



Keeping Girls in Secondary School as HIV Prevention: Insights from the Innovation Challenge.

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Introduction & Background

Adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in sub-Saharan Africa account for nearly three-quarters of new HIV infections (PEPFAR 2018). Keeping girls in school through secondary school is a key component of comprehensive HIV prevention for AGYW under the DREAMS initiative. Higher levels of education are associated with lower rates of HIV infection in sub-Saharan Africa (De Neve 2016, Hargreaves 2008). Students with poor school attendance are two-to-three times more likely to contract HIV or other sexually transmitted infections (Stoner 2017) than those with good attendance records. Educational attainment appears to be a protective factor against HIV infection because it is associated with delayed sexual debut and condom use (Zuikowski 2011, Hargreaves 2008, Jukes 2008). Across East and southern Africa, girls whose families are poor, highly mobile, or foreign nationals, and those who are orphans or vulnerable children, live with disabilities, are mothers, and/or are forced out of school prematurely are more vulnerable to HIV (Mee 2018, UNAIDS 2016). For these girls and young women, completing high school reduces this vulnerability.

Overview of Focus Area Two: Keeping Girls in Secondary School

Nearly half (21) of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge grantees piloted interventions under Focus Area (FA) 2 for keeping girls in secondary school through graduation in both formal and non-formal education settings. They tested new models to retain girls who are most likely to drop out of secondary school and to return those already pushed out, collectively reaching 103,045 15–18 year-old girls (115 percent of the life of project target) across the 10 countries.

DREAMS Innovation Challenge Technical Brief Series

The DREAMS Innovation Challenge was launched in 2016 to advance the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief's (PEPFAR's) commitment to reducing HIV infection among adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in sub-Saharan Africa. Funded by the U.S. Department of State, Office of the Global AIDS Coordinator, and managed by JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), DREAMS-IC spurred new partnerships and approaches in a multi-dimensional response to HIV prevention for AGYW ages 15 to 24 in 10 DREAMS countries: eSwatini, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Forty-six global and local organizations implemented two-year projects in six focus areas: (1) strengthening the capacity of communities to deliver services; (2) keeping girls in secondary school; (3) linking men to services; (4) supporting pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP); (5) providing a bridge to employment; and (6) applying data to increase impact.

Innovations included:

- Infusing business skills, financial and digital literacy, and female empowerment in HIV-prevention curricula and reinforcing these topics through contemporary themes in youth culture via a "hip" magazine format. (*FeminalHip: Girl Power*)
- Accelerating curriculum "catch-up" by providing access to mainstream academic certification through part-time continuing education centers, distance education, and out-of-school study groups for pregnant and parenting teens; combining academics with education on early childhood stimulation; and community mobilization and advocacy within the education sector to transform attitudes about girls' education. (World Education, Inc./Bantwana Initiative: *Protect Our Youth*)
- Radio programming designed and produced by girls reached young female audiences with behavior-change messages for empowerment and HIV prevention, combined with using influential people to inspire and adopt new thinking and behaviors about girls' potential. (Wizards Foundation: *Super Woman*)
- Access to girl child-friendly, culturally sensitive, well-equipped learning environments with story time, laptops, and computer-based literacy programs in local languages; visual and performing arts; and mentoring in community-based safe spaces for girls to gather and study. (Lubuto Library Partners: *Evaluating and Advocating for Innovation in Education*)
- An early warning system (EWS) led by female students (peers) in diverse teams of teachers and school administrators, parents, and community leaders to identify girls most likely to drop out, involve their parents, and link them to appropriate social, economic, academic, and community-based support, including gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and HIV services. (World Vision: *School-Community Accountability for Girls' Education*)



