

SDSR/GIZ PROJECT, BURUNDI: Tools for Adolescent and Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health

Single mothers' associations

How young women rejected by society reclaim their dignity and become a community resource with wise advice for other young people

Exponential vulnerability

In Burundi, girls and women are subject to certain forms of discrimination, including reduced access to inheritance. But those who become pregnant without being married – usually disowned by the author of the pregnancy – find themselves in a particularly precarious situation. Often punished by society (exclusion from school – sometimes even from their family), these young women are isolated and restricted in taking care of their own and their baby's needs. These young single mothers lose their self-esteem and shy away from possible opportunities for self-fulfilment, be it access to health services or a return to school. Representing a major challenge for the education system, most unwanted pregnancies occur in secondary and even primary school.

“In the old days, when a girl fell pregnant, she was thrown off a cliff. Even today people continue to consider you the same way: that you have bad behaviour, that you are a prostitute.”

Claudine, single mother, 25 years old

The Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Project in Burundi

Commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the project *Renforcement des structures de santé dans le domaine de la planification familiale et de la santé et des droits sexuels et reproductifs* (SDSR) is implemented by the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH* (GIZ) in partnership with Burundi's National Reproductive Health Programme (PNSR). The project aims to improve the reproductive health of the population in the provinces of Mwaro, Muramvya and Gitega, particularly among young people aged 10 to 24, women and marginalised and vulnerable people, by on the one hand, supporting the quality of services in 90 health centres (HCs) and on the other, by strengthening the demand for reproductive health services.



Young single mothers ready to share their stories

A role to play

In 2014, Burundi's Ministry of National Education set a goal of reducing to zero the number of pregnancies in schools – an aspiration that joined the priorities of the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SDSR) project of GIZ and its partner PNSR. Inspired by an initiative of 'Aunties' – single mothers who counsel young people – supported by GIZ in [Cameroon](#), the SDSR Project took seriously the potential of these young women to contribute to awareness-raising of other young people.

But Burundi went even further than Cameroon by integrating these solidarity groups of young single mothers into its community networking strategy for sexual and reproductive health (SRH) of adolescents and youth. Each of the 29 functioning networks formed around health centres (HC) supported by the project in the provinces of Mwaro, Muramvya and Gitega today includes an active group of young single mothers.

Emergence of the SENGE association

Based on school dropout statistics from 2013-2014 in its areas of intervention, the SDSR Project observed the highest rate in the commune of Ndava (Mwaro province). To discover the real extent of pregnancies among unmarried girls and women, the project organised a census of single mothers in the communities surrounding the two health centres of this commune. Those who had become pregnant before the age of 19 (thus close in age to the target group) received training on sexual and reproductive health (SRH), but also on testifying and counselling techniques.

The training session proved to be such a motivating experience of exchange and mutual support, that the young single mothers decided to maintain this close relationship by creating an association which they named 'SENGE' ('Auntie' in Burundi's national language Kirundi).

From outcasts to esteemed members of the community

With capacity building through the project, the young mothers organised SENGE as a savings and loan group. In addition to promoting youth SRH, they combined their efforts to rise out of poverty by working in a group rather than alone. Several of these young single mothers have become change agents in their local environment.

To facilitate the emergence of SENGE, the SDSR Project involved local influence groups with a stake in youth sexual and reproductive health and rights (YSRHR), e.g. administrators, parent representatives, health providers and community health workers. Convinced by the example of SENGE, these partners then asked that this support be extended to young single mothers in other communes.

Meanwhile the SDSR Project had supported a total of 29 HCs – including the two from the commune of Ndava – to set up community networks in their respective areas of responsibility. These community networks bring together all the actors in their zone that work with young people (schools, youth centres, religious denominations etc.). In 2018 the project supported the other 27 HCs in identifying a total of 3679 young single mothers in their respective areas. The project again focused on those who had become pregnant before age 19 to train them in SRH, leadership and community participation, testifying in

Young women scarred by life

'On your hill they talk about you. The neighbours were pointing at me, saying the daughter of so-and-so puts her family to shame: She dropped out of school, she's pregnant, she's cursed, she is a prostitute. With this child, my brothers mistreat me, telling me to take the child to his father, that you are diminishing their share of the inheritance. I am fortunate that my child is financially supported by his father because he is a boy – otherwise he would have been killed. My brother once slapped me, he really changed at home, they treat me like a stranger. I had no one to trust, I was alone. When you have suffered such problems, you are discriminated against, it's as if you no longer resemble the other girls.'

