



## POWER TO YOU(TH)

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### **YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES AND DECISION-MAKING REGARDING HARMFUL PRACTICES, SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND UNINTENDED PREGNANCY**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY KENYA



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# PREFACE

KIT Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), in collaboration with in-country research partners, is pleased to present this executive summary of the Power to You(th) baseline study conducted in Kenya<sup>1</sup>. This was one of seven such studies conducted for the Power to You(th) programme in the seven programme implementation countries, namely Ethiopia, Ghana, Indonesia, Kenya, Malawi, Senegal, and Uganda. Power to You(th) is a five-year programme (2021–2025) with a specific focus on harmful practices (such as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and child marriage), sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and unintended pregnancy. These are persistent ‘key issues’ on which insufficient progress has been made over the years in the participating countries.

Power to You(th) aims to ensure that young people (aged under 35) are meaningfully included in discussions and decisions, particularly those related to the SRHR of adolescent girls and young women. By increasing the participation of young people from a range of backgrounds and groups in political and civic space, the programme aims to improve youth-led and focused advocacy and accountability. This is particularly in relation to unintended pregnancy, SGBV and harmful practices such as child marriage and FGM/C in Kenya.

The programme is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and globally the programme is coordinated by three partners: Amref Flying Doctors, Rutgers and Gender Justice (Sonke). In Kenya, the programme is being implemented in four counties (Homa Bay, Kajiado, Migori and Siaya) led by a consortium of five organisations: Amref Health Africa, the Network for Adolescent and Youth for Africa (NAYA), Siaya Muungano network (SIMUN), Ujamaa Africa (Migori) and Wanawake Wavuvi (WA-WA) (Homa Bay and Kajiado).

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<sup>1</sup> The full baseline study report is available here: <https://www.kit.nl/publication/power-to-youth-baseline-report-kenya/>.

## BASELINE FINDINGS: YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES AND DECISION-MAKING REGARDING HARMFUL PRACTICES, SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND UNINTENDED PREGNANCY

A desk review and mixed-method baseline study were conducted to inform the adaptation and implementation of the Power to You(th) programme in Kenya. The baseline study provides a comprehensive understanding of adolescents' and young people's perspectives (knowledge, attitudes, priorities, and demands) regarding harmful practices (including child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C)), sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and unintended pregnancy, and their role in decision-making processes regarding these issues in four study counties in Kenya. Additionally, the baseline study provides data on youth voice and agency, and how social and state actors can contribute to positive change. Finally, the baseline study provides information on civic space, as well as the role of the media in these social change processes around the core topics.

The study was conducted by a research team from the University of Nairobi and KIT Royal Tropical Institute in the four implementation areas of the Power to You(th) programme, namely Homa Bay, Kajiado, Migori and Siaya.

Quantitative data was generated from a youth baseline survey of 834 respondents distributed in four study counties. In addition, an online civic space survey was conducted among 25 CSO and youth advocates (16 males, 7 female and 1 non-binary respondent with a mean age of 36.4 years).

Qualitative data was collected from the four sites using semi-structured interviews (25 in-depth interviews with societal actors, including community leaders, healthcare workers, teachers and youth and 12 key informant interviews with state actors including CSO or NGO and government representatives, lawmakers or implementers, local authorities, policy makers and youth advocates); eight focus group discussions (FGDs) with adolescents girls and boys (15-19 years), young women and men (20-24 years), and parents and caregivers; and photovoice – a methodology in which eleven adolescents and young people responded to specific questions using photos.

# KEY BASELINE RESULTS FOR THE POWER TO YOU(TH) PROGRAMME IN KENYA

The baseline study suggests a mixed but often positive picture of youth knowledge, agency, and attitudes towards harmful practices, SGBV and unintended pregnancy. It also shows large reserves of untapped potential among young people ready to act on these issues, and a gradual positive shift in public attitudes. On the one hand, young people felt subjectively well-informed, and were comfortable expressing themselves in safe spaces such as with peers. On the other hand, they found it difficult to talk to parents about important issues, often felt excluded from decision-making processes related to harmful practices (particularly in Migori), and in practice most do not participate in community activities. Repressive gender norms still restrict the rights of all young people, particularly those with multiple vulnerabilities – though more community members are now rejecting harmful practices and embracing the value of education for both boys and girls.