Super Woman peer leaders recording a radio show. Photo by: Wizards Foundation

Within two years, these grantees documented a collective school retention rate of 98 percent and demonstrated significant positive effects in other areas of girls' lives. Evaluations from FA 2 grantees highlight positive shifts in school culture and classroom environments, as well as in parents' attitudes and support for their daughters' educational success. Group savings to support girls in need beyond the life of the project have been mobilized. For example, seven parent "grow groups" under Cecily's Fund generated \$5,500 through village savings and loan associations (VSLAs), and AGYW raised \$12,500 from income-

generating activities like selling dry fish, charcoal, groceries, second-hand clothes, and cooking oil. In Malawi, VSLAs formed under FHI360 generated \$54,800 for AGYW educational support. Above all, evaluations documented changes in girls' academic performance, overall confidence, and in their

knowledge and agency to avoid HIV. Grantees also documented positive shifts in girls' attitudes about gender equity and GBV. Further, in this sub-Saharan African context, where only one-in-two adolescents knows his/her HIV status, DREAMS Innovation Challenge reached more than 89,700 girls with HIV testing services (HTS) and provided referrals to other HIV and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services.

Selected Innovations & Results

Two case studies from the DREAMS Innovation Challenge attest to the transformative impact that these interventions had on the lives of AGYW and their communities. After 18–24 months of implementation, these programs demonstrated effectiveness at improving girls' academic performance, increasing their retention in school and use of preventive health services, and strengthening their capacity to make choices that support their best interest. The projects led to the development of more positive attitudes toward gender equality, lowered tolerance for GBV, and strengthened parental and community commitment for keeping girls in school.

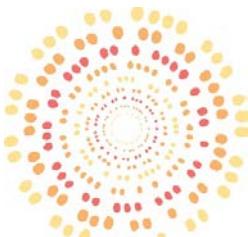
South Africa: Driving Program Resources to Large, Underserved Segments at Risk of HIV: Migrant & Disabled Girls. Community Media Trust (CMT).

CMT, the Disabled People of South Africa, and Population Council implemented a girl-centered intervention to meet the needs of girls with differing abilities and within migrant households. The multi-pronged approach focused on factors that increase vulnerability of girls who are foreign nationals (xenophobia, social isolation, broad-based discrimination, restricted access to social entitlements, and heightened mobility), and girls who live with disabilities (isolation, lack access to and services responsive to their health). At the heart of this intervention was advocacy for schools to uphold foreign nationals' right to education and to integrate disabled students into mainstream education opportunities.

CMT established 143 community-based girls clubs across eThekwin District in KwaZulu-Natal, involving 62 primary and secondary schools serving foreign nationals and eight schools for disabled students, as well as the University of Kwazulu Natal. The girls' clubs delivered a standardized 20-session program of life skills training with HIV education, mentoring and social support and protective assets like school completion and knowledge of HIV prevention and how to access clinical services. With 15 sessions required to graduate from the program, CMT and partners graduated 2,212 migrant girls, 703 girls with disabilities, and 463 South African girls by the end of the project. The schools with which CMT worked requested continued support for HIV-prevention programming. CMT with support of PEPFAR is implementing Healthy Choices and Stepping Stones for priority populations like AGYW.

"I had no confidence going to health facilities, especially for sexual and reproductive health services thinking I was too young to get it. I feared expressing my health issues to anyone. Through the Loyalty program I am now confident to express myself to health care workers."

-Caroline, Amref Health
Tanzania



Kenya: Promoting the Participation of Girls and Young Women in Secondary School. Trócaire.

Trócaire and local implementing partners Girl Child Network, Liverpool Health, and Africa's Voices Foundation delivered a package of services to help AGYW in Kenya return to secondary school after pregnancy. In rural areas of Siaya County and informal urban settlements of Nairobi, Trócaire built four "bridge centres" that offered accelerated learning, SRH and HIV education, life skills, psychosocial support from trained adults and peer-counselors, food, and onsite child care. Girls had access to tablets and the internet, and could connect to a digital platform offering interactive health information and counselors. The innovation also included a text and call-in radio program that reached thousands of listeners with HIV-prevention messages tailored to the urban and rural AGYW audiences.



Jackline Adhinga – Bridge Centre graduate re-enrolled in secondary school. Photo by: Trócaire.

Community facilitators engaged gatekeepers and parents in "community conversations" on the structural and social barriers to girls' education. Sensitization sessions and advocacy with school boards facilitated and supported girls' re-entry to school and reduced stigma of teen pregnancy. Trócaire fine-tuned its design to include a component to link parents to household livelihood-strengthening and bursary programs to support their daughters' school fees after the project ends. Male partners were engaged as champions for the program, and AGYW linked to post-secondary employment services offered by other DREAMS partners. In two years, the project nearly doubled its intended reach, enrolling 1,737 AGYW ages 15–24. Sixty percent (1,041) of AGYW served were re-enrolled in 276 secondary schools; 84 percent of whom were still in school at the end of the project.

