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Girls Improving Resilience
through Livelihood & Health



Girls Improving Resilience through Livelihoods and Health (GIRL-H)

Learning Brief - Context-effective approaches to improving knowledge, attitudes, and uptake of SRHR services in Karamoja

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Overview

The Girls Improving Resilience Through Livelihoods + Health (GIRL-H) program is a comprehensive initiative aimed at enhancing the well-being of adolescent girls by increasing their access to essential life skills, health information, numeracy, literacy, and financial literacy. The program also fosters pathways to formal education, economic opportunities, and civic engagement.

A key component of the GIRL-H program is the Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) initiative, which seeks to improve girls' well-being by increasing access to SRHR information and promoting positive gender attitudes towards girls' uptake of SRH products. This is achieved through the implementation of a 'safe space' approach, which creates a supportive environment for adolescents and young people to openly discuss their SRH needs, concerns, and experiences without fear of judgment or discrimination. The program has been operational in Karamoja since 2022, supporting 5,000 adolescents and young people.

The key program activities include: Weekly SRHR sessions with in-school participants, community awareness creation on SRHR services and products, and support to parent groups in the production of soap and reusable pads

Since its inception, the program has achieved significant milestones, including:

1. 73% of enrolled participants completing the SRHR curriculum, resulting in enhanced knowledge of SRHR best practices
2. Increased access to SRHR services in Moroto, Karenga, Kaabong, Kotido, and Amudat districts
3. Training of 500 parents (150 male, 350 female) in the production of bar soap and reusable sanitary pads, supporting local livelihoods and enabling young people to better manage menstruation

Aim of the learning brief

This learning brief highlights effective, context-relevant practices for enhancing access to sexual reproductive health services and products for youth and adolescents in the Karamoja region. Built on evidence of positive change amongst participants, it advocates for scaling up successful strategies to drive broader impact. The brief explores key learning questions, including:

- I. What are the specific SRHR needs and gaps for young people in the Karamoja subregion?
- II. What are the best practices for creating and maintaining safe spaces for discussing SRHR topics?
- III. What impact does the involvement of local government officials, traditional leaders, elders, religious leaders, and civil society organizations have on the sustainability of SRHR programs?
- IV. How effective is the use of peer educators in normalizing positive attitudes towards SRHR and driving the uptake of services?



A senior woman teacher teaching inschool adolescent girls how to practice menstrual hygiene

Young People and SRHR in Karamoja: the gap

Sexual and reproductive health (SRH) is a vital component of health that integrates the physical, mental, and social well-being of individuals¹. In the Karamoja subregion, 23.6% of adolescent girls aged 15-19 have begun childbearing. The region's demographic characteristics include a higher prevalence of polygamous unions (58%) compared to the national average (25%). The total fertility rate (TFR) in Karamoja is 7.9, differing from the national rate of 5.6. Additionally, 59% of women with six or more surviving children in the region express a desire for additional children, varying from 20% nationally².

The Karamojong community, comprising pastoralists and agro-pastoralists, traditionally relies on cattle and employs a transhumance system. In this cultural context, cattle are essential for family and clan propagation through marriage, leading females to aspire to "full marriage" status, often seeking wealthy suitors. This societal dynamic can influence adolescent girls' choices.

Several factors contribute to the underutilization of reproductive health services in hard-to-reach settings, including social stigma, ignorance, lack of confidentiality and privacy, misconceptions about service quality, and religious and cultural prohibitions. The prevalent practices of polygyny and 'bride capture' also increase the risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Approximately 25% of women in Karamoja deliver at home, exposing them to complications during childbirth that require emergency skilled attendance.

Furthermore, gender roles and responsibilities in Karamoja assign women primary responsibility for domestic work and household provision. This situation can impact women's ability to prioritize rest and healthcare during pregnancy and childbirth. These factors intersect with adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) in complex ways³.

¹WHO. 2006. Defining Sexual Health: Report of technical consultation on sexual health 28-31 January 2002, Geneva. In Sexual health document series

²Achen et al. Pastoralism: Research, Policy and Practice (2021) 11:25 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13570-020-00188-9>

³Ayoo, Sandra, Robert Opio, and Oliver T. Kakisa. 2013. Karamoja Situational Analysis: Northern Uganda Women's Empowerment Programme (NUWEP).

Lessons Learned

Same-sex grouping using a safe space approach creates a comfortable, inclusive space for sharing SRHR information

The GIRL-H SRHR program employs a 'safe space' methodology. Trained teacher-mentors, selected and compensated by the program, facilitate weekly sessions, providing a structured and supportive environment for participants. These sessions are meticulously planned to address specific needs and concerns, fostering a sense of community and offering valuable guidance and support.

This approach establishes a supportive and non-judgmental environment, facilitating open discussions among adolescents and young people regarding their sexual and reproductive health (SRH) needs, concerns, and experiences. The approach ensures confidentiality, privacy, and empathy, enabling individuals to make informed decisions about their SRH and access quality care and support.

The program has achieved a 75.8% engagement rate, demonstrating its success in creating a safe and inclusive space for youth and adolescents to discuss and address their SRH concerns. This high level of participation underscores the program's commitment to addressing and promoting SRH issues among youth and adolescents.