Evelyne, 23 years old

public and interpersonal counselling. This capacity building motivated the young mothers to join forces, and new groups have emerged and grown.

For these young mothers, being organised in an association is a great factor of affinity – and their monthly meetings have proven to be a good framework also for discussion on personal concerns. Most testify that the association is like their second family. Project support to the associations enabled some young mothers to initiate economic self-promotion activities (e.g. joint animal breeding, purchase of hens for the members with the funds generated in common, mutual savings and loans etc...). All of this helps to build self-esteem on the part of these young single mothers.

The majority of the single mothers' associations are registered with the communal administrations and are becoming more and more autonomous.

Single mothers' associations – actors more than beneficiaries of the YSRHR networks

Living symbols of the consequences of a failure of SRH, the young single mothers are not only beneficiaries of the networks' support (medical monitoring of pregnancy, mediation with the family), but above all they play a role in the networks to encourage other young people to avoid such misfortune. Each network includes a group of young single mothers prepared to testify about their experiences, but also to listen to young people who hesitate to confide directly in school or health officials.



Support meeting of the Kanka single mothers' association

Currently 29 associations, totalling 498 young single mothers, are functional in the areas of the 29 HCs with networks. As permanent members of the Network Committees, the associations' representatives act in synergy with the other members in analysing the situation and developing and implementing the annual action plans. The other members of the network regularly call on these outstanding communicators to sensitise the young people they work with.

Providing young people with lessons from real life

Young single mothers from the associations contribute significantly to the sexuality education of other young people through their courageous testimonies. To support and reinforce one another they present as a group. Their real-life testimonials during IEC sessions in schools, at parent meetings or within solidarity groups have made it possible to change influential groups' perception of YSRHR, as well as the perception of other young people towards the single mothers.

The testimonies of the young single mothers are even credited by some observers as having contributed to freeing up speech within their communities, making it possible to address more frankly and naturally the questions related to sexuality, particularly between parents and young people, and even with religious authorities.

Counselling young girls on how to avoid traps

Trained both for testifying in front of a group and for individual counselling, the young single mothers particularly target young girls, both in and out of school, whom they want to protect against an unwanted pregnancy by telling their own stories, deeply rooted in the shared experience of Burundian girls and women. By laying bare certain sociocultural constraints of life on the hills, these honest testimonies open the eyes of vulnerable young girls for a salutary awareness of potentially risky situations.

They were too ashamed to call for help

'He added that we must at all costs have sex. It was on a path where no one was walking. Since I couldn't see how to escape, I didn't even cry out for help because no one was there to help me. I accepted it, telling myself that because it happened, I had no choice. In addition, I felt that shouting would cause me shame.'

Vivine, 24 years old

'I tried to refuse but he ended up forcing me, because he was bigger than me. I wanted to cry out for help, but I was afraid of what the people who always see us together would say: They wouldn't believe it was not a consensual relation.'

Evelyne, 23 years old

'But is screaming more shameful than pregnancy without marriage?'

Advice in the single mothers' Book of Testimonies

“ We have learned that we must refuse to take what the boys offer us, like drinks and peanuts, to get us to have sex with them, because, by accepting what they give us, we expose ourselves to having these sexual relations. ”

Vivine, single mother, 24 years old



It is this kind of frank and generous communication of young single mothers which creates trust in young girls who would hesitate to share their intimate problems with a person of authority such as a parent or a teacher.

Multiplying the impact of young single mothers with suitable materials

The project’s experience with the associations led to the development of various educational materials and aids, intended first of all to support the young single mothers in carrying out their witnessing and counselling activities.

These materials can also be exploited by other actors working with young people: health service providers, community health workers, teachers, school facilitators, associations, social workers in the Communal Directorates for Family and Social Development (DCDFS), youth clubs, religious groups, young peer educators.... This enables a much broader target group to benefit from the wisdom of these young mothers once banished from society.

For optimal understanding of users and young people, all the materials are both in French and in Kirundi.



‘How to accompany a young single mother to testify’

is a guide for the young mothers themselves and for the people who support them in the delicate exercise of testifying on their own life in front of an audience.



