

# POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES TO MITIGATE SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND COERCION AMONG ADOLESCENTS: BUILDING CHOICE, VOICE, AND AGENCY FOR PREVENTION AND RESPONSE



Photo: Peace Corps

## INTRODUCTION

Nearly one in three adolescent girls, globally, report that their first sexual experience occurred under some form of coercion or force.<sup>44</sup> Although little data are available on adolescent boys' experience of sexual coercion or force, evidence in some countries suggests that as many as one in five adolescent boys also experience sexual violence before the age of 18.<sup>13,37</sup> Early childhood or adolescent experiences of sexual coercion can negatively impact individuals' physical, psychological, and social development throughout their lifetimes.<sup>38</sup> This technical brief aims to inform researchers and program implementers working with youth in developing countries, who likely interact with youth who have experienced sexual coercion, by highlighting examples of successful programs for reducing the occurrence of sexual coercion and force and by describing strategies for responding to them. The brief discusses how the frequency and negative effects of sexual coercion experienced by boys and girls could be reduced by building assets, especially social skills, agency, and youth empowerment, as a part of positive youth development (PYD) programs.

## DEFINING POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

USAID has defined PYD as an approach that engages youth, along with their families, communities, and governments, so that youth are empowered to reach their full potential. PYD transitions away from traditional approaches of responding to young people in a risk or problem frame and toward proactively building skills, fostering healthy relationships, and supporting youth to be active partners in development efforts. It suggests that if young people have appropriate knowledge, skills, and support, they will thrive as adults, enjoy good health, succeed economically, and make meaningful contributions to their communities. Thus defined, PYD must be centered in approaches that work to empower young people and build their agency, skills, and confidence to transform communities and systems.



## WHAT IS SEXUAL COERCION?

Sexual coercion is defined as the act of forcing or attempting to force another individual—through violence, threats, verbal insistence, deception, cultural expectations, or economic circumstances—to engage in sexual behavior against his or her will.<sup>8</sup> Sexual coercion, as a component of sexual violence, is a violation of human rights.<sup>43</sup> Coercion may occur in the context of a sexual act, or it may take the form of social pressure from other parties, such as friends, siblings, parents, supervisors/coworkers, or peers. Apart from physical force, coercion may involve psychological intimidation, threats of physical harm, or threats to withhold employment, financial support, or goods. Sexual coercion may also occur when an individual is physically or mentally incapable of giving consent.<sup>28</sup>

### DEFINING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence includes both physical and psychological attacks against another person without their consent. It is not limited to a physical invasion of the person's body and may include acts that do not involve penetration or physical contact. Sexual violence includes sexual harassment, sexual assault, incest, and rape. Sexual activity agreed to under duress because of coercion, intimidation, threats, or harassment is not consensual and is considered sexual violence. The perpetrator of sexual violence may be a stranger, acquaintance, friend, family member, or intimate partner. All forms of sexual violence harm the person and constitute human rights violations.

## SEXUAL COERCION AMONG ADOLESCENTS

Globally, adolescents of all genders are at risk of experiencing sexual coercion and force at sexual debut, as well as at other points in adolescence.<sup>42</sup> While there is growing evidence of sexual and gender-based violence experienced by adolescents, disaggregated by sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression,<sup>3,11,14</sup> more data are available on the experience of sexual coercion and violence by female-identified adolescents:

- One in 10 adolescent girls, globally, reported experiencing sexual violence or forced sex during their lifetime.<sup>38</sup>
- In certain countries, particularly in the global south, higher rates of coercion at sexual debut have been reported:
  - 38% of 12-19-year-old girls in Malawi<sup>31</sup>
  - 30% of 12-19 year old girls in Ghana<sup>31</sup>
  - 23% of 12-19 year old girls in Uganda<sup>31</sup>
  - 15% of 12-19 year old girls in Burkina Faso<sup>31</sup>
  - 50% of young women in Peru<sup>11</sup>
  - 33% of girls aged 15-17 years in Kingston, Jamaica<sup>9</sup>

