



# Policy Brief - March 2021

## HIV/AIDS among Adolescent Girls and Young Women (AGYW) Policy Research

### Context to Research

- ◆ In order to end AIDS by 2030, efforts are being made towards achieving various targets stated in commitments/policies and strategies, such as the SDGs, the UN Declaration to Ending AIDS in 2030, the Global Fund strategy for 2017-22, with specific commitments to scale up support programs for AGYW and advance sexual and reproductive health and rights. The Global Fund left with less than two years to conclude the existing strategy and renew for the next post 2022 phase/strategy, making a strong case for a focus on reducing the transmission among AGYW, scaling up successful and bolder initiatives, and strengthening collaboration among the players is a decisive input for the preparation. For this to be realized, region-wide consultations and a policy research based on review and analysis of policies, strategies, programs as well as contexts were conducted.
- ◆ **While new HIV infections have fallen in sub-Saharan Africa by 41% since 2000, the situation of HIV infections in AGYW still remains bleak. In Africa, 74% of new HIV infections are among adolescent girls aged 15-19.** It is to be noted that the research referred to the UN definition of adolescent girls and women who are girls between the age of 10 and 19 years and young women are those between the ages of 20 and 24 years old.

### Research findings :

- ◆ **Behavioural and structural patterns are** the root causes that drive the HIV epidemic among AGYW. In this regard, **Unequal gender norms** often limit the access of women to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services including HIV information and services, and put them at risk of gender-based discrimination and violence, including harmful practices, such as child, child and forced marriage and female genital mutilation, that may increase the risk of contracting HIV.
- ◆ **Structural drivers** of HIV among AGYW also include restrictive laws - While several countries have already changed or revised their law, there are still countries that have a handful of restrictions, prohibitions and conditions set, for AGYW in relation to their access to SRH services –such as parental or spousal consent and laws that restrict access to resources for women and girls.
- ◆ **Lack of Evidence-Based Programming, Scaling and Sustainability** - there are gaps in terms of synthesizing evidences, making the necessary modification and adaptation to the local context and in trying to have a large-scale impact in the HIV among AGYW prevention and response. Some of the best practices and successful models are not being seen to go at scale. Successful models in some cases might also have not been designed in consideration of sustainability, and hence are short-lived.
- ◆ **Unaddressed Segments of AGYW**- AGYW are often seen as a homogenous group without sufficient attention to age, disability, identity, socioeconomic circumstance, location, occupation, access to information, etc. Therefore, there is a lack of consideration, for diversity in HIV prevention, testing, treatment and care among the target sections of the AGYW population throughout the region.
- ◆ **Limited spaces and Opportunities for Meaningful Participation of AGYW**- There is a lack of gender consideration and absence of meaningful engagement and available opportunities for participation in policy spaces.
- ◆ **Accountability, Coordination and Integration**-There is a lack of accountability and absence of strong mechanisms for coordination and integration in the HIV prevention and response sector. These issues are even in the scarce when it comes to the specific target groups of AGYW.
- ◆ Shortage of resources- resources have become increasingly unavailable, for the HIV/AIDS response. UNAIDS has explicitly stated that those organizations and initiatives for and by AGYW are under resourced<sup>4</sup>.

## Policy Recommendations

Countries should review their progress, rekindle their commitments and intensify their efforts to end the HIV epidemic by 2030. Main recommendations, for the Global Fund is to emphasize on supporting countries and stakeholders in:

- 1 **Promoting gender transformative and rights-based approaches** by supporting actions that promote gender equality, address structural barriers, abandon harmful gender norms and improving access, quality and friendliness of services for HIV prevention among AGYW
- 2 **Enhancing accountability mechanisms** for commitments made towards ensuring gender equality and HIV prevention and response for AGYW.
- 3 **Catalysing partnerships and collaboration** and knowledge sharing among stakeholders
- 4 **Contextualizing AGYW programs**- Addressing HIV among AGYW in different contexts and socio-economic backgrounds
- 5 **Creating a conducive Policy and legal environment for AGYW**- Addressing policy and legal barriers that hinder access to services
- 6 **Develop the capacities of country stakeholders** -to enable them integrate gender in the HIV prevention and response and mobilization of resources.
- 7 **Promoting AGYW friendly approaches** in the provision of information and services related to SRH (e.g through social media platform), including HIV testing and antiretroviral treatment and pre-exposure prophylaxis
- 8 **Support at scale interventions that empower AGYW** through access to information and education and other appropriate means to negotiate for safer sex, delay sexual debut, and know the whereabouts of HIV services, including where Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT), are accessed
- 9 **Increasing funding** for HIV response, especially for those targeting AGYW
- 10 **Supporting the scale-up of proven strategies** for HIV prevention among AGYW including engaging men and boys and mobilizing the community for social and behavioural change
- 11 **Promoting the participation of women's organizations and networks of PLHIVs, adolescent girls and young women** so that their voices guide policies and programs aiming to enhance behaviours, biomedical, and structural interventions for adolescent girls and young women.
- 12 **Strengthening the knowledge management and resource mobilization systems and capacities** of CSOs and government agencies working on HIV/AIDS and AGYW.

## References

1. <https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/linkages/agyw-hiv-risk/en/>
2. The Lancet, HIV incidence rates in adolescent girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa (2019)
3. UNAIDS, Global AIDS Report, 2020
4. UNAIDS, Report of the Consultation meeting on Progress, Challenges and Opportunities: Adolescent Girls and young women in all their diversity" a discussion that will feed into and inform the development of UNAIDS next strategy (2020)

## Acknowledgements and funding

This policy brief benefited from independent research funded by the African Constituency Bureau (ACB) for the Global Fund and conducted by Dr Alemneh Tadele.

ACB is grateful for funding from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.