

# Let's talk about men!

**Men are not only capable of – but also willing to share responsibility for fertility and prevention.**

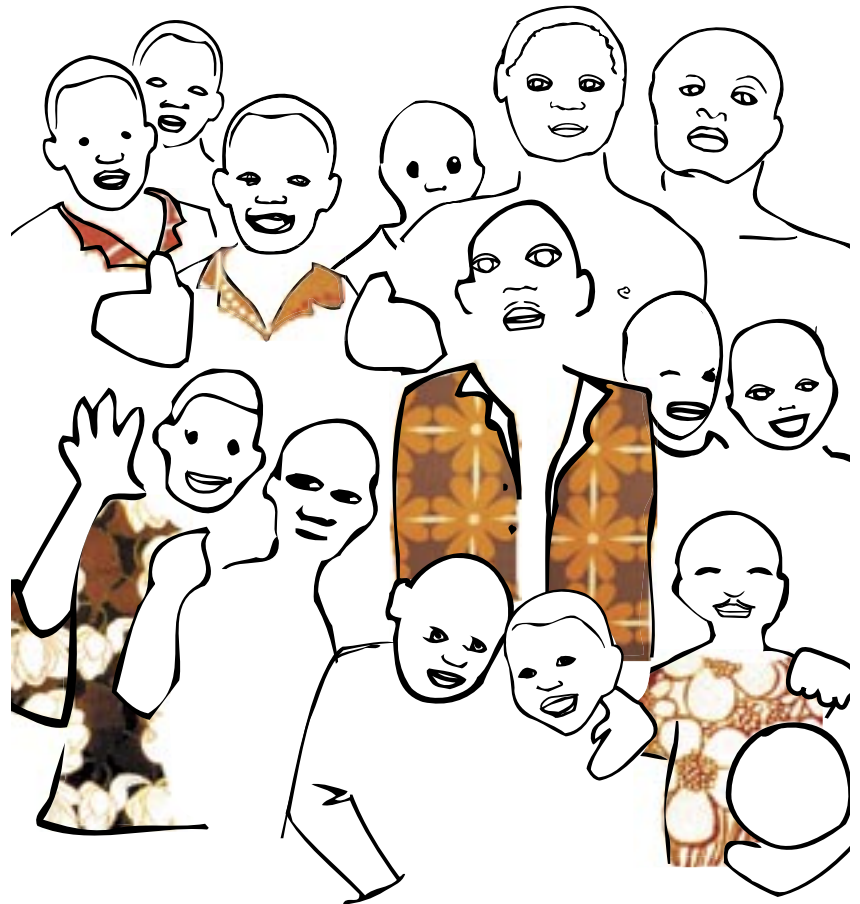
Fifty percent of the population are men. For a long time, they have – at least in general statements – been considered as the key problem when it comes to unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV, sexual harassment and abuse. Nevertheless most information and efforts concerning sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) have been directed at women. Knowledge on how to work with and integrate men into preventive work is limited.

The fact is that men often take crucial decisions on sexually related issues. Accordingly, the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU), together with the Family Planning Association of Tanzania (UMATI) and its equivalent in Zambia (PPAZ), started a male-involvement project in the two countries. The project named “Young Men as Equal Partners” (YMEP) targeted young males aged 10 to 24, and was aimed at developing methods to increase young men’s participation in SRHR issues. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation supported the project financially.

The YMEP project was designed on the understanding that the SRHRs of women very much depend upon behaviours and decisions of their male partners. The need for the YMEP intervention was also built on the fact that males also have unmet SRHR needs. Men have the possibility to improve not only their own sexual health but also that of their partners.

The project was conducted from November 2001 to January 2003.

This is a brief description of the YMEP project. For anyone interested in reading more, the final report is available at [www.rfsu.org](http://www.rfsu.org).



*“My daughter is a peer educator. Initially, I was concerned about seeing young men and adult men coming to her for condoms. After I had been educated by the co-ordinator and by my daughter herself, I have been very supportive. Since then I sleep with a box of condoms close to me because some clients arrive even at midnight. I serve them and report to my daughter in the morning. I am convinced that the number of condom users is increasing in our community since they come even during night. This indicates that awareness has increased. Also, the visits of male condom-seekers are increasing by the week.”*

**Projects on male participation and on sexuality education for boys and young men have been performed in Sweden for 25 years. Their primary purposes have been to gain deeper understanding of the behaviours and attitudes of young men, and to give information on reproduction, sexuality and prevention. Further purposes have been to develop methods and find new ways to reach out to young men. RFSU has consistently been pursuing development of the concept of "Male Involvement – Male Participation".**



*"The project has helped me understand what kind of information boys need in order to improve their sexual health. I now have a very good idea of what young men want and need when they come to see me; before I was never so sure."*

*Nurse Tutor and UMATI Trainer*

### **For the benefit of all**

Because of anxiety concerning men's behaviours, they are seldom counted on as responsible, intimate and caring beings when it comes to sexuality and love, health and reproduction. But, even in a patriarchal society, men can change when they understand how to communicate with their partner in a more intimate way. They can learn to regard their own feelings not as weaknesses but as strengths. Out of the stereotypes, men and women after a while learn to see the individuals, the worries, and the opportunities for new understanding. One of the purposes of the YMEP project has been to show that preventive work against abuse, unwanted pregnancies, and HIV is possible. Men have the possibility to improve not only their own sexual health but also that of their partners.