Several factors contribute to the use of sexual force and coercion. Gender and social norms that contribute to sexual force and coercion are set in early childhood: expectations for what it means to be masculine or feminine are socialized through choice of toys; differential treatment from parents, community, and family; and the distribution of household chores by gender. Women and girls in particular are subject to harmful gender norms that seek to control their sexuality and decision-making ability about sexual activity.<sup>26</sup> Research shows that gender-based violence stems from social norms and expectations that reinforce inequality and place women's and girls' choices outside of their realm of control, weakening their agency with regard to these decisions.<sup>17</sup> Social norms research suggests that most males are mistaken about other males' attitudes and behaviors toward sex and falsely assume that other men do not seek consent for sex.<sup>10</sup> Adolescents of all genders may use sex to gain social status, putting them at higher risk of violence or coercion. Economic needs and social expectation can impact a girl's decision to engage in sexual activity; it is a risk factor for sexual coercion and can influence her decision-making regarding sexual activity. Girls may engage in sexual activity with older men in exchange for necessities like school fees, food, and job opportunities.<sup>29</sup>



Photo: USAID

## IMPACT OF SEXUAL COERCION ON ADOLESCENTS' AGENCY AND EMPOWERMENT

The physical effects of sexual coercion are well documented. Sexual coercion can result in unintended pregnancy, abortion, and increased risk of STI infection (including HIV), as well as influencing future sexual risk-taking (including failure to use condoms) for young people of all genders.<sup>15,21,28,38</sup> Young men who experience coercion and sexual violence in childhood are more likely to perpetrate sexual violence in adulthood.<sup>13</sup> Psychologically, sexual coercion can lead to anxiety and depression, and, in some cases, attempted suicide.<sup>21</sup>

The experience of sexual coercion not only carries physical and mental health risks for adolescents but can also negatively impact a young person's development of confidence, self-efficacy, and assertiveness. The social stigmatization of young people who have experienced and reported violence perpetuates a cycle of sexual coercion and use of force in young people's sexual experiences into adulthood. Programs and solutions that build agency and empower adolescents of all genders to make their own decisions about when and how to be sexually active can provide an appropriate response to, and help to prevent, sexual violence and coercion.

## PYD APPROACHES TO PREVENTING SEXUAL COERCION

Prevention programs have had to deal with a number of difficulties. Adolescent girls and boys in developing-country settings are often out of school or attend lower-quality schools, and/or they lack social or physical mobility because of gender norms.<sup>39</sup> These limitations can reduce their access to accurate information from peer networks, teachers, and other influential community members.<sup>41</sup> Engaging parents and community leaders can be difficult in places with strict gender norms and expectations. This section highlights several programs that have worked to reduce the incidence of sexual coercion and violence by transforming gender norms through a focus on empowering individual adolescents and building enabling environments.

## TRANSFORMING GENDER NORMS

Gender-transformative programs have been effective in reducing sexual and gender-based violence and improving sexual and reproductive health and rights outcomes among adolescents.<sup>4</sup> Strategies that have been employed in programming to promote changes in gender norms include mentoring for boys, working to provide alternative notions of masculinity, and modeling gender-equitable relationship behavior and power dynamics.<sup>2,10,19,34</sup>

The Gender Roles, Equality and Transformations (GREAT) project, implemented by the Georgetown University Institute for Reproductive Health, aimed to increase gender-equitable attitudes among adolescents in Uganda. Over the course of six years, program participants shifted their attitudes toward gender norms and accepted a more critical analysis of gender inequality. There was significant improvement in areas of equitable partner decision-making and couple communication, and acceptance of gender-based violence declined significantly among older adolescents—who also demonstrated increased self-efficacy by asking for help if they experienced inappropriate touching.<sup>16</sup>