Most young people demonstrated a base level of knowledge on key issues such as FGM/C, and contraception. They also expressed positive views about topics such as SGBV and did not wish to continue the practice of FGM/C. Despite this, these practices are still prevalent. Their understanding of these issues was positively nurtured through youth platforms, particularly in Siaya; where these platforms functioned well, they felt empowered by them, but generally youth were not meaningfully engaged by CSOs. Despite their positive impact, most young people were not encouraged to participate in such organisations, and few had been involved in activities directly addressing child marriage, FGM/C or SGBV.

Women and girls were particularly excluded from action and decision spaces; views that they mainly represent a source of (bride price or transactional sex) income for families were apparent. These views had demonstrable knock-on effects on rights, restricting agency in decisions about whether and when to marry and have children – partly due to stigmas around pregnancies occurring outside of marriage and SGBV, and the deep-rooted nature of harmful practices like FGM/C. Despite this – and in response to it – girls are increasingly active in standing up for their rights. They are not merely passive victims but are actively resistant to child marriage, FGM/C and other forms of SGBV. They require more support in this from authorities such as the police and local leaders. Informal community-based mechanisms are not delivering justice for young people, while police often fail to follow up on cases.

A healthy civic space and media environment is necessary for constructive public conversations which hold duty-bearers accountable on these issues. A mixed picture emerged on the freedom and protection of civic space in Kenya, with many CSOs feeling it to be quite open but others – particularly youth and LGBTI+ groups – far less so. Media platforms like radio are important for lobbying and advocacy, but the quality of information exchanged can depend on how well CSOs engage media outlets. CSOs face many challenges around finances, and criminalization or repression of some activities, but they continue to find ways to build dialogues and defend the rights of young people, while respecting the culture and values of communities with which they work.

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S KNOWLEDGE AND ACTIONS RELATED TO HARMFUL PRACTICES, SGBV AND UNINTENDED PREGNANCY

*Adolescents and young people seem, overall, well-informed about SRHR and related Power to You(th) themes*

Respondents from Kajiado generally felt most informed about SRHR topics, compared to the other three study counties, especially about prevention and testing of HIV (95%), FGM/C (93%) and puberty (89%). The prevention and testing of HIV was also one of the most known topics in the three other counties, with 80% of respondents in Siaya, 79% in Homa Bay and 80% in Migori respectively feeling informed about the topic. Overall, respondents felt least informed about sexual orientation and identity, ranging from 50% in Homa Bay and Migori to 63% in Kajiado. The majority of respondents (81%) could name at least one modern method to prevent pregnancy. Overall, youth (aged 20–24) were more knowledgeable about modern contraceptive methods than adolescents (aged 15–19 years). Results showed that overall, most young people were aware of the legal status of FGM/C (91%) and would not want to perform it on their daughters (96%). In addition, most young people (92%) thought that SGBV was not acceptable. Despite this high level of awareness, the practices are still prevalent.

**What stood out:** Although less than half (48%) of the respondents knew the correct legal minimum age for marriage for girls, which is 18 years in Kenya, none of the respondents thought it was legal to marry below the age of 18.

*School teachers, mothers and social media represent the main sources of SRHR information and were most accessible by male respondents.*

The main sources of SRHR information for young people were school teachers and mothers, although in Siaya, social media and the Internet were mentioned as the main source (22%). Additionally, in all counties more male and adolescent respondents received SRHR information through school teachers than their female and older counterparts.

*"...in school, they have a good space to discuss such topics, they are given opportunity to get information about their sexuality, may be from teachers, peer educators invited to school by the head teacher and other teachers, and these information gives them knowledge to make informed decisions." (KII, teacher, Kajiado)*

**What stood out:** In Migori, Homa Bay and Kajiado, social media were used more by male than female respondents as the main source of SRHR information (7% vs. 4% in Migori, 15% vs. 9% in Homa Bay, and 19% vs. 15% in Kajiado), while in Siaya the opposite could be observed.

## ***Despite limited communication between parents and young people regarding reproductive health and relationships, young people manage to find safe spaces to express themselves.***

Study results show that youth were generally constrained in expressing themselves, particularly on topics related to reproductive health and relationships. This was attributed to culture and socialisation, where communication between parents and young people is inhibited to the extent that they are constrained to speak openly. Nevertheless, young people were able to identify potential safe spaces where they can express themselves, such as schools, where the majority of youth spend most of their time, social networks such as youth-led organisations and, to some extent, the church.

*"[...] a father cannot talk openly to his girl on issues like touching, relationships, menstruation, bodily changes. So, there is that distance a father keeps from his daughter from age 10, 12; the age near FGM/C or after FGM/C. So that closeness and frequent contact is not acceptable ... makes most girls get lost." (KII, teacher, Migori)*

## ***Adherence to social norms and cultural practices continues to limit the abandonment of harmful practices.***

The results show that although young people were affected by harmful practices, SGBV and unintended pregnancy, they had very limited decision-making power as this is vested in men and especially community elders. From the survey and qualitative data, many of the young people knew that these practices were illegal and did not want them to continue, but adherence to social norms and cultural practices was a major barrier to the abandonment of these practices.