Through sexuality education and the promotion of gender awareness the project has offered an alternative to the stereotyped role of masculinity. We have identified young men's good sides, and have supported them in cultivating these sides. The project has provided training in empathy – not only between men and women – but also (and this is of most importance) between young men themselves.

As well as knowledge in a training context, there is a need for suitable methods and a professional approach. Looking upon sexuality education as both basic and life-saving, and adopting a supportive rather than a judgmental approach are crucial to building trust and credibility. Knowing something about your own body, emotions and sexuality is one of the fundamental rights, and provides the foundation for an empathic approach towards other people. It also offers you an increased opportunity to make conscious decisions concerning your present and future life.

Whether information is focused on men, women, boys or girls, they all have to feel that you know something about their needs, and the questions and problems they are dealing with. If you want to change their sexual behaviours, you must understand their thoughts and perceptions. You also have to gain trust from the local community to be able to reach out with your information. People have to experience that the message you are giving is for the benefit of their society.

### **Starting up the project**

We talked with almost everyone – from local parents and other adults, and community leaders, to representatives of ministries with local responsibility.

The purposes of the project were to involve young men in the prevention of STIs, including HIV/AIDS, and to prevent unwanted pregnancies and sexual abuse. The means of achieving these goals were to promote gender awareness and improve sexuality education. To plan the project, two goal-oriented workshops (LFAs) were conducted in Sweden with representatives from UMATI and PPAZ.

### **Baseline study**

We performed a thorough baseline study, where more than 800 boys and young men gave us insight into their thoughts on sexuality and gender. Also, teachers, service providers, parents and young women, together with local leaders, gave us their views in focus-group discussions. As well as to gather data for the intervention research, the purpose of the base line study was to avoid a top-down approach in the project and make sure that the issues were relevant to the target group of young males.

### **Guidelines**

Based on the baseline study, and starting with a workshop, a book of guidelines was created. Fourteen topics considered to be of key importance were identified. The guidelines are designed not only for working in schools and with other community groups, but also to be read directly by the target group.

### **Advocacy**

To gain approval for our ideas much time was spent on advocacy for the project. We talked with almost "everyone" – from parents and other adults to local community leaders and representatives of ministries at local level.

All this took a lot of time, but being thorough in starting the project was probably one of the factors in attaining a successful outcome.



*“The YMEP project has helped me to recall my own youth. This makes me feel better related to my pupils, and I have greater understanding of their behaviour. I can see that teachers who haven’t gone through YMEP training have greater difficulties in creating good relations with their pupils, since blaming them for their behaviour is the most common approach. I can definitely see changes in the behaviour of my pupils. Now, they make better decisions, and are more self-assured.”*

*Teacher at the Songea Boarding School for Boys*

### Teaching and counselling

The aim was to target groups of young men and other males who had influence on young men (such as teachers, medical officers, football instructors, youth and religious leaders, etc).

A further target group consisted of males in decision-making positions, including men within the two family planning associations (FPAs) of Tanzania and Zambia. The idea was to sensitize, train and support men to act as role models in sexual and reproductive health and on gender issues within their community, and to advocate for male involvement in society at large. Workshops were seen as a major tool for discussing and training young men and adult males, who could then reach out to their sons and brothers.

#### Workshops

The workshops were also of key importance for gathering information on young men’s conceptions, knowledge, and needs within the area of SRHR. Methods used in Sweden for this purpose were demonstrated to see if they would fit into an African setting. Trained motivators used their existing platform and developed methods to reach young men. Suitable information, education and communication (IEC) materials were developed.

Other activities included establishment of community-linked, clinical-based services for young men and their partners.

#### Circle of interaction

The project formed a circle of interaction around young men. This was achieved by trained

young male peer educators (PEs), trained male schoolteachers, and trained service providers in sexual and reproductive health (SRH). This design enabled young men to be in constant contact with SRH information, IEC materials and health services – in their communities (the PEs), in schools (the teachers) and in health facilities (the service providers). Through information and anchoring the project, it has gained full support – not only from community leaders but also from society at large.

Meetings were held with the project group every sixth month. At these meetings people from the five project sites had a chance to compare experiences and share good examples with each other. This was an important way of strengthening the group and further developing the project.