### DEFINING GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES

Promundo defines gender-transformative approaches as those that “seek to reshape gender relations to be more gender equitable, largely through approaches that free both women and men from the impact of harmful and rigid gender and sexual norms. Gender-transformative programmes aim to accomplish the following: (1) raise awareness about harmful gender norms; (2) question the costs of adhering to these norms (e.g., negative outcomes in sexual and reproductive health and rights for women and men); and (3) replace unhealthy, inequitable gender norms with redefined healthy, positive, and equitable ones.”<sup>30</sup>



## EMPOWERING INDIVIDUAL ADOLESCENTS AND BUILDING ASSETS

In a recent study conducted by the International Center for Research on Women, three overlapping pathways of empowerment are identified through which girls can expand their ability to make and act on strategic life choices:<sup>41</sup> (1) transforming the way a girl sees herself; (2) increasing her opportunities for advancement and alternatives to her status quo—specifically education and alternatives to early marriage—and building her influence in her community through increased mobility and visibility; and (3) making her voice heard.<sup>41</sup>

### HEALTH AND EMPOWERMENT FOR YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN

Promundo has had great success in improving gender attitudes among adolescents through long-term investments in **Program H**, which works with young men to encourage critical reflection about “manhood,” and **Program M**, which works with young women on their sexual and reproductive health and rights and empowerment in interpersonal relationships, in Brazil, Jamaica, Mexico, and Nicaragua.

Focusing on health and empowerment, participants improved self-confidence and self-knowledge, communication skills, community involvement, recognition of the cycle of violence, and a critical vision of traditional gender norms.<sup>15</sup>

One group of assets young people need to acquire in order to become empowered is soft skills—such as assertiveness and communication—which enable them to feel comfortable challenging gender-inequitable beliefs and attitudes about women and men’s sexuality, roles, and responsibilities. YouthPower Action’s review of *Key Soft Skills for Cross-Sectoral Youth Outcomes* literature noted that a large majority of violence-prevention literature focuses on a *lack* of particular soft skills as a “risk factor” for perpetrating violence, rather than on the *presence* of soft skills as a protective factor for preventing youth violence. Lack of self-control and impulsivity were considered risk factors.

Some skills were highlighted as important in violence prevention: skills like empathy, social skills, and positive attitudes are key to preventing the perpetration of gender-based violence. Building positive soft skills associated with empowerment and agency, such as positive self-esteem, high self-efficacy, and assertiveness in communication, should be protective across a range of violence prevention and sexual and reproductive health outcomes. A WHO study<sup>44</sup> also shows that life skills (building social, emotional, and behavioral competencies) acquired in social development programs can prevent different types of violence.

In programming as well as practice, there is a strong connection between increased empowerment, changing gender norms, and decreased sexual coercion.

### EMPOWERING YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

The **IMpower program**, introduced by No Means No Worldwide in Kenya and Malawi, has also successfully reduced rates of sexual assault, harassment, and gender-based violence by combining a curriculum on empowerment and life skills with self-defense classes for very young adolescents. The six-week curriculum includes sessions on communication skills, boundaries, self-efficacy, negotiation, and de-escalation and self-defense techniques.<sup>34</sup>

By working with adolescent boys to change attitudes toward gender-based violence, the No Means No Worldwide program showed increased positive attitudes toward gender equality; it also increased the rate at which boys were willing to intervene to stop or prevent incidents of harassment, bullying, and violence against their peers.<sup>24</sup>

## ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS

Young people are influenced by a number of outside sources, including their peers, parents, teachers, and community members. These outside influencers can reinforce, by words and by actions, harmful traditional gender norms. It is important to consider such enabling environments in implementing a program or when examining attitudes and behaviors of others toward gender norms. Recognizing the need for an ecological

approach to changing norms, a number of successful programs have been implemented to help community leaders and influencers have a greater effect and longer-lasting impact on changing gender norms.