*"Another thing is that maybe I had fallen in love with a woman whom I want to marry, then I come and inform him, then my dad can say that I don't want her in our home. So, making decisions in our culture is a challenge." (FGD with boys, 20–24 years, Kajiado)*

## ***Formal education presents a relative leeway for young women to assert themselves***

In Migori, on average, one in three respondents agreed that their community was positively acknowledging and welcoming young people to take on roles and assert themselves. These proportions were much higher in the other three counties studied (ranging from 62% to 81%). Girls and women had a particularly insignificant role in household decision-making especially in Migori and Kajiado, where FGM/C is practiced. However, in instances where youth had formal education, they (including girls) had a relative leeway to assert themselves and oppose or refuse to undergo harmful practices such as marrying a spouse selected for them by their parents or deciding not to undergo FGM/C.

*"Information like understanding one's rights, importance of education, and how to identify your skills at a younger age, to know their roles and responsibilities as youth in the community, to understand the challenges youth are going through and how to overcome them." (IDI, girl, 20–24 years, Kajiado)*

## MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF ADOLESCENTS AND YOUTH

### *Limited engagement of adolescents and young people in activities to prevent harmful practices and SGBV.*

Overall, one in four female respondents and one in five male respondents reported ever participating in activities to prevent child marriage. The most common activity or action respondents participated in to prevent marriage was educating girls (63%), rallying the wider community to stand up for girls' rights (40%) and empowering girls (35%). In Migori and Kajiado, 39% and 38% of respondents had been active to prevent FGM/C. The most common type of activities in Migori and Kajiado was educating girls on their rights, challenging the reasons for FGM/C and speaking out about the risks and realities of the practice. Differences in participation could be observed between female and male respondents. Overall, one in five respondents had ever participated in any activities or taken action to prevent SGBV.

*"...normally they do the sensitisation thing, they organise tournaments then we have sometimes we sit down then we talk, people share." (R5, FGD with fathers, Siaya)*

### *Siaya Muungano Youth Network and the Siaya Youth Parliament serve as examples for meaningful engagement of young people.*

Results show that generally young people were not meaningfully engaged in activities carried out by CSOs in the four study sites. However, Siaya was an exception with its existence of networks such as Siaya Muungano Youth Network and the Youth Parliament which provide a platform for youth to identify issues that affect them through community dialogue fora and demand action from duty-bearers and leadership at the county level.

*"I am engaged in youth initiatives, like currently we are having an umbrella of a youth network which is called Siaya Muungano Network which is working across Siaya county and different sub-counties and villages. We always identify an issue, and we voice, we force the duty-bearers to act on them... We dialogue, we come up with memos, and then we submit the memos." (KII, youth advocate, Siaya)*

### *Potential of CSOs to provide spaces for young people is restrained by limited resources and the absence of commitment of duty-bearers.*

The study showed that CSOs had the potential to organise and provide spaces for young people to express themselves and champion their rights through representation in the county government policymaking process. For example, the Youth Parliament lobby group in Siaya seemed to be a good platform to replicate in other study counties. A major constraint was that these CSOs have limited coverage due to limited resources and therefore, were unable to address all the needs of young people in their area of operation or ensure that policies are implemented in the absence of commitment from duty-bearers such as the county government.



## (ENABLING) ENVIRONMENT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE'S RIGHTS AND ADDRESSING HARMFUL PRACTICES, SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND UNINTENDED PREGNANCY

### *Existing positive changes in social norms contribute to a reduction of harmful practices.*

Social norms were still a hindrance to the promotion and protection of the rights of young people. They influence the continuation of FGM/C in Kajiado and Migori, and early marriage and SGBV in all four counties. In all the study counties, the belief that a girl or woman is property and a source of wealth for the family, which mainly consists in the bride price, was expressed. Positive changes in social norms contributing to a reduction in harmful practices revolved around embracing formal education for both boys and girls, the return to school policy for pregnant girls, and a change in perception that pregnant girls should get married even if underage. Societal actors were found to play a key role in enforcing these positive changes.