We also performed a mid-term evaluation from which, among other things, it was found that the guidelines tended not to be used as intended, and in some areas – not used at all. We also found that the issue of gender was not brought up in some of the areas. We dealt with the problems by calling together the group for training, where we more firmly discussed these issues. We identified sensitive issues in the guidelines (e.g. masturbation) and suggested approaches. We also added a workshop on gender awareness.

#### Some results and examples

The evaluation revealed the following:

- There was an observed significant drop in the percentage of young men who felt that girls found with condoms were prostitutes – from 49.8% at baseline to 14.6%.
- Use of condoms among young men increased from 55% to almost 78% during the project period.
- Mutual decision-making between men and women regarding condom use increased from 23% to 45%.
- In all project sites, in both Tanzania and Zambia, the incidence of pregnancies among young girls was observed to be declining. In, for instance, Ruvuma Day Secondary School (Songea, Tanzania) a drop from 10 in 2001 to 2 in 2002 was reported.
- There is now a better climate between girls and boys in schools. Girls dare to report cases of sexual harassment.
- Communication has improved between men and women, and women testify that their husbands and boyfriends have become nicer and gentler.

In particular, these examples reveal that the project has broken down the barriers that

have prevented discussions on issues such as masturbation. In response to masturbation being proposed as one of the 14 topics, teachers in Tanzania were initially reluctant to agree. However, with further discussion and sensitization, it became evident that this was a key topic – one which had various taboos and myths associated with it, one which was of great concern to young men, and one which is now being discussed freely as a result of the work done within the project.

## Sustainability

Since we took the view that a sense of ownership among community members is one of the crucial components of sustainability, we spent a lot of time on anchoring the project and sensitization.

Another way of sustaining the project was to use already existing structures within the FPAs and the local community. Trained teachers and health service providers will remain active long after the project ends. They will need some support from the project management, ministries and colleagues to be able to work according to the project's objectives.

Trained teachers and health service providers are relatively few in number in comparison with the numbers at each project site. Nevertheless, through information and sensitization of ministries, management and colleagues we created a conducive atmosphere for people connected to the project and for support from their colleagues.

One must be aware that the effect will be diluted over time. Therefore the work put in so far must be supported and followed by other and new efforts to accomplish and establish lasting change.

## Some examples

- During the YMEP Final Conference in January 2003 the Minister of Health ordered the district councils to include YMEP continuation work in the annual District Health Plans that are funded from the district basket funds.

- Songea District Council has decided to expand YMEP experiences from education in the project schools to include all schools in the district by using trained teachers as trainers.

- District councils in Maganzo and Kikatiti have agreed to allocate land sites and to supply bricks and other materials for the establishment of youth centres.

- Three Youth Friendly Health Corners (YFHCs) were opened at Choma General Hospital and at the Shampande and Railway clinics in Zambia.

- Decision-makers, parents, the elderly and other influential persons in the community have recognized the importance of addressing young men, and sexuality and gender conditions. This contributes to a change in attitudes and priorities in society at large.

- In Choma, the World Bank, with the Zambian Social Investment Fund (ZamSIF) as funding channel, has offered to give financial support for continued project activities operated by the local branch of PPAZ. The continuation was possible due to the procurement of a house aimed for activities to be carried out by YMEP-trained PEs.

## Some final remarks

Sexuality education and gender equality are not only the human right of all citizens. They are a forceful weapon in the fight against the HIV/AIDS pandemic and a prerequisite for sustainable human, social and economic development.

In this project we have learnt that men in east Africa and northern Europe do not only have similar questions regarding anatomy, sexuality and love, but also that many men are trapped in the same stereotyped pattern of masculinity. We can see that the condemnation of male weakness leads to risk behaviour and gender imbalance. Men in Tanzania and Zambia long for possibilities to take greater responsibility as lovers, husbands and fathers. We know, for instance, that adult men in Tanzania are demanding to be part of the project if there is to be a continuation.

We want to confirm the important linkage between sexuality and gender. If you want to change sexual behaviour among youth, you have to deal with the stereotyped gender patterns that restrict human understanding and behaviour.

It is also of the utmost importance that we speak frankly and in a clear way about sexuality. Openness and non-judgmental sexuality education is a precondition for change.

An important reason for the success of the YMEP project was the massive intervention at several levels in local society with messages and open discussions on gender issues. It is important to gain approval from the local community as well as from decision-makers.

Today, when – in the project areas – you notice how peer educators and teachers deal with information on HIV, masturbation, condoms and sexual abuse, you realize that the taboos surrounding sexuality and gender are within ourselves as adults, and not among young people.

*“Before I joined the YMEP project I had a very harsh approach towards boys. I didn’t know how to handle them or their questions. Today, I have methods and knowledge that I can use in my meetings with them, and I think that I have a very good relation with those who approach me on SRH questions. I have found that my new approach is far more successful.”*

*Project Coordinator, Songea*



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