Such approaches, which engage girls and boys, their families, and other community leaders and gatekeepers, have proven to be effective and promising ways to change gender norms and ensure long-term change in attitudes and behaviors.

### **ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS: UGANDA**

SASA! Uganda worked with community activists, and with local government, religious, and cultural leaders, police officers, and health care providers to change harmful attitudes and norms around gender and power in relationships and perpetuation and acceptability of gender-based violence.<sup>1</sup> Among both men and women, the program saw lower levels of acceptance of intimate partner violence, greater acceptance that a woman can refuse sex, and greater community support for women who had experienced sexual violence.<sup>1</sup> The project curriculum has been adapted and replicated in 15 countries.

### **ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS: INDIA**

Pathfinder International's PRACHAR project in India also shifted attitudes and behaviors towards more gender-equitable norms, as well as enlisted community support for adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights among gatekeepers engaged in the intervention programs, including parents, parents-in-law, and other community leaders.<sup>32</sup>

### **ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS: EGYPT**

The ISHRAQ program in Egypt, implemented by the Population Council, worked with in- and out-of-school girls, community members, and parents to promote change in gender norms. The program conducted meetings and community dialogues with parents and other gatekeepers and provided spaces for girls to learn life skills and improve their decision-making abilities. As a result, girls felt more empowered to talk to their parents about delaying marriage and their desires to remain in school.<sup>36</sup> Parents and community members also changed their attitudes about girls' education and became more accepting of girls' mobility in their community and more progressive on girls' rights and capacities.



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## ENSURING EFFECTIVE RESPONSES TO SEXUAL COERCION AND VIOLENCE

Empowerment- and agency-building approaches are vital not only for the prevention of sexual coercion and violence but to build appropriate responses. PYD programs must be prepared to respond to and support adolescents who have experienced sexual coercion and force by facilitating access to physical and mental health services, increasing linkages with community and social support, and promoting or providing legal redress.

Many young women and men who experience sexual coercion or violence may choose not to pursue help from health providers or from local law enforcement for fear of social stigma or retribution.<sup>36</sup> In societies with especially restrictive gender norms, girls' sexuality is seen as something that is controlled by the men of her community. As a result, girls who are coerced into sexual activity can feel significant shame and guilt.

While young women face discrimination and blame for their own experiences of sexual coercion and violence, the stigma that men and adolescent boys who have experienced sexual assault face is compounded by gender-normative pressure on boys to be sexually active, by homophobia, and by traditional expectations of masculinity.<sup>37,38</sup> Legal definitions and cultural understandings of sexual assault are frequently gendered (focused on vaginal penetration), or may only regard men as perpetrators, leaving male survivors without a clear language for their experience. The social taboos and silence surrounding sex, sexuality, and sexual assault may also leave health, education, and development professionals working with adolescents uncomfortable with and unprepared for responding to adolescent clients who disclose experiences of sexual coercion or force.

## INTERSECTORAL RESPONSES

Programmatic responses to sexual violence and coercion should consider:

- A range of sexual and reproductive health services, including pregnancy screening and emergency contraception; contraceptive counseling and services; HIV counseling, testing, and post-exposure prophylaxis; and medical treatment for injuries.<sup>26,27</sup>
- Mental health support in the form of counseling and community and social support groups.

- Referrals to legal redress through local law enforcement, human rights bodies, or survivors' support programs.

In many contexts, these services may be hidden, inaccessible, or nonexistent, or adolescents may be hesitant to access them for fear of experiencing greater stigmatization or retribution from their families or from perpetrators. PYD program staff may be untrained or feel ill-equipped to respond to disclosure from adolescents, may not know their program's legal disclosure or reporting requirements, or may be unaware of what services are needed or available in their program area. PYD programs should, as part of their design or in the formative stage, research and map available resources in their program area and establish response guidance for staff as part of their child protection policy.