*"Then you tell them education is an equaliser: it makes people equal, and it can create hope where there was no hope. This one we have achieved because the school has been trying. [...] Because when they see a poor child who was just here going through that school then going to university, they see change and that creates hope in the community."*  
(KII, Teacher Homa Bay)

### *Poverty and transactional sex increase the risk of unintended pregnancy.*

Unintended pregnancy was largely attributed to cultural practices such as FGM/C (in Kajiado and Migori) and poverty in all study counties 'pushing' young girls to search for 'sponsors' to meet their financial needs. Poverty created an opportunity for boda-boda riders (scooters used as public transport) to take advantage of young girls. At the same time, lack of guidance and counselling for youth, peer pressure and poverty pushed adolescents and young people into risky behaviour, especially in the communities where children had been orphaned by the HIV epidemic in Siaya and Homa Bay.

*"They lack guiding and counselling or some may lack fees, or those boys [such as boda-boda riders] can pay for them their fees so they get in a relationship which results to that."*  
(R4, FGD with boys, 15–19 years, Homa Bay)

**What stood out:** In addition to the risky transactional behaviour of youth, the study found that social protection programmes – supporting young pregnant girls by giving them KSh3,000 (US\$30) per month to take care of their basic (reproductive) needs – run by NGOs in Homa Bay, unintentionally motivated girls to get pregnant, almost deliberately.

### *Enforcement of laws and policies is restricted by the preference to deal with cases at the community level.*

Although laws and policies around FGM/C, SGBV, and early and child marriage, and

the return to school policy for cases of teenage pregnancy are available, enforcement of these laws remained challenging. In some instances, the offence was watered down, and there was a preference to deal with it at the community level, partly due to stigma, the observation that there were few convictions, and that often too much was demanded of the victim and family to report and testify against the violator. Some of the SGBV cases, including rape and defilement, were often not prosecuted due to community considerations rather than considering the victim.

*"I think the authorities are not doing all well about these acts of raping, fighting. If you report it, you will find the authorities some are ready to put you down so that you can agree before reaching there, you will find some assistant chiefs and walangos and the chiefs, they will put you down. 'You know this is your relative. If you can do this and he is jailed you may bring a curse to you if he dies there. Just help him (laughs). Mwelewane tu [just agree].'" (R8, FGD with fathers, Siaya)*

### **Domestication of national laws and policies aims to enhance implementation and accountability that is lacking behind.**

Some counties have domesticated or are in the process of domesticating the national laws and policies to enhance implementation and accountability at the local level. The domestication process enables counties to allocate resources and budgets for implementation. For example, Kajiado has an anti-FGM/C policy, and Siaya has a county action plan in response to teenage pregnancy and is in the process of developing a county SGBV policy and domesticating the national youth policy. However, there were no reports of policy domestication in Homa Bay or Migori.

*"...it is important that the county adopts these policies so that it guides operations, and that will also influence budget allocation for these issues because, for instance, if you want to approach the county to support the teenage pregnancy campaign, they may not do so because there is no policy to back it up." (KII, CSO, Siaya)*

## CIVIC SPACE AND ROLE OF MEDIA

### *Are CSOs unaware of their freedom of expression?*

The findings of the online survey on civic space (n=25) suggest that youth and CSO advocates considered different aspects of freedom of information and expression constrained or restricted. Throughout the qualitative interviews with societal and state actors, however, the civic space was described as quite open. Interviewees in all four study counties reported that CSOs had freedom of expression and could speak out about any issue without fear. CSOs were said to speak about matters that other societal actors felt unable to speak about. A lawmaker from Kajiado said that CSOs had freedom to express themselves; the challenge would be if the CSOs were not aware of this freedom.

*“...the meetings that are being organised by the government most of the times, they come in as stakeholders and you will always have them share what they feel is not right or they feel is not going on well with them or what the government is doing that is not making their work easier, so they share all that and the government side also responds, so I would say that on the issue of them expressing themselves, I think it is there...” (KII, social services, Homa Bay)*

**What stood out:** Mixed results were found between the online (anonymous) survey and the interviews with social and state actors.

### *Key role of media in lobby and advocacy, but guidance from CSOs is needed.*

The media was identified as an important lobbying and advocacy tool for issues affecting youth. Their role in highlighting the issues and bringing them to the attention of the public and the law was seen as a positive element in the abandonment of harmful practices. In all four study counties, the media were said to be playing an important role in advocacy and lobbying. The presence of local radio stations that use vernacular language was considered particularly important in areas where literacy is low. Young people use social media for reporting or communicating messages on reproductive health. Some social actors however highlighted that the effectiveness of the media was dependent on how active and engaging the CSOs were themselves in reaching out to the media and that there was a need to ensure that the information being passed on was accurate.

