

Young people's Experiences of Empowerment and its Drivers within a Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) program in Uganda: A qualitative inquiry.

Nanyange, D., Matovu, Q., Owekmemo, C., Walakira, G. & van Veen, M. (2018)

Background

The transition from childhood to adulthood presents particular sexual and reproductive health (SRH) needs and challenges. In Uganda, young people are not only faced with challenges of limited access to information and services but also restrictive societal beliefs/values. These might negatively affect their agency regarding their SRHR. Efforts for addressing the above challenges have not only come from the government but also various development partners and civil society organizations. One of such being the Get Up Speak Out program (GUSO).

GUSO is a five-year program (2016-2020) developed by a consortium consisting of Rutgers, Aidsfonds, CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, Dance4life, International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and Simavi. In Uganda, the program is implemented by the SRHR Alliance Uganda in 4 districts (Jinja, Mayuge, Iganga, and Bugiri). Implementing organizations include Reproductive Health Uganda (RHU), Reach A Hand Uganda (RAHU), Straight Talk Foundation (STF), Family Life Education Program (FLEP), Centre for Health Human Rights & Development (CEHURD), Uganda Network of Young People Living with HIV and AIDS (UNYPA), Restless Development (RD) and National Forum of People Living with HIV and AIDS Networks in Uganda (NAFOPHANU). The overall aim of GUSO is to address the problem of young people not claiming their sexual rights and their right to participation because of restrictions at the community, societal, institutional and political levels. This hinders their access to comprehensive SRHR education and services that match their needs, and ability to make their own informed SRHR decisions. The ability to make own decisions (informed) maybe defined as agency/ empowerment.

Empowerment is a ‘buzz’ word without an explicitly clear definition of its meaning. Despite its ambiguity, Page & Czuba, (1999) defined this concept as “a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives” From previous studies, it is evident that empowerment is influenced by several factors that go beyond the individual level; social, cultural, political and economic factors play a role in the empowerment process. Addressing these underlying factors creates an enabling environment for young people to realize their SRHR and consequently achievement of the GUSO goal which is empowering young people to realize their SRHR.

Although there is numerous literature exploring of empowerment, very few explored this concept on the basis of young people’s sexual and reproductive health and rights experiences and perceptions. Therefore the current study aimed to expand the literature on young people’s experiences with empowerment within the sexual and reproductive health arena. Finding from this study can be used in the refinement and development of SRHR interventions that meet their unique needs and empower them to take charge of their lives

Aim

The aim of this qualitative content analysis study was to explore and understand how beneficiaries within the GUSO program in Uganda experienced empowerment and its drivers.

For the purpose of this study, empowerment was generally defined as “a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives” Page & Czuba (1999). The phenomenon was explored in line with the multi-component approach domains (GUSO Consortium, 2015) i.e. information/ education, services and support.

Beneficiaries are young people aged 10-24 who have encountered or utilized the GUSO program interventions (GUSO target group).

Research question

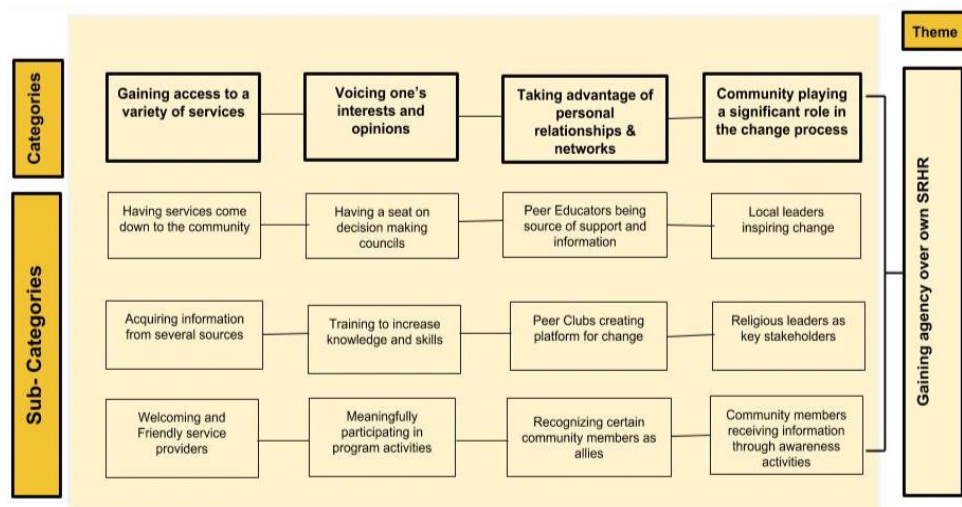
What are beneficiaries' experiences of empowerment and its drivers within the GUSO program in Uganda?

Methodology

The study was conducted in Iganga district, Busoga sub-region between January – April 2018. A qualitative research design was chosen because of the complexity and sensitive nature of sexuality. Semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions were the primary data collection methods adopted for the study. The study population comprised of beneficiaries (both male and female) aged between 18 and 25 years. Individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews with seventeen participants were conducted in a private setting. Settings that were selected included; health facilities, community centers, youth centers, mosque, organization offices and individual's homes. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (QCA) guided by Graneheim and Lundman (2004)

Findings

Latent analysis resulted in an emerging theme: gaining agency over own SRHR, with four drivers identified: opportunities to express interests/opinions, relationships that foster access to information/services, community support for SRH and gaining access to SRH services.



Overall, empowerment was experienced as a multi-dimensional concept with influencing factors beyond the individual level. The different strategies employed under the program such as outreaches, supportive community engagements and most importantly linking young people to decision making platforms and opportunities proved to be key drivers of empowerment. Findings indicated a need for capacity strengthening to increase the effectiveness of programs and heightened focus on addressing negative beliefs and attitudes, especially in the religious and cultural contexts. Findings have implications on the future planning and implementation activities of not only GUSO but also other public health programs targeting young people.