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Youth leadership in safe abortion advocacy

Ipas
MALAWI

A case study of
IPAS Malawi

Coming from a conservative culture

Access to quality sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information and services is an age-old challenge in Malawi, owing to its largely conservative culture. The challenge is even more pronounced among young people, who, according to common beliefs and practice, are not supposed to be anywhere near discussions related to sex and sexuality, let alone related services.

According to a 2009 study by Malawi Ministry of Health (MoH), nearly half of women seeking treatment for complications arising from unsafe abortions are young people below the age of 25.¹ Several factors contribute to this, including limited access to information and access to family planning services for adolescents. Although MoH has a policy for Youth Friendly Health Services (YFHS), these services are hardly available due to, among other things, inadequate numbers of YFHS trained personnel in public health facilities, who can provide quality ASRH. For example, Blantyre has a youth population of nearly 300,000 people,² but has only 59 trained YFHS providers in its 24 health facilities. The rest of the youth are left with no choice but to seek these services from other healthcare providers, who may not have an understanding of the unique and specific SRHR needs for adolescents.

With less than 5% of adolescents accessing and utilizing modern contraceptive methods, adolescents are faced with high proportions of unintended pregnancies.³ As a result, some of the adolescents resort to unsafe abortions, with adolescents accounting for over a fifth of all patients accessing post abortion care (PAC) in public health facilities.

Abortion is legally restricted in Malawi, and is only allowed to preserve the life of the pregnant girl or woman. According to the country's Penal Code, any woman procuring an abortion, or any other person assisting a woman to procure an abortion (including health care workers) risk imprisonment for seven to fourteen years. Although the Gender Equality Act⁴ enacted in 2013 acknowledges women's autonomy and respects their right to choose the time to and number of children to have as well as their access to SRH services, guidelines for implementation of this law are yet to be developed.

1. Ministry of Health in Malawi, Ipas, United Nations Population Fund (2011). Abortion in Malawi: results of a study of incidence and magnitude of complications due to unsafe abortion. Unpublished manuscript
2. Malawi National Statistical Office, 2018 Population and Housing Census
3. Lunguzi, J. et al. (2012). Reproductive Health Characteristics of Young Malawian Women Seeking Post-abortion Care, in African Journal of Reproductive Health, Vol. 16, No. 2 (June 2012), pp. 253-261
4. Government of Malawi. (2013). Gender Equality Act 3 of 2013. Malawi: Malawi Government; 2013

Creating a youth SRHR movement

Ipas has been working with stakeholders in Malawi since 2005 to support advocacy efforts for expanding access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Since 2010, Ipas has been convening civil society organizations and human rights defenders to form a movement of change agents advocating SRHR, including abortion, under the banner of the Coalition for the Prevention of Unsafe Abortion (COPUA).

COPUA has been pushing for abortion legal reform using the public health argument of saving the lives of women and girls. Key on the COPUA agenda has been ensuring that the young people who are disproportionately affected by unsafe abortions have a seat at the decision making table to contribute to SRHR issues affecting them.

Young people, especially adolescents, have mostly been passive recipients of critical decisions about their SRHR made on their behalf. Despite adolescent girls being most at need of safe abortion care, Ipas Malawi found that conversations on abortion legal reforms often excluded the youth voice. This prompted them to conceptualize the 'Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (ASRHR) Programme' aimed at building the capacity of adolescents and young people in Malawi to openly advocate for their abortion rights.

The ASRHR programme ensured upskilling and mentorship of five youth-led and youth-serving organizations on abortion rights advocacy and to mentor these organizations to integrate abortion advocacy into existing SRHR advocacy programming. The five organizations included;

- 1 Society for the Advancement of People (SOAP)
- 2 Centre for Youth and Children Affairs (CEYCA)
- 3 Centre for Community and Youth Development (CCYD)
- 4 Young Voices Organization (YVO)
- 5 Health Rights Watch and Chipembere Community Development Organization (CCDO)

With support from Hivos, through the Regional SRHR Fund, Ipas Malawi's ASRHR Programme ensured meaningful participation of young people and amplified their voice in community mobilization and advocacy processes aimed at legal reforms. Ipas Malawi built the capacity of young people in advocacy and created platforms at community, districts and national levels for the youth to engage in the policy discourse on the Termination of Pregnancy Bill.

The Termination of Pregnancy (TOP) Bill has been formulated to liberalize abortion provision on exceptional and compelling cases such as termination of pregnancy arising out of rape or incest, as well as expanding definition of "risk of health of the pregnant woman" to include mental health. The bill currently awaits parliamentary debate and passage, having been shelved in the recent session ending October 2020. However, those opposed to access to safe abortion have organized and advocated for the bill to be thrown out of parliament, arguing it is against religious beliefs prevalent in the country. This shows how the Malawian society in general still sees abortion as outlawed, and healthcare providers ride on this vagueness in the legal and policy environment to deny many women access to safe abortion.

Business unusual: youth taking over

After extensive training and mentorship from Young Voices Organization (YVO), Ipas Malawi's local partner in Blantyre in the Southern Region, the youth have been conducting community engagement sessions with fellow young people, traditional and religious leaders, parents and healthcare providers, on the importance of SRHR for young people. Among other things, the youth have been empowering their fellow youth to demand access to SRH services, including family planning at local health facilities.

The youth have undergone an extensive empowerment and mindset change process, and have now become SRHR "champions". They have taken a leadership role in educating fellow youth about SRHR, including dispelling myths and misconceptions about contraceptives.



"Most of our friends are just afraid of using contraceptives such as the Norplant because they have heard wrong information that it will prevent you from getting pregnant in future, even after you remove it. So, we sit down with these kinds of people and tell them exactly how it works."