The safe space approach features homogeneous grouping, where participants learn about SRH with a same sex peer group. The integration of gender-sensitive teaching practices, with male teachers mentoring male adolescents and female teachers mentoring female adolescents, creates a comfortable and inclusive space, encouraging open interaction and participation among participants.

“During the safe space sessions, I could ask any question that relates to my health. Through my free interaction with my teacher and peers, I came to understand that menstruating for more than 3 days wasn't a disease since my menstruation period could go more than 3 days at times.”

Adolescent, Rengen P/S, Kotido district

Engaging formal and traditional leadership structures drives sustainability



The GIRL-H SRHR program strategically engaged traditional leaders, elders, and religious figures to catalyze attitude shifts and reduce stigma surrounding sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services. By securing the endorsement of influential figures, including village chiefs, clan elders, and local religious leaders, the program leveraged their significant influence to promote positive changes in community norms, resulting in increased acceptance and utilization of SRH services, particularly among adolescent girls and young women.

This engagement yielded a notable reduction in stigma associated with discussing and seeking SRH services, leading to more open conversations within families and communities. The program's impact was further demonstrated by the high uptake of counseling and emotional support services (66.5%) and HIV and STI testing and treatment (58.1%) among adolescents, highlighting the critical need for mental health and emotional well-being support and STI prevention in this age group.

The program fostered strategic partnerships with district local government officials and civil society organizations to implement and scale up interventions, leveraging their local expertise and networks. By engaging government structures, such as teachers, health assistants, and village health teams, the program ensured sustainability and paved the way for long-term impact.

Capacity building was achieved through comprehensive training sessions, workshops, and ongoing support, equipping stakeholders with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively promote and manage SRH initiatives. This collaborative approach ensured that key government structures were not only involved but also actively leading and driving the initiative forward, embedding SRH support into the fabric of the community and ensuring its long-term sustainability.

Awareness and outreach campaigns should use a variety of approaches and reach the last mile.

The GIRL-H SRHR program executed a comprehensive and multi-faceted awareness campaign to educate the community about the significance of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, addressing misconceptions and highlighting benefits for girls and the broader community. A diverse range of media channels was utilized, including radio broadcasts, community theater, social media, and printed materials, ensuring widespread dissemination of information.

Innovative approaches, such as engaging local influencers and employing culturally relevant storytelling, were employed to enhance the campaigns' relatability and impact. Peer education and awareness campaigns emerged as the most popular SRHR-related activity, with 79.2% of participants engaging in these initiatives, demonstrating the effectiveness of peer-led approaches in educating communities about SRHR issues.

To increase accessibility, the program implemented mobile clinics and outreach programs, bringing SRH services to remote, rural, and underserved areas. These mobile clinics provided a range of services, including health education, contraceptive distribution, STI screenings, and peer counseling and support, directly within the communities.

The program's approach, combining traditional and modern communication methods while actively involving community leaders and influencers, significantly enhanced the reach and effectiveness of awareness campaigns. This strategy not only educated the community but also empowered individuals to advocate for SRH rights and services, ensuring the sustainability and long-term impact of the program.

“We found out that most of the youth and adolescents in the community were not reaching the health center. So, we started conducting outreaches, both in schools and in the community. In our school outreach, we deliver educational sessions and also organize camps, which have proven more effective in reaching a larger audience than waiting for individuals to visit the health center.”

Health Assistant, Kalapata H/C III, Kaabong district.

Delivery of SRHR information by peer educators helps to normalize positive attitudes towards SRHR and drives the uptake of services

The GIRL-H SRH program adopted a comprehensive approach by training adolescents and youth as peer educators to disseminate accurate sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information among their peers. This strategy leveraged the natural influence of peer groups, rendering the information more relatable and contributing to the normalization of SRH services among young people. Peer educators received extensive training in SRH topics, communication skills, and counseling techniques, enabling them to effectively address their peers' questions and concerns and promote positive health behaviors.

Furthermore, the program conducted targeted interventions to engage men and boys in discussions about SRH, gender equality, and the importance of supporting girls' health choices. These interventions included community workshops, focus group discussions, and interactive activities designed to challenge existing gender norms and promote a more supportive environment for girls. By involving fathers, brothers, and male community leaders in these conversations, the program aimed to reduce opposition and foster a culture of support for girls' use of SRH services.

Notably, 59.3% of youths and adolescents accessed peer counseling and support, highlighting the pivotal role of peer networks in offering both emotional and informational support. This facilitated a supportive environment that encouraged open communication and shared learning among peers, underscoring the significance of peer-led initiatives in promoting SRH awareness and education.

The dual approach of empowering peer educators and actively engaging men and boys yielded several key insights:

1. The involvement of peers in disseminating SRH information significantly enhanced the credibility and acceptance of the messages, leading to increased trust and higher rates of SRH service utilization among young people.
2. Moreover, the engagement of men and boys proved crucial in establishing a comprehensive support system for girls. By addressing and transforming harmful gender norms, the program successfully cultivated a more inclusive and supportive community environment, ultimately contributing to a holistic and sustainable impact.

