FINAL REPORT
Adolescents' Perceptions of Healthy Relationships
Youth Participatory Research Project
2017-2019
for Oak Foundation

International Institute of Social Studies

International Child Development Initiatives

nas cent
Nascent Research and Development Organization

20 ГОДИНИ ФОНДАЦИЯ АСОЦИАЦИЯ АНИМУС

la Strada

April 2019

Table of Contents

Abbreviations:

APHR	Adolescents' Perceptions of Healthy Relationships
ASRH	Adolescent sexual and reproductive health
CEREDEV	Center for Research and Development
FGD	Focus group discussion
ICDI	International Child Development Initiatives
ISS	International Institute of Social Studies
NRDO	Nascent Research and Development Organization
YPA	Youth Peer Advocate
YPR	Youth Peer Researcher

Introduction

Oak Foundation's Child Abuse Programme Strategy 2012-2016 established that the program would address violence prevention through greater attention to the broader societal, structural factors that provide an enabling environment for the sexual abuse and exploitation of children. The strategy's three primary focus areas built upon and refined the foundation's previous work by:

- re-focusing on preventing the sexual exploitation of children;
- deliberately engaging men and boys in preventing violence against children; and
- prioritizing action to prevent violence in the health, education, and child protection sectors.

The APHR project falls specifically under the second objective, with a focus on encouraging boys and girls to respect each other and their contributions to family and community. Oak hopes to achieve this through two main strategies. One is by emphasizing healthy relationships through, e.g. comprehensive sexuality education and life skills training. The second is by promoting gender equality: challenging social norms that condone or perpetuate inequality, especially in the media.

In addition, one significant change to Oak's strategy has been the integration of learning into the work they support. The APHR project also arose out of the desire to incorporate children's perspectives so that they might gain greater insight from the people most affected. Oak decided to start from individual-level interventions to better understand how adolescents regard interpersonal relationships. According to their strategic plan, "developing clarity around what is considered normal, appropriate or acceptable sexual behavior for children, and how this evolves and changes over time, is an important part of being able to understand what is abusive or exploitative" (p. 13). This would thereby be not only protective for children but also empowering. Hence Oak's desire to support child-centered research into the new priority areas.

Abuse

Child sexual abuse can be found in all societies—though its definition is highly contextual and thus variable. Children are abused by people they know, by family members, teachers, and other young people. Our findings in this study reaffirmed this. Available research suggests that an almost exclusive focus on responding to victims and finding and locking up 'wicked' or 'demonic' perpetrators is ultimately ineffective at reducing sexual violence. Instead, work aimed at addressing the structural or societal factors that perpetuate violence can effect change—particularly understanding more about how to influence norms around gender and age, that associate masculinity with violence and reinforce norms of male sexual entitlement. Such attitudes are associated with or engender a lack of respect for children (Warburton 2014). Our utilization of youth participatory research to conduct research that highlights adolescents' perspectives was one way to already begin to overcome such attitudes and to work toward lasting solutions to child sexual abuse.

Research Context

Other recent reviews of available literature cite the paucity of research on relevant areas such as early adolescence, gender attitudes, and sexual development. Where it does exist, it is quite partial: For example, 90 percent of research on gender attitudes in early adolescence focuses on North America and Western Europe (Kågesten et al. 2016: 1). They are thus rather Eurocentric and also tend to be heteronormative in their orientation. Moreover, most are developed by professionals in medical and/or psychology fields, and thus tend toward a public health model.

It should also be noted that the conceptual models in these areas are not only based on notions of deficit and pathology but are also all adult-led. In other words, few directly consulted young people for their views in constructing these models. For example, a group of Australian researchers constructed a 15-point framework for determining healthy sexual development. The seven authors were drawn from various child development and sexuality-related disciplines, including experts in psychology, early childhood, children's rights, sexuality education, and media impacts on children's development. They report, "The group…worked together to develop a consensual definition of healthy sexual development that drew on the insights of their various disciplines" (McKee et al. 2010: 15). Yet no young people were directly involved in developing or even vetting this 'consensual' definition.

However, Gevers points out that "there is no widely accepted and commonly used model or measure of healthy adolescent relationships… Without a clear model, any work with adolescents on relationships is disadvantaged by a default focus on problems (Gevers 2016: 7). Given these circumstances, the APHR project aims to develop an adolescent-led, reflective conceptual framework—a model with an aspirational/positive starting point, rather than negative one. In developing such a framework, we will critically unpack such concepts of adolescence, gender, generation, sex/relationships, and violence. This will help us contextualize the framework within the local societies of Oak's project areas, eastern Europe and eastern Africa.

Study Design

Bulgaria

UNICEF Bulgaria recently commissioned a national study into the attitudes of children and young people in Bulgaria on a wide range of topics. The results showed that young people's relationships with their families and friends are seen as a source of happiness, but that these relationships could also lead to unhappiness.[1] Either way, it signifies how important relationships are for the psychosocial well-being of children and young people.

Although, in general, one can say that children and young people are faring well in Bulgaria, it also has to be acknowledged that there are some persistent socio-economic problems that affect them and their relationships in a negative way. Examples of these include:

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[1] https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/en/reports/voices-children

Teacher-pupil relationships: Young people often report that teachers use an authoritarian style of teaching, with little space for real communication or own initiative for the pupils. It seems very difficult for teachers to hear and acknowledge children's voices and empower them to participate in a meaningful way.

Children left behind by migrating parents: Animus partner Bulgaria Foundation used qualitative and quantitative research methods in order to explore the current situation of children left behind. Although the studies are not completely representative, they do show that the phenomenon has been increasing. The researchers found that 70% of children of the Turkish minority are living with one parent due to migration.[2] Our professional experience confirms that many children of Bulgarian and Roma origin are left behind by one, or even by both of their parents.[3] In most of the cases these children are living in rural areas.