The guide ‘Advice for youth’ is a brochure to use by a single mother (or another trusted person) for confidential listening and individual counselling to young girls in difficulty that approach her for advice.



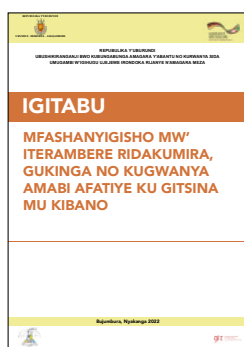
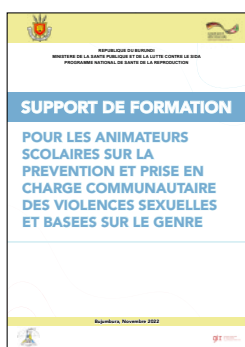
‘When the smell of beans becomes unbearable: Testimonies of young single mothers’ is a collection of powerful testimonies from seven young members of the SENGE association, which – like the public testimonials – aim to protect young girls against unwanted pregnancy and boys against irresponsible fatherhood.

Single mothers’ associations, a great potential – including in the fight against sexual and gender-based violence

The 29 single mothers’ associations launched by the SDSR Project represent an important resource for promoting YSRHR in rural areas. Through their testimonies they also have great potential as stakeholders in the fight against sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), a theme on which the SDSR Project and its partner PNSR have published two manuals for community and school facilitators.



Young single mothers telling their stories at Ceru health centre



Consideration of single mothers' associations among important players for everything related to family planning/prevention of pregnancies and promotion of the Burundian girl-child could further advance them as effective actors in the health sector and in particular for promoting the health of adolescent girls and youth. Finally, the networking of the various associations could be the cornerstone of a solid system of prevention of SGBV and a strong advocacy body for young victims of SGBV.

The 8 problematic situations that can ruin the life of a young girl

1. 'My boyfriend keeps tempting me to have sex'
2. The girl is afraid that she is pregnant
3. Unwanted pregnancy
4. Sexual violence
5. Sexual harassment by an adult
6. Forced marriage for a pregnant girl
7. Parents refuse to let their children go to SRH education sessions
8. Discriminating against a young single mother who returns to school

Source: 'Advice for Youth' to be exploited by a single mother

The single mothers' associations are beginning to attract the attention of other partners. For example, they are currently integrated among priority partners of the DCDFS, and young single mothers are also invited to participate in high-level activities such as the campaign against teenage pregnancies organised by the office of Burundi's First Lady.

Lever which other stakeholders could engage to strengthen the actions of the associations imply consulting with them on the choice of interventions and their implementation ('acting with' rather than 'for'). The integration of other dimensions in the life of a single mother (socio-economic support, nutrition and schooling of children, psychosocial empowerment, etc.) could provide a significant boost that would allow them to advance to another level of autonomy.

A story that can end well

'When I joined SENGE, I learned a lot: I am fulfilled, I am happy, and I have acquired a lot of knowledge. We have received lessons: We know that a girl who has given birth is also valuable. We share our knowledge about the changing body, the fertile period, menstruation, inconveniences experienced in our families, how we are mistreated. They showed us where to go when we have suffered sexual violence: Go quickly to the health centre or hospital for sexual and reproductive health and family planning.

The advice I could give to other young single mothers is that they are like the others and that they should not devalue themselves. I too discriminated against myself, but now I discuss with the other young people because I have a lot to tell them about what happened to me. I advise them to abstain, and if that is not possible, that they use condoms, or I refer them to the health centre for other contraceptive methods.'

Evelyne, 23 years old



Members of Teza association (Muramvya province) in monthly meeting

Would you like to know more?

Here are links to other SDSR Project publications and a toolbox on Community-Based Networking for Adolescent and Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health:

<https://health.bmz.de/fr/toolkits/reseautage-sdsr-jeunes/>

Published by *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH*
Registered offices Bonn and Eschborn, Germany

Projet Renforcement des structures de santé dans le domaine de la planification familiale et de la santé et des droits sexuels et reproductifs (SDSR) au Burundi – Phase 3
Avenue des Orangers N° 9 B.P. 41
Bujumbura, Burundi

www.giz.de

As at March 2023

Photo credits

GIZ / Rukemampunzi Landry (p.1 and p.5), Rémy Nsengiyumva (p.3), Pierre Cimana (p.6)

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Layout

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On behalf of

Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Germany

GIZ is responsible for the content of this publication.