Lessons & Recommendations

Grantees had a direct impact on increasing attendance, improving academic performance, enabling advancement to a higher grade, and a school retention rate of 98 percent. Their interventions also improved students' knowledge of HIV prevention; linked them to health and social services in creative ways; provided opportunities to improve parenting and livelihood skills; and reshaped community attitudes to support girls' education. Along the way, grantees encountered and overcame a variety of challenges, which yielded the following recommendations.

When schools are involved, synchronize project and school timetables

Interventions designed for students must accommodate (and yield to) the school timetable and calendar. When key program activities do not align with the daily schedule and/or the overall school calendar for vacations, exam periods, etc., the intervention suffers. When project and school schedules projects conflicted, intervention "dose/intensity" was weakened and outcomes stymied. Partners adapted by re-arranging sessions to reach girls after school, working to minimize negative effects on girls' academic performance, contributions to household labor, and personal safety.

Target periods of high risk

While many partners were unable to engage students during school holidays, these periods were missed opportunities to involve girls and communities during critical times. Holidays sometimes overlap with traditional cultural events that heighten girls' risk of contracting HIV, such as Hyena in Malawi (during which girls' hymens are broken in preparation for marriage) and the Reed Festival in eSwatini (during which girls dance for the king so that they might be chosen as a wife). Contemporary celebrations such as Christmas and national holidays occasioned by increased drinking and reduced inhibition also heighten AGYW vulnerability to sexual harassment and exploitation. A few partners developed mini-interventions to keep girls positively occupied during this time, for example, engaging them in "holiday clubs" to minimize their exposure to external risk.

Address multiple underlying structural factors simultaneously

Successful interventions built support for girls' education by strengthening parent associations, engaging community leaders in providing safe spaces for girls in and out of school, and developing family contracts with parents to support their daughters' education and set aside resources to do so. In Zambia, for example, Cecily's Fund required up to 50 percent contribution to school fees from parents to ensure long-term support for keeping their daughters in school. It is also critical to plan for post-placement monitoring and support of girls who return to school and who receive scholarships to that they stay in school. Interventions that cultivated livelihoods for parents help communities maintain educational supports for girls beyond the life of the project.

Several partners involved male students in supporting girls' leadership and sensitizing others to the values of girls' education. This diminished the backlash frequently encountered in response to the directing of resources to girls. For example, Brick by Brick Uganda trained boys to sew reusable menstrual pads and build private girls' sanitation facilities. At the community level, particularly in rural areas, constructive engagement of male community leaders and faith-leaders is essential for instilling the value of educating girls and delaying marriage. In Tanzania, WEI/B included boys in protect our youth (POY) clubs; in Zimbabwe it targeted partners and spouses through community dialogues to remove restrictions to girls' school attendance.

Reduce policy and institutional barriers to school re-entry at multiple levels

Supportive policy and institutional practices are a major part of girls strategic gender needs. In some countries, such as Tanzania, national policy does not support return of girls who dropped out due to pregnancy.¹ While Kenya has had a school re-entry policy since 1994, many schools limit when girls can return to school to the start of the academic year. Some DREAMS Innovation Challenge grants focused on changing education policy and practices that disadvantage girls while building coalitions on behalf of girls' educational needs and providing items (e.g., uniforms, notebooks, menstrual pads) to help them stay in school. Interventions that collaborated with local government to enforce positive girls' education policies reported shifts in attitudes that supported girls' education. Those that engaged officials early and often were also able to sustain support for keeping girls in school. For example, Catholic Medical Mission Board's continuous engagement led county education officials in Siaya, Kenya to allocate 10 percent of school budgets to purchase menstrual pads for girls who could not afford them.

