MUGOTA / IXHIBA YOUNG MEN'S FORUM

REPORT

Mugota / Ixhiba Young Men's Forum

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Mugota/Ixhiba Young Mens Forum Symposium was held during the 5th edition of the Southern African Regional Students and Youth Conference convened by SAYWHAT in partnership with the University of Botswana from the 17 – 19 of July 2024 in Gaborone Botswana under theme "Building Bridges, Navigating Emerging Issues: Advancing Equitable Access to Public Health and Education".

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Introduction

On the 17th of July 2024, SAYWHAT convened the Young Men's Forum dubbed the Mugota/Ixhiba Symposium, in Gaborone, Botswana. This event was held as part of the 5th edition of the Southern African Regional Students and Youth Conference on sexual and reproductive health (SARSYC). The conference serves as a regional platform, which brings together students, young people, policymakers, program implementers, civic groups, governments, the UN Family, donors, and other stakeholders to engage in solution focussed dialogues on all matters related to young people's health and wellbeing. Mugota/Ixhiba represents a safe space for young men to come together and dialogue on the peculiar challenges that affect young men of today. Realising the commonality of the challenges that young men in the region confront, this regional platform provides a space for young men in the region to share ideas and reinforce their role as responsible agents to address the challenges of young men.

This report provides a summarised presentation of the key discussions that took place during the young men's symposium held during the conference in Botswana.

About SAYWHAT

Students And Youth Working on reproductive Health Action Team (SAYWHAT) is a Southern African public health advocacy institution with 20 years of experience in championing health including Sexual and Reproductive Health and rights (SRHR) of young people. The organization addresses policy, structural and community level barriers to the realization of health rights of young people.

SAYWHAT envisions "A generation of healthy young people in Southern Africa" driven by the mission "To promote students' and young people's access to Health Rights, Services and Commodities. SAYWHAT's programmatic approach is rooted in the health rights movement which is sustained through its strategic pillars of capacity building, research, documentation, advocacy and engagement.

Key amongst SAYWHAT's Programming Focus areas include;

- Comprehensive Sexuality Education
- Service help line facility (Emergency toll free number 577)
- Gender Equality and Equity Advocacy
- Ending Child marriages
- Safe and Legal abortion advocacy
- Menstrual Health Management
- Mental Health Education
- Child Protection – Child Safeguarding
- Right to Education Advocacy
- Demand generation for SRH and GBV services
- Linking young people to SRH and GBV services
- Responding to young people's health needs during emergencies and humanitarian crisis situations
- Transnational advocacy on the right to health and education
- Budget tracking on health and education for young people

About SARSYC

The 5th Edition of the Southern Africa Regional Students and Youth Conference (SARSYC V) was held from the 17-19 July 2024 in Gaborone, Botswana. This year's conference was held under the theme "Building Bridges, Navigating Emerging Issues: Advancing Equitable Access to Public Health and Education" reinforcing the critical role of strengthening education system in the region as a strategic necessity to address the intersecting socio-economic, political and public health concerns confronted by young people.

This year's conference primarily focussed on 5 thematic areas which are:

a) ICPD30: As we approach the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) 30th anniversary, it is a time for celebration and introspection. SARSYC presented an opportunity for the youths to examine the ICPD's impact and relevance in today's context, ensuring that their voices contribute to shaping the future trajectory of population and development discourse.

b) HIV, TB, and other communicable diseases: Southern Africa continues to face a high burden of HIV and tuberculosis (TB). These not only strain healthcare systems but also cast shadows over economic productivity and social stability. SARSYC is an opportunity for students and young leaders converge to dissect policies, evaluate the intersections of communicable diseases with other aspects of life, and forge actionable plans.

c) Emerging Issues in Public Health: The Southern African Regional Students and Youth Conference (SARSYC) is a strategic opportunity to address critical emerging public health concerns. In this edition, the focus areas were climate change, the AI revolution, drug and substance abuse, and its negative and positive implications in the youth's wellbeing.

d) Intersecting Quality Education, Gender Equality, and Public Health: Advancing SDGs 3, 4, and 5
The African Union's proclamation of 2023 as the Year of Education comes at a critical time when millions of girls drop out of school in Sub-Saharan Africa due to constraints such as vulnerability to sexual harassment, menstrual health challenges, and early marriage. These barriers not only disrupt individual lives but also impede the region's progress. SARSYC ignited dialogue on these matters and foster partnerships to develop educational interventions that are responsive to the emerging challenges within the region.

