

EngenderHealth ICFP 2022 Abstract

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Abstract title

Advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Eliminating Sexual and Gender-Based Violence through Partnerships with Feminist and Youth-Led Organizations in West and Central Africa

Significance/background

West and Central Africa (WCA) remains one of the youngest parts of the world with an estimated 77 million young people between the ages of 15 and 24 (World Population Prospects 2017). This large youth population could be an asset, if donors and governments adequately invest in addressing the many challenges young people face, particularly in terms of respect for their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and their access to appropriate and quality gender-sensitive health services. Across the region, violence against women and girls is endemic, with high rates of child marriage, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and female genital mutilation. The gender power imbalance means that many young women in the region are unable to make decisions about their lives. For example, in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, more than 80% of married women aged 15 to 19 do not have the final say in their healthcare decisions (DHS Surveys 2010 and 2012, respectively).

Program intervention/tested activity

EngenderHealth has worked in the region for more than three decades to address these challenges through innovative programs and partnerships that put girls, women, and youth at the center of our interventions. The Building Equitable Partnerships with Youth-Led Organizations (YLOs) in WCA to Advance SRHR and Eliminate SGBV project uses an equitable partnerships approach with YLOs in Benin, Burkina, and Côte d'Ivoire. The project aims to assist these organizations in identifying their needs and to provide responsive technical and financial support to implement their action plans in a flexible programming context focused on the SRHR needs of young people.

Methodology (location, setting, data source, time frame, intended beneficiaries, participant size, evaluation approach)

In the prior project, EngenderHealth established a partnership with young feminist activists and organizations from all three countries. This partnership facilitated the implementation of

joint activities, notably during the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign. From this collaboration, we learned that partnerships with a range of different stakeholders are crucial to achieving desired results for communities. These include partnerships with local authorities to advance standards and protocols; partnerships with other organizations to avoid duplication and to promote synergy of actions; and, above all, partnerships with YLOs to increase meaningful youth participation. In August 2021, we selected nine YLOs in Benin, Burkina Faso, and Cote d'Ivoire, which we identified as being the most committed, having a sound reputation, and having the ability to quickly mobilize. We also assessed these YLOs' capacities and programmatic, administrative, and financial needs, and concluded that they would benefit from organizational and institutional strengthening. This assessment allowed us to identify key themes for capacity strengthening initiatives and to create a customized capacity-strengthening program for these partners.

Results/key findings

Through this partnership, across the WCA region, we directly trained 52 young leaders (aged 18 to 30; 73% of whom were female) from YLOs and indirectly reached 1,305 other members and volunteers. All organizations developed SGBV prevention action plans. In Benin, for example, the action plan included activities to improve care for SGBV survivors through: (1) training of judicial and police officers, (2) strengthening of girls' and women's access to health services, including family planning, through an approach that challenged negative notions of masculinity, and (3) strengthening feminist actions in the community. In Côte d'Ivoire, the YLO action plan included the development of a national directory of influential women from several sectors (e.g., journalists, police officers, and magistrates), with the goal of mobilizing these women to use their influence to advocate for the adoption of a national SRHR law and to shape national strategies to better prevent and manage SGBV cases.

EngenderHealth provided financial support for these action plans and YLOs are currently implementing activities. As activities are underway, the results obtained are preliminary at this time and can be supplemented with additional findings. Importantly, we will highlight our learnings on how to strengthen a regional network of YLOs to promote access to SRHR services, including family planning and SGBV prevention, care, and referrals for adolescents.

Program implications/lessons

Less than a year after the start of this partnership approach, our findings confirm that flexible, local, agile, and customized partnerships with YLOs can strengthen and increase meaningful youth participation in SRHR programs and activities, including those targeting SGBV. We have observed that the inclusion of young people across all project phases enhances their responsibility and decision-making power while affirming their leadership. This has provided young people with the opportunity to make calls to action in favor of SRHR and prevention of SGBV and for their voices to be heard.

A recurring observation is that many YLOs have limited institutional (financial, administrative,

programmatic) capacities, which presents a risk for a partnering organization. However, our experience shows that we can harness their immense potential through a partnership that strengthens their capacity and simultaneously supports the implementation of their activities. Critical to this partnership approach is a participatory process with the YLOs that includes customized trainings to ensure institutional and organizational support. We learned that such trainings must be customized, given that each YLO has their own unique needs that cannot be replicated across different countries or organizations. Our experience also shows that an equitable partnership approach must include institutional and financial support for facilities and equipment (e.g., laptops, printers, rent, and travel allowances). Moving forward, the challenge will be to engage more donors and partners that are willing to invest in this approach to maximize outcomes.