*“The media also play a big role, but it depends on the activism of the CSO. If the CSOs by themselves are not active in lobbying such practices, the media will not also do so...” (KII, lawmaker, Kajiado)*

### *Youth groups and LGBTI+ groups face most difficulties in organising and assembling themselves.*

Most youth and CSO advocates felt that these freedoms were constrained or restrictive. Ten of the 17 respondents stated that the ability of citizens and organisations to organise, participate and communicate was constrained or

restrictive. The main restrictions limiting freedom of assembly and legitimate protest were identified as the use of violence, repression and policing, the cost of and requirements for authorisations, and the criminalisation or punishment of certain activities. Organising and gatherings of young people and LGBTI+ groups were reported as experiencing the most difficulties.

***CSOs still largely rely on international funding, with only few knowing how to access government funding.***

Government mechanisms or initiatives that provided financial support to organisations working on SRHR were generally not known (or available) to youth and CSO advocates in all areas. Asked why they thought these finance mechanisms or initiatives were not in place, some responded that their funding came from outside Kenya or from other partnerships, including with NGOs, but not from the government. However, other respondents said that the financial mechanisms were limited and not easy to access. The lack of funds made it challenging for CSOs to keep government officials accountable.

*“It is one thing for civil society pointing out areas that the county government needs to improve, pointing out supporting the budgetary process but it is another thing for them to be implemented. They can push about implementation but the back remains with the leadership, if the leadership has not supported, the CSOs can talk and talk and push for those other challenges, but I want to say that we need to keep on pushing because we cannot change people within one day.” (KII, health care worker, Migori)*

## RECOMMENDATIONS PER PATHWAY

### *Pathway 1. Young people demand accountability and responsiveness on harmful practices, SGBV and unintended pregnancy*

- Use a targeted approach to addressing harmful practices and SGBV in the four counties. For Siaya and Homa Bay, the focus should be on teenage pregnancy and SGBV. For Kajiado and Migori, the focus should be on FGM/C and early marriage. Young people are not homogeneous, and this needs to be taken into consideration during intervention design. There is a need to have specific interventions for girls and for boys and different age groups, and they should also be county-specific.
- Sensitise all community members, including girls and boys, men and women, to address SRHR issues holistically in the form of community dialogues.
- Invest in education and build programmes around economic enterprises to increase participation in decision-making and assertiveness. Education is an equaliser in terms of the empowerment that comes with it and keeping girls in school in Kajiado and Migori has been lauded as saving the girls from FGM/C and early marriage. Similarly, economic enterprises can offer opportunities to young people by using their skills to socially and economically engage and work towards a better and productive future.

### *Pathway 2: CSOs amplify young people's voices to claim, protect and expand civic space*

- There is a need to ensure that CSOs have the capacity to address and deliver effective interventions and are accountable to the community. This may involve strengthening the capacity of CSOs and developing leadership skills for young people for effective advocacy and community engagement.
- Use youth networks and leverage other working practices such as the youth parliament in Siaya, the Siaya Muungano Network, to replicate in other counties.
- In Kajiado and Migori, there is a need to strengthen the programme's links with other projects/programmes, especially around rescue centres, for leverage. This could include the provision of basic reproductive health needs for girls and educational support such as paying school fees.

### *Pathway 3: Societal actors support and promote youth rights and progressive social norms and attitudes to youth rights.*

- Involve community elders in activities so that they can support the identified social changes to improve the lives of young people in the community. This was stressed for Migori and Kajiado counties, where elders are powerful with regard to promoting FGM/C.
- Focus on involving and strengthening the engagement with different media outlets. The Power to You(th) needs should especially strengthen their engagement with local medial channels, especially vernacular local radio stations, to create wider reach. There is a need to leverage social media to reach young people with information and collaborate on online engagement.
- Inform and create awareness in communities about the reporting and referral

systems within counties, to increase their awareness of the systems.

***Pathway 4. State actors improve policymaking, budgeting and implementation at the local, national, regional and global levels on harmful practices, SGBV and unintended pregnancy***

- Build and embrace partnerships with different stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, civil society, law enforcement agencies, the Ministry of Youth, Gender and Social Services, the local administration and the police to collaborate and agree on the areas of focus and approach so that the community is dealing with a working team.
- Contribute to operationalising policies and action plans that have been domesticated by the county governments to respond appropriately to the needs of youth at the community level. Examples are the anti-FGM/C policy in Kajiado, and the SGBV policy and teenage pregnancy response plan in Siaya.
- Build the capacity of stakeholders and request regular feedback on the focus areas.

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