e) Research: SAYWHAT recognises the power of research to address the contemporary challenges that young people confront. As part of the SARSYC V, SAYWHAT conducted the 2nd Edition of the Regional Research Indaba with the aim of contributing to evidence-based programming in the organization and offer research proposals that address contemporary challenges faced by young people. The regional indaba promotes and strengthens the linkages of research, training, policy and practice to achieve universal access to health services in Southern Africa

Mugota/Ixhiba complements the work and discussions in these thematic areas by bringing out the young men's perspectives, who also represents an often-neglected group in the discourse to address challenges that affect young men.

Role of Mugota/Ixhiba Symposium in the SARSYC Movement

The name Mugota/Ixhiba has cultural connotation harnessing from the labelling of young men's hut as "gota" in Shona and "xhiba" in IsiNdebele. In the typical traditional set up, Mugota/Ixhiba is the space boys sleeps and elders teach the young boys about being responsible to their families and the society. It is also a

space for candid talk in which men challenge each other and encourage accountability. This concept was adopted in the modern world to provide a platform for young men to be on their own and reflect on their own issues in the typical traditional men to men gathering of honour, education and power dialogues. With this background, the contemporary Mugota/Ixhiba, as designed by SAYWHAT, represents a space for young men to reflect on the various socio-cultural aspects, belief systems and norms that expose them to various sexual and reproductive health challenges. It enables young men to challenge themselves to be enablers of social transformation as they reflect on negative masculinity aspects and other gendered norms that perpetuate inequality in the society and expose the young men to various SRH challenges.

Informed by this background, Mugota/Ixhiba serves the following strategic purposes:

- Provide a safe and inclusive space for young men to critically examine and challenge prevailing socio-cultural norms, beliefs, and practices that contribute to gender inequality and expose them to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) challenges.
- Facilitate discussions and reflections among young men on the concept of "negative masculinity" and how it perpetuates harmful gender-based norms within the society, with the aim of transforming these mindsets and behaviors.
- Empower young men to become active agents of social change by equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to challenge and reshape restrictive gender roles and norms that impact their own SRH and that of their communities.
- Serve as a platform for young men to explore and redefine positive masculinity traits, such as compassion, respect, and responsibility, that can contribute to more equitable and inclusive gender dynamics within the region.
- Collaborate with relevant stakeholders, including healthcare providers, policymakers, and women's rights organizations, to develop and implement evidence-based interventions that address the specific SRH needs and challenges faced by young men in the region.

DELEGATE

Symposium Delegates

The symposium was attended by the following delegates

- Students and young people from Southern African region
- Representatives of youth movements
- Civil society actors
- Representatives from regional and global bodies like ICASA
- Feminists (Male)

Symposium Proceedings

The following are the key highlights of the deliberations that took place during SARSYC V
The man in the mirror: Who are we, where are we coming from and where are we going?
This session was facilitated by Charlton Mapfaka, the Mugota/Ixhiba Coordinator. He emphasized the importance of self-reflection, empowerment, and collective action among young men in Southern Africa. The speech highlighted the significance of the MUGOTA initiative, established by SAYWHAT, as a culturally resonant space for young men to discuss their health, well-being, and conceptions of masculinity without judgment.

Key points from the speech include:

- The coordinator noted that the initiative has grown from a local program in Zimbabwe to a regional movement, with successful implementations in South Africa, Zambia, and Malawi.
- He noted that this evolution and growth is testament to young men's readiness to address c hallenges that the young men confront and emphasized that the platform is a space to advocate; it represents the voice of vulnerable groups, and engage with regional policies.

Objectives for the Mugota/Ixhiba Young Men's Forum

- Establishing a secure forum for young men to freely express themselves, reflect on their lives, and share knowledge, opinions, and experiences.
- Strengthening the MUGOTA/IXHIBA movement by providing networking opportunities, forming alliances, and promoting intercultural interactions between young men and CSOs.
- Protecting male youths' rights and well-being by enhancing their ability to impact local and national decision-making processes.