## BUILDING EMPATHY TO COPE WITH STIGMA

PYD programs can help address how survivors deal with the effect of stigma experienced by survivors by building adolescents' empathy. Cultivating empathy, "the ability to understand and share another's emotional state or context,"<sup>14</sup> has been strongly linked to the prevention of violence, including group violence, interpersonal and intimate partner violence, and bullying.<sup>16</sup> Educational and outreach methodologies that help build empathy include a strong focus on storytelling and personal narratives, respectful dialogue, and group reflection.<sup>6</sup> The No Means No program in Kenya paired a curriculum of prevention, life skills—such as empathy—and self-defense with a survivors' support group where participants could share their stories in a safe and respectful space. Fostering group empathy helped reduce feelings of shame associated with the stigma of sexual assault, leading to an increase in rates of disclosure of sexual violence in the intervention group.<sup>35</sup>

## MOVING FORWARD: CHOICE, VOICE, AGENCY, AND MORE EVIDENCE

Programs that aim to change gender norms around sexual activity and promote choice, voice, and agency have seen success in a number of developing-country settings. The availability of resources—physical, social, and economic—creates an environment in which **choices** are available to an individual: what job to



pursue, where to live or attend school, what to do about sexual and reproductive health. The first step in reducing sexual coercion experienced by youth is to provide them with resources and choices that enable them to make decisions about managing their own lives. The making of decisions and expressions of agency also require that youth have a **voice**: the ability and the right to speak up and to be heard, to make decisions, and to participate in discussions in their homes, community, and in national political forums about the choices and resources available in their lives. By using those resources and choices, that voice can express an individual's **agency** to make decisions regarding his or her body, life, and future. Choice, voice, and agency are all key components of empowerment.

However, most of the evidence is available from programs in Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Latin America. Increased research in other parts of the world, specifically Southeast Asia and the Middle East, is needed to broaden the base of evidence on causes and incidence of sexual coercion among young people.<sup>39</sup> More measurements of PYD outcomes, which should include devising tools for measuring soft skills, are required. More research is needed on the long-term impact these programs have on participants' attitudes and behaviors into adulthood, and on the changes in gender norms seen at the community level across generations. This stronger evidence base can help tailor and improve programmatic approaches that have worked in other country and cultural contexts to change attitudes and behaviors associated with sexual coercion.

Positive youth development is rooted in programming that gives youth voice and agency and presents them with choices they can make to alter their lives. The successes that programs have seen in preventing and responding to incidents of sexual coercion among adolescents point to a clear connection to PYD programming. Programs that build adolescents' assets and agency through developing their soft skills have helped reduce stigma, build empathy, and modify environmental and social norms that contribute to violence and coercion. Working to build an enabling environment of supportive communities and positive relationships in which adolescents can critically engage with and develop positive norms, expectations, and perceptions helps open a safe space for gender transformative development. PYD programs are ideally positioned to positively respond to and support adolescents dealing with sexual coercion and violence through connecting and integrating health and social services at the community level. It has been demonstrated that working with adolescents and young people to integrate into PYD programming measures for the prevention of sexual coercion and the development of appropriate responses to it can change young people's lives. More research can build a stronger evidence base for the value of approaches based on agency and empowerment in improving outcomes in positive youth development and violence reduction programs.



Photo: ICRW

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For more information on YouthPower or the Gender and PYD CoP, please visit <http://www.Youthpower.org> or email the project at [info@youthpower.org](mailto:info@youthpower.org)

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 YouthPowerLearning

USAID YouthPower Learning generates and disseminates knowledge about the implementation and impact of positive youth development (PYD) and cross-sectoral approaches in international development. The project leads research, evaluations, and events designed to build the evidence base related to PYD. Concurrently, YouthPower Learning employs expertise in learning and knowledge sharing to promote engagement and inform the global community about how to successfully help transition young people into productive, healthy adults. YouthPower Learning supports the implementation of the 2012 USAID Youth in Development Policy to improve capacity and enable the aspirations of youth so that they can contribute to, and benefit from, more stable, democratic, and prosperous communities.

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