Temwanani, 23, Blantyre



Having become SRHR champions, the youth are now trusted sources of information on SRHR in their communities.



“Because we are now empowered, we are able have conversations on tough topics such as use of contraceptives and abortion with older people in our community. When the chief calls for a community meeting, they call upon us to explain any critical issues on contraceptives and even expanding on the abortion bill to our fellow community members.”

Daniel Chakhaza, a 28-year-old radio producer at a local radio station.

A youth empowerment radio program called Youth Power has been on the airwaves on Blantyre’s popular radio station, Joy Radio since 2015. Since 2019, producer Daniel Chakhaza has allocated more time for live programs on SRHR, and has unpacked the TOP Bill with different expert panelists. *Youth Power* is broadcast live and invites audience feedback on topical issues.



“What I have noted is that there has been a definite change in the kind of feedback that I get from listeners who call into the program, or send SMS. Previously, they would attack me every time I put in a controversial topic such as abortion for debate. But now, they ask my panelists very critical questions and provide constructive feedback. This is evidence that people are indeed becoming more open-minded about these issues, because they have now understood what the TOP Bill is all about.”

Daniel Chakhaza

In the nearby Thyolo District in the Southern Region, youth under the Chipembere Community Development Organisation (CCDO), Society for the Advancement of People (SOAP) and Centre for Community and Youth Development (CCYD) in Mzimba District in the Northern Region and Centre for Youth and Children Affairs (CEYCA) in Kasungu District in the Central Region have also been advocating for support for the TOP Bill as part of their SRHR advocacy work, which also includes mobilizing their fellow youth to demand SRHR services in public health facilities.

“This is the first time for Malawi to have a movement of young people mobilizing their fellow young people to face duty bearers and opinion leaders head on in asking very critical questions and advocating for liberalized laws on SRHR, including abortion. They have also engaged the Chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on Health and engaged him on issues that should be discussed with fellow parliamentarians when the TOP Bill comes up for debate.”

Explains Luke Tembo, Ipas Malawi Program Manager.

Learning from Malawi youth

The implementation of the ASRHR Programme has shown various lessons that can be considered when implementing similar programs;



Capacity Building

01

Capacity building for young people through trainings and mentorship has gone a long way in empowering the youth to be champions of SRHR. The youth feel confident to engage their fellow youth and policy makers on otherwise sticky issues, such as contraceptive use and abortion.

"I can say that the process of training us, especially taking us through values clarification and attitude transformation (VCAT) exercises has been an eye opener. We feel confident now more than ever, because this has built our capacity from within, and we now believe in what we do."

States Temwanani, 23, Blantyre.

Mobilizing Communities

02

Equipped with skills and knowledge, the youth are taking the lead in mobilizing their communities to seek knowledge and information on SRHR issues. Having become the trusted sources of information in the communities, traditional leaders look up to these youth SRHR champions to cascade their empowerment to their fellow youth.

Mobilizing Communities

03

The youth have also evidently claimed their space at the table with law and policy makers, evidenced by their dialogue with the Parliamentary Committee on Health. Law makers will now seek and take into account views from for young people when making decisions that affect them.

However, the challenge in implementing the programme and advocating for the enactment of the TOP law has been inadequate community and social mobilization on the TOP prior to submission to parliament.

“We have not mobilized enough support from our communities. We need to engage more people. We need to get more people talking about it, and even use the media to educate them about the actual contents and benefits of the TOP Bill for us young people, so that when it is finally tabled in parliament, the members of parliament (MPs) will already have known why it is important for us.”

Daniel Chakhaza, 28, Blantyre.

A positive future for youth SRHR in Malawi

Although the ASRHR Programme is time bound, the youth have taken lessons learned from the project and incorporated into their existing and upcoming projects. Some of the five organizations have mainstreamed abortion and other SRHR issues into their existing girls' education and gender-based violence prevention work. YVO has incorporated these issues in an Amplify Change Project that focuses on SRHR and GBV prevention in COVID-19 response.

“As we implemented the ASRHR Programme as part of COPUA, many organizations have seen the fruits of youth leadership and are now fundraising for abortion related activities for the youth outside of Ipas Malawi's support. They are no longer shy to speak out on abortion related issues.”

Luke Tembo, Ipas Malawi Program Manager.



“Change takes time, and we know we cannot achieve everything within a short time. But I am proud that we have kickstarted conversations about different topics, including contraceptives and abortion in relation to young people. This is the start of something big. We will mobilize more young people to advocate for the bill among parents, religious and traditional leaders, and, I can assure you, the Bill will pass.”

- Kenneth Mtago, Young Voices Organization Executive Director.

Young people like Temwanani Banda continue engaging fellow young people and elders in their communities on SRHR issues, while pushing for reforms in SRHR policy and service provision that is youth friendly. The TOP Bill appeared on the order paper for Malawi's Budget Parliamentary Sitting which ended in October 2020, but was never tabled. There has been an opposition movement fighting against tabling and enactment of the law. Which may have worked to the Bill's proponents' advantage, particularly young people.

The youth have now taken on the leadership mantle in empowering fellow youth with accurate SRHR information; using the media to dispel myths and increase demand for SRHR services; and mobilizing parents and religious and traditional leaders to press upon parliamentarians to support and pass the Bill.

While legal and policy changes take time and advocacy processes span a long time, lessons from Ipas Malawi's ASRHR Programme shows the critical role of capacity building and community mobilization in ASRHR policy which ensures sustainability of ASRHR advocacy and an enabling social environment for policy and legal reform.



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