Vision for MUGOTA/IXHIBA's future, including expansion into a leading platform for men's health and wellness, with:

- Online resources and community engagement to support members across the region
- Webinars, conferences, and partnerships with health organizations to promote men's health awareness.
- Mentorship programs and physical centres or meetups to create safe spaces for connection and learning.

The coordinator concluded by emphasizing the need for young men to:

- Prioritize their well-being,
- Foster a culture of openness and support,
- Contribute to research and innovation in men's health awareness.

The speech underscored the significance of the Mugota/Ixhiba in empowering young men to take responsibility for their health, well-being, and roles in society, and its potential to drive positive change in

the region and beyond. The speech was well-received by the audience, comprising young men from various Southern African countries, who showed enthusiasm for the MUGOTA/IXHIBA vision and objectives.

Catching Up Men to Men: Addressing the Challenges Faced by Young Men in Southern Africa

Mugota Panel Discussion

This was done in the form of a panel discussion and the panellists were:

- Chrispin Kapepula (Zambia)
- Godwill Zulu (Zimbabwe)
- Madikwa Marule (South Africa)
- Charm Mavimbela (Botswana)
- Desmond Lunga (MBGE Botswana)

From this panel discussion, below are the major issues which were presented by the panellists:

- Cultural Barriers to Healthcare: Young men in Southern Africa often avoid seeking health services due to cultural beliefs that equate masculinity with strength and invincibility. This mindset must be challenged to encourage men to prioritize their health.
- Fear of Vulnerability: Men may hesitate to seek health services due to fear of discovering underlying health issues, which can lead to mental health challenges. This fear stems from societal expectations that men should be strong and stoic.
- Socialization and Upbringing: The way boys are socialized from a young age contributes to these challenges. Society often discourages men from expressing emotions or seeking help, perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes.
- Impact on Mental Health: The pressure to conform to traditional masculinity can lead to mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. Men must be encouraged to express emotions and seek help without fear of judgment.
- Responsibility and Respect: Men must take responsibility for their actions and treat others with respect, particularly women. This includes recognizing the impact of their actions on others and creating a safe and supportive environment.
- Addressing Ignorance and Unwillingness to Listen: The panel emphasized the need to address the alarming rate of ignorance and unwillingness to listen, which has devastating consequences. Men must be willing to listen, learn, and take action.
- Leading by Example: Men must lead by example, demonstrating approachability, empathy, and understanding. This includes being open to feedback and willing to change their negative behaviours.
- Education and Awareness: Promoting education and awareness on sexual and reproductive health is crucial for creating a more inclusive and supportive community. Men must be encouraged to take an active role in promoting gender equality and challenging harmful gender stereotypes.

By addressing these challenges and promoting positive change, young men in Southern Africa can create a safer and more supportive, healthy environment for themselves and everyone.

Motivational Talk – Luc Armand Bodea - ICASA Director

Luc Armand Bodea, the Director of the International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa (ICASA), delivered a rousing address to young men at the Southern African Regional Students and Youth Conference (SARSYC) Mugota/Ixhiba Symposium. In his remarks, Bodea commended the participating youth, recognizing them as the driving force behind Africa's development.

He emphasized that the agenda to eliminate HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) would be unachievable without the involvement of young people, who constitute the majority of delegates at ICASA conferences. He highlighted that the youth of today have access to a wealth of tools and information to protect themselves, such as PrEP, PEP, and condoms, and urged them to leverage on these resources to access essential sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services and commodities. As a testament to ICASA's commitment to youth engagement, Bodea announced that the organization will be offering special registration incentives for young people to participate as delegates in the upcoming 2025 ICASA conference. He revealed

Luc Armand Bodea
ICASA Director

that the host country for the next conference is yet to be determined, with Ghana and South Africa currently being assessed as potential venues.

Mr Bodea commended SAYWHAT, the organizers of SARSYC, for providing a platform that empowers young people to share knowledge and solutions to address pressing health, education, and emerging issues, such as climate change. He expressed his desire to see SAYWHAT host the conference at a Pan-African level in the near future, bringing together youth from across the continent to address the multifaceted challenges they face.

In closing, Mr Bodea urged the young men in attendance to embrace their responsibility as change-makers. He encouraged them to consistently use condoms, seek SRHR services when needed, and be proud of their role in driving local solutions to contemporary problems. He emphasized that it is the African youth who hold the power to rewrite the narrative, and challenged them to be innovative, research-driven, and committed to creating lasting, community-based change.