¹ Tanzanian leader reaffirms ban on pregnant girls attending state schools. Reuters. June 23, 2017.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-tanzania-education/tanzanian-leader-reaffirms-ban-on-pregnant-girls-attending-state-schools-idUKKBN19E19F>

Provide multiple supports to girls who are most at risk, their children and families

Some DREAMS Innovation Challenge grantees created allies for girls' education by raising the consciousness of boys, men, teachers, and school administrators. They built coalitions to support girls' academic success and provided tools to identify girls who are most at risk of leaving school. They provided educational support for "catching up" academically, linked them to health and psychosocial services, and strengthened girls' ability to defend their rights in homes, communities, and schools. Internet communications and technology can strengthen academic and support for girls' education,



Lavina Ouma Oduor's young daughter attends daycare at the Bridge Center while she attends class. Photo by: Trócaire.

with ingenuity in resource-constrained environments. Partners such as The Population Council and HOPE worldwide Zambia piloted use of e-readers, interactive digital platforms for tablets and mobile phones, internet-enabled girls' libraries, and solar-powered lanterns for studying after dark. Several grantees sought to mitigate factors that hinder girls' high school completion. Teaching parenting skills helped young mothers complete their education, while providing childcare, menstrual pads, and safe hygiene facilities reduced school absenteeism and drop out.

Integrate gender-responsive and equity-promoting strategies

While projects were sometimes able to shift attitudes to favor gender equality among students, parents, teachers, and community members, programs also must meet girls' gender-specific needs and respect their essential human rights. AGYW's access to menstrual hygiene products and appropriate toilet facilities, for example, allows them to participate in formal education by minimizing their absence from school. Legal and social protection from sexual abuse and other forms of GBV, along with access to care and support when GBV occurs, also increase the likelihood that girls will complete secondary school. Activities aimed at preventing GBV on and around school premises as well as intervening wherever GBV occurs are essential components of programs for AGYW (see Wizards Foundation's *Superwoman* project <https://youtu.be/oR7oNcBwez4>). Such approaches should be integrated early and adapted for age-appropriateness. Gender-responsive and equity-promoting strategies should be grounded in human rights principles and involve policy makers, community elders, faith leaders, and other opinion leaders. For example, FHI 360 emphasized safety in the learning environment to help girls complete secondary education. Their intervention included gender-sensitization for head teachers to reduce GBV and increase school safety.

Foster peer leadership with girl-centered programming and mentorship

AGYW were at the front and center of all interventions. This paved the way for girls to emerge as leaders at schools where a safe and girl-friendly environment or school culture were also cultivated. In Population Council's *Girls Read* program, AGWY were paired with teachers or community mentors to promote gender equality, develop literacy, and encourage secondary school attendance and completion. Efforts to promote girls as leaders and ensure their safety at school communicate that

girls have value, and considers the particular social protection needs of adolescent girls. When World Vision introduced the EWS at secondary schools in Uganda, peer leaders took on the daily tracking and monitoring of their classmates who were identified as at-risk. Teachers in these schools were trained to administer the EWS, provide mentorship, and sign a publically displayed code of conduct. Similarly in Swaziland, WEI/B shifted responsibility for filling out an early warning tool from teachers to young women involved in after-school POY groups.

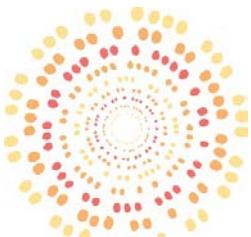
Cultivate teacher, administration, and broader Ministry of Education champions

The commitment of school directors and teachers to a girl-sensitive classroom is essential to program success and sustainability, and should be coupled with sensitization of local education officials to support allocation and institutionalization of interventions and resources for girls. When teachers led school clubs, for example, they readily committed to continuing the clubs post-DREAMS. Badilika's *Girl Education Support* solicited school administration (head teachers), parent-teacher associations, school bursary committees, and mother groups to identify, select, and support AGWY for scholarships. This facilitated the development of allies for teaching methods that recognize the equal value of girls and boys in the classroom and encourage aspirations unbound by gender biases. It also ensured program sustainability.

Collectively, the 21 DREAMS Innovation Challenge partners working to keep girls in secondary school underscored the value of a multi-pronged and asset-based approach that empowers and mentors girls as it reduces barriers to school completion. Continued efforts in this area, guided by girls, will further the development of a comprehensive response to HIV prevention among vulnerable AGYW in sub-Saharan Africa.

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