These findings underscore the importance of peer-led initiatives and gender-transformative approaches in SRH programming, highlighting the need for a multifaceted strategy that empowers young people and actively engages men and boys in promoting positive health behaviors and gender equality.



Primary school teachers undergoing a training on sexual reproductive health rights and referral pathways

SRHR objectives can be met in a way that provides livelihoods to local communities; adopting this approach drives agency and sustainability

The GIRL-H SRHR program invested in training 500 parents of adolescents in the production of reusable pads and detergents, in partnership with Wabibi Pads, a social enterprise specializing in reusable pad training. This initiative aimed to increase the accessibility of essential products while promoting economic empowerment.

The initial distribution reached 2,720 participants across Kotido, Amudat, Moroto, and Kaabong, providing parents with start-up materials to produce and sell pads and soap. The generated income supported their children's education. Collaboration with local businesspeople facilitated community integration, increased product visibility, and contributed to the sustainability of soap-making enterprises.

Key success factors included the strategic partnership, provision of start-up materials, and marketing support. However, some parents faced challenges in dedicating time to pad production, citing lower-than-anticipated profitability.

To scale this approach and achieve systems-level change, the program could enhance training sessions with business skills, diversify products to increase profitability and establish robust support networks for ongoing mentorship and resource access. Additionally, advocating for policy support and integrating the initiative into broader economic development plans could ensure long-term sustainability and wider community impact.

Recommendations

Institutionalize Gender-Transformative SRHR Approaches in Schools

Integrate gender-transformative SRH education into school curricula and community outreach programs, emphasizing the role of men and boys as advocates for gender equality and SRH rights. Develop targeted interventions, including workshops and awareness campaigns, that challenge harmful gender norms and promote positive attitudes towards girls' health choices. Collaborate with local leaders and influencers to endorse and amplify these messages, fostering a culture of support and inclusivity within communities.



In-school adolescent girls pose for a photo during the Menstrual Hygiene Day on May 28th 20204

Expand and diversify safe space approaches

Building on the success of the same-sex grouping strategy, there is a need to expand and diversify safe space approaches by including mixed-gender sessions in addition to the existing same-sex groups. This would provide an opportunity for adolescents to learn about SRHR from diverse perspectives, fostering mutual understanding and respect between genders. Careful facilitation by trained mentors can ensure that mixed-gender sessions are conducted in a respectful and inclusive manner, maintaining the confidentiality and non-judgmental atmosphere that has proven effective. Additionally, integrating age-specific sessions within the same-sex groups can further tailor the discussions to the unique needs and developmental stages of different age groups, thereby enhancing the relevance and impact of the SRHR information shared.

Expand community based mobile services

Develop a sustainable model for mobile clinics and outreach programs that integrates SRH services with broader health initiatives. Strengthen partnerships with local health authorities and community leaders to ensure consistent funding and logistical support for these mobile services. This approach will enhance access to comprehensive SRH services, particularly in remote and underserved areas, thereby addressing barriers such as distance and transportation.

Scale Peer-Led Initiatives

Expand peer education programs by training and empowering more youth as peer educators and advocates for SRH. Establish peer networks that utilize both in-person and digital platforms to sustainably disseminate SRH information and support across diverse communities. Foster continuous engagement through mentorship and leadership development programs to ensure peer-led initiatives remain effective and impactful in promoting SRH awareness and education.

Enhance Business and Entrepreneurship Training

Expand training sessions for parents on business skills, including financial management, marketing, and product diversification. Incorporate modules on sustainable business practices and market analysis to empower participants to adapt to market demands and increase profitability. Establish mentorship programs that provide ongoing support and guidance to entrepreneurs, ensuring they have the skills and resources needed to sustain their livelihoods and support their families.

Strengthen Multi-Sectoral Partnerships

Expand partnerships with local civil society organizations and local government agencies to establish a comprehensive referral network for adolescent health services. By integrating SRH into broader health initiatives and leveraging existing community networks, such collaborations can ensure sustained access to counseling, testing, and treatment services, addressing the holistic health needs of adolescents effectively

Conclusion

The GIRL-H SRHR program has made notable progress in advancing sexual and reproductive health (SRH) through innovative strategies and community engagement. However, significant gaps persist in reaching all segments of the youth population and ensuring sustained impact.

To address these gaps and achieve systems-level change, it is essential to scale effective initiatives, such as the safe space approach, engagement of formal and traditional leaders, gender-sensitive education, peer-led initiatives, and community-based mobile services.

Enhanced funding and support for comprehensive SRH programs that integrate economic empowerment with health education are crucial. Collaboration across sectors, including government agencies, civil society organizations, and private sector partners, is necessary to leverage existing networks and advocate for policy support.

By scaling these best practices and bridging the SRH service gap communities can be empowered to champion positive health outcomes for youth and adolescents, fostering healthier and more empowered communities. Mercy Corps calls on stakeholders at all levels to join efforts in scaling these initiatives and promoting sustainable access to SRH services.



Robinah, one of the parents in Moroto participating in the SRHR program poses tailoring reusable sanitary pads for sell



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