Young Africa Programme

Young Africa International, represented by their Communications Officer, Mr Jephiter Tsamwi, shared a presentation that highlighted the economic opportunities for young people and young entrepreneurs. Jephiter Tsamwi highlighted that Young Africa (YA) aims to collaborate with young Africans to provide training and skills development, enabling them to become entrepreneurs and job creators. He noted that the YA program`s goal is to empower 500,000 young people in Africa by 2025 with skills and knowledge through:

- Expansion capacities for the centres
- Expansion of mobile training services
- Extensively sharing of the YA model

He invited entrepreneurs to partner with the organisation by adopting the organisation's model through the Franchise approach which has been developed by the organisation in the quest to share its evidence-based models to empower youths.

Why become a Young Africa Partner

Mr Tsamwi highlighted that by being a partner of Young Africa, young entrepreneurs and youth organisations have a strategic opportunity to be change makers within their communities. He highlighted that:

- The YA model targets the society's periphery including those that have been rejected by the society
- Every young person has the capacity to be productive. All they need is a skill and YA has invested in perfecting the approaches to be sustainable and holistically empowering
- Collaboration with young African entrepreneurs for skills development and job creation will help address other health related challenges that the youths in the region confront today, including risky sexual behaviours.
- The YA model has yielded many success stories with examples of drug addicts who enrolled with YA and became successful business owners.
- The model is mostly critical in developing young Africans to have the skills to be employable and also create employment opportunities for fellow young people.

Mr Tsamwi concluded by announcing that the organisation has now developed a digital platform that will enable young people to train in a skill of their choice in the comfort of their homes. He noted that the platform will be launched in 2024 and encouraged the delegates to follow the Young Africa Digital Platforms for more updates on this.

Powering Post SARSYC Conference Action

The young men at the SARSYC V ended their symposium with an 8-point plan to address challenges they face as well as to advance the mission of the platform. These were as follows.
Commitments:

- Intergenerational Knowledge Sharing: The men's movement committed to learn from other successful social movements, such as the feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements, to adopt effective strategies and tactics for advocacy and stakeholder engagement.
- Male-Friendly Service Provision: Committed to establish peer-to-peer dialogues to increase health seeking behaviour among men.
- Self-Care Promotion: Committed to prioritize self-care by taking ownership of their health, practicing healthy habits, and sharing their challenges with someone to avoid suicidal thoughts.
- Cultural Transformation: Committed to challenge negative socio-cultural belief systems that perpetuate inequality and help to shape a positive culture in Southern Africa by promoting positive masculinity, challenging harmful norms, and embracing inclusive values.

Advocacy

- Promoting Economic Empowerment Opportunities: The young men advocated for the development of economic empowerment initiatives that provide them with access to skills training and development, entrepreneurship support, and job opportunities. These may help address the intersection of SRHR and empower young men to become self-sufficient and positively contribute to their communities.
- Decentralized Health Services: The need to bring health services closer to young men by d ecentralizing them to community levels, ensuring ease of accessibility and convenience.
- Research: The need for more support towards research on men's health and well-being, including the impact of societal expectations and cultural norms, to inform evidence-based advocacy and programming.
- Addressing the Intersection of SRHR, Education, and Climate Change: The young men advocated for integrating SRHR, education, and climate change mitigation strategies, recognizing the interconnected nature of these issues. This includes the need for curriculum reforms that incorporate comprehensive SRHR education and climate change awareness, as well as advocating f or community-based solutions that address the impact of climate change on SRHR and education outcomes.

Conclusion

The Mugota/Ixhiba Young Men's Forum Symposium served as a valuable component of the SARSYC conference, providing a platform for young men's voices to be heard and their perspectives to be integrated into the larger discourse on advancing equitable access to public health and education. The insights and action plans that emerged from the symposium contributed to the SARSYC movement's goals of promoting the health and wellbeing of young people in the Southern African region. The discussions also influenced the key resolutions that were compiled into the broader SARSYC Gaborone Declaration which was handed over to H.E Ms Boemo M. SEKGOMA, the Secretary General of the SADC Parliamentary Forum.

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