

Strengthening Girls' Rights!

Addressing the triple threat of HIV, teenage pregnancy and gender-based violence

The challenge

Zambia has a very young population; more than half of its citizens are below the age of 18 years. Young people can make a crucial contribution to sustainable social and economic development, but the risk of HIV infection, teenage pregnancy and becoming victims of gender-based violence is high – especially for girls.

In 2022, young people aged 15-24 years old made up 20% of the population but accounted for 40% of all new HIV-infections – with 7 out of 10 new HIV infections in this age group being amongst girls. Moreover, more than half of all girls (53%) started childbearing by age 19 and early marriage remains a challenge for Zambia. Despite the passage of the Gender-Based Violence Act in 2011, more than one in three young women have experienced physical violence since the age of 15.

The Zambian government has committed to providing adolescents and young people with comprehensive sexual and reproductive information and services, including in the ESA Statement of Commitment. However, parents, teachers, health care workers, and religious or traditional leaders often have reservations about young people's access to HIV prevention, family planning or information on gender-based violence, due to social taboos and discriminatory gender norms. In addition, there is a lack of appropriate tools and methods for providing quality services in these areas.

Goal

Young people, especially young women and girls, are better able to exercise their rights, access counseling services, and take action for their sexual and reproductive health, HIV prevention, and non-violent gender relations.

Our approach

In 2020, a nationwide data analysis on the response to HIV and sexual and reproductive health risks amongst young people found that a more targeted, systematic approach and better coordination between stakeholders were needed to improve interventions and adequately address the situation. The Strengthening Girls' Rights Program therefore takes a multifaceted approach to ensuring that young people have access to quality, youth-friendly information and services to protect them from HIV, teenage pregnancy, and gender-based violence. An important aspect of this approach is to improve policy, institutional, and social frameworks so that young people are better able to exercise their rights.

Project name	Strengthening Girls' Rights! Reproductive Health, Family Planning and HIV prevention for learners, especially girls, in Zambia
Commissioned by	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
Project region	Lusaka Province, North-Western Province, Luapula Province, Southern Province
Lead executing agency	National HIV/AIDS/STI/TB Council (NAC)
Duration	01.01.2020 – 31.08.2023

At the **policy level**, the program supports the NAC in cross-sectoral policy dialogues at the district, provincial, and national levels involving government officials, civil society organizations, and youth. Policy dialogue findings and recommendations inform national strategy and policy documents and regional exchanges.

At the **institutional level**, the project promotes the sustainable roll-out of the Join-In-Circuit on AIDS, Love and Sexuality (J-IC) through local authorities and the health sector. The J-IC is an interactive method that allows young people to talk openly and



Left: J-IC run with adolescents in Choma, Southern Province;

Right: Peer educators in Kasempa, North-Western Province



Dieneke ter Huurne
Project Coordinator
dieneke.huurne@giz.de
www.giz.de

Left: Professional Development Course for DACAs and PACAs;

Right: Youth participation in national dialogue, 2021

learn new things about a range of topics – from how HIV is transmitted and prevented to contraceptives and gender-based violence. Originally developed by the German Federal Center for Health Education (BZgA) and further developed by GIZ in numerous partner countries, the J-IC has proven to be an effective tool for equipping young people with the knowledge and skills they need to protect themselves.

At the **community level**, the project provides capacity building for Provincial and District AIDS Coordinator Advisors (PACAs and DACAs). These advisors play a key role in ensuring that the issues of HIV, teenage pregnancy and gender-based violence are dealt with on the ground in a multi-sectoral manner, taking into account the special needs of young people. To this end, the national training institute for local governments was supported to develop a professional course for PACAs and DACAs. The course is complemented by a web-based exchange platform that enables continuous peer learning between PACAs and DACAs. In addition, PACAs and DACAs are provided with J-IC materials, so that they can introduce the tool and make it available in their communities. They are also tasked with engaging religious and traditional leaders in dialogues for creating an environment where young people can access information and services without fear or prejudice.

Our results

Several predecessor programs have already done important groundwork for the current interventions and reached over 20,000 young people with the J-IC. Studies conducted in 2018 and 2021 have also demonstrated the effectiveness and efficiency of

the J-IC. In the current project phase, new content – for example on reproductive rights and COVID-19 – has been added to the J-IC and it has become inclusive for young people with disabilities. Over 400 professionals and young people have been trained as J-IC trainers and facilitators and DACAs have successfully introduced this intervention in more than 20 districts. The University of Zambia, School of Public Health and two colleges of nursing and midwifery have integrated the J-IC into their teaching programs, so that new graduates can apply it in their work as they start working in the health sector.

Out of 117 DACAs in the country, 114 completed the 3-week professional training course at the national training institute, as well as all 10 PACAs. Among others, this provided them with the skills to effectively coordinate over 250 awareness activities on HIV, sexual and reproductive health and gender-based violence in the four focus regions. Together with civil society organisations, the DACAs also engaged 160 stakeholders, including 95 religious and traditional leaders, in dialogue sessions on youth-friendly practices in SRHR, gender, and HIV prevention.

In addition, nearly 300 health facility staff in 3 provinces have been trained on youth-friendly and gender-sensitive counseling services, which has also increased young people's demand for counseling and services. The target group's satisfaction with counseling services was assessed in a survey of 300 young people aged 10 to 24 and showed an increase from 3.6 to 4.0 points on a scale of 1 to 5.

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Strengthening Girls' Rights!
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1 Mpile Office Park, 3rd floor
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Lusaka, Zambia
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Text Dieneke ter Huurne, Patrick Schünemann
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