

Open eyes to youth sexual rights

Service providers and youth workers came together to critically consider what it means to be ‘youth friendly’. In May 2015, they discussed how they could advance young people’s sexual and reproductive health and rights in their work during a six-day workshop in the Ghanaian city of Tamale. What they learnt about young people’s sexual rights and power relations was a real eye-opener.

A new rights-based perspective

Service providers and youth workers have little knowledge on policies and laws concerning young people’s sexual rights or even conflicting ideas around them. For instance, they wonder whether it is allowed to provide sexual health services to youth below the age of 16—the age for sexual consent in Ghana. For some it was also difficult to put aside their personal perceptions about being sexually active at a young age.

Several service providers in the group had never been exposed to the concept of sexual rights. During a reflection about sexual rights, one participant realised she should change the way she works: *“Last Friday a young girl came to me for a pregnancy test. It was positive. I could tell that she wanted an abortion. I told her we didn’t provide those services at our clinic and that she could call me anytime during her pregnancy for support. Now, I feel I gave her bad advice”.*

Power relations

All service providers and youth workers agree that young people lack control in many areas of life, including sex, sexuality and health. A particular exercise—the ‘power walk’—revealed how power relates to gender, financial status and level of authority, and how especially youth, females, persons with a disability and those living with HIV lack control. Even though it was a game, all ‘left behind’ expressed feelings of disempowerment, vulnerability and social exclusion. For example, young women often lack the control to decide or negotiate in sexual relationships which is a major obstacle to accessing sexual and reproductive health services and preventing unintended pregnancy.

During the workshop participants came to realise that a different approach is necessary for young people to decide about their own lives and fully exercise their sexual rights. This approach should be youth-friendly, one in which duty-bearers take on their responsibility. A

Facts - ASK programme in Ghana

Where? 17 districts in the Northern, Upper East, Brong Ahafo and Central region.

By whom?

- Curious Minds
- Health for Future Generations
- Northern Sector Action on Awareness Creation
- Planned Parenthood Association of Ghana
- Presby Health Service
- Simli Aid
- Theatre for a Change

For whom?

Young people 10-24 years and SRH service providers

Scope of the research

Researching how reflection on rights and use of self-assessments during a workshop for participants changed their perceptions and ambitions of being a youth friendly service.

good example was mentioned: *“One girl dropped out of school after she became a mother. Thanks to efforts of our team she was allowed to re-join the school”.*

Recommendations

- Consider working with a legal professional to map out laws and policies that affect young people’s access to SRH information and services to clarify these issues and enable organisations to fully embrace young people’s sexual rights and access to services.
- Provide partners with support to roll out trainings on sexual rights and youth-friendly services—including the topics of youth involvement, confidentiality and the importance of location – in their respective branches.
- Help service providers and youth workers to realise that promoting abstinence for young people has the potential to stigmatise those who are sexually active, an obstacle to realising their sexual rights.