Children with special needs: Although positive changes have taken place, in general, public attitudes towards children with special needs is still exclusionary: many Bulgarians still believe that children with mental or physical disabilities should be placed in special institutions or schools.[4]

Children from the Roma community: Children of Roma origin face many challenges in terms of their education. Many of them are still dropping out of Bulgarian schools.[5] Previous studies show that the drop-out rate for Roma children to be higher compared to that of children of other ethnic origins.[6] There are many Roma parents who find it difficult to find a job. The country ranks amongst the lowest EU member states in terms of poverty prevention.[7] This also reflects on Roma children's physical and emotional life and is one of the reasons behind the widespread begging phenomenon.[8]

Bullying/violence in schools: The results of a study in 43 countries in Europe and the Americas indicated that Bulgaria is one of the top ten countries where school bullying is the most rampant.[9]

In this context, the APHR project came at a very good point in time, as it contributes to the knowledge base on how young people perceive their lives in Bulgaria and gives insights into how they themselves—but also society as a whole—can support healthy relationships, which will have a positive impact on the overall child rights climate in which children grow up.

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[2] http://www.childrenleftbehind.eu/2014/02/focus-situation-children-left-behind/

[3] Animus Association runs the Bulgarian National Helpline for Children: 116 111. The line is free of charge. It is very popular in Bulgaria, and many calls are received by children living in and outside Sofia.

[4] https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/sites/unicef.org.bulgaria/files/2018-12/SITAN%20Eng_December_OK.PDF

[5] https://sofiaglobe.com/2017/11/16/bulgaria-third-from-bottom-among-eu-countries-in-bertelsmann-foundations-social-justice-index/

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] There are also many reports on children begging on the streets on from the Bulgarian National Helpline for Children and Child Protection Departments

[9] http://nmd.bg/данни-от-изследване-за-българия-аларм/

Tanzania

According to UNICEF, more than one in five—or 9.9 million—Tanzanians are adolescents, aged between 10 and 19 years.[10] Adolescence is a remarkable period of transition; a time when new patterns of behavior are formed, and decisions are taken regarding life directions that will mold their futures, as well as those of their families and communities. Most Tanzania adolescents have a sense of positive discovery and growth, yet they are often exposed to risks and vulnerability, including the loss of parents, the inability to complete education, and/or exposure to violence, abuse, and exploitation. A national survey carried out in 2009 indicated that in Tanzania, by the age of 18, approximately 30 percent of girls and 14 percent of boys were subjected to sexual violence (UNICEF, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences 2011).

During adolescence, the social sphere broadens beyond the childhood scope of family and many different types of relationships become more important and influential in adolescents' lives. Indeed, relationship experiences and norms established during adolescence often persist through adulthood. Therefore, in order to promote healthy adult and intergenerational relationships, we must be informed by adolescents' own views and experiences.

In Tanzania most studies on adolescent relationships have been directed towards their sexual and reproductive health. More interest has been directed towards girls' high risk of exposure to HIV infection compared to boys[11]: specifically, early pregnancies,[12] early marriages, and childbirth. There is limited documentation of adolescents' positive relationships beyond sexual relationships.[13] An investigation specifically seeking adolescents' views on healthy relationships is therefore invaluable in development practice. This study brings out not only the views of adolescents but created a space for adolescents themselves to seek out the views of fellow adolescents as youth peer researchers.

Participatory Research Process: The *Circles of Support* Approach

Our path to understanding adolescents' perceptions of healthy relationships in Bulgaria and Tanzania has been through our Circles of Support approach to participatory research with young people. Developed and refined by ISS and partners in previous projects on adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH), our approach is participative from design to dissemination. Throughout, young people were seen as co-creators of knowledge about their own lives, and their voices and perspectives were absolutely central.

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[10] https://www.unicef.org/tanzania/TANZANIA_ADOLESCENT_REPORT_Final.pdf

[11] https://data.unicef.org/topic/hivaids/adolescents-young-people/

[12] https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/14/tanzania-15-million-adolescents-not-school

[13] http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/sites/strive.lshtm.ac.uk/files/LL11_Bangser.pdf

Figure 1: Circles of Support approach to youth peer research

The approach sees young people as better placed to share their experiences with fellow young people, hence counteracting the adult gaze and gatekeeping of information (Cheney 2011, Ngutuku and Okwany 2017). Moreover, youth peer research is useful for reducing power discrepancies between the research participants and the researchers (Horvath et al. 2013). Such an approach aids in disclosure and honesty in responses. It was thus seen as useful for a study on healthy relationships in which multiple sensitivities are embedded. It is necessarily reflective throughout the process in order to maintain a high level of adolescent participation; we give careful and constant attention to adult/expert power relations with young people to be sure that the research process remains youth-centered throughout (Ngutuku and Okwany 2017). In this project, we were also particularly attentive to gender and generational power dynamics in adolescents' lives, effectively engaging men and boys in achieving gender equality (Kato-Wallace et al. 2016).

In the Circles of Support approach (Figure 1) to youth participatory research, adolescents are placed at the center of the research process, both as researchers and as study participants, where data is generated through the gathering of knowledge from peers by youth peer researchers (YPRs) whom we train in research techniques. The youth are supported by several 'layers' of adult support, from local supervisors like teachers, counselors, or youth group leaders, who provide daily assistance for YPRs carrying out the research. They are further supported by our local researchers who come from our local project staff. All of them are in turn supported by ISS.

An essential element of the Circles of Support approach is holding preliminary reflective workshops with the adult interlocutors—local supervisors, researchers, gatekeepers, donors, etc.—to engage

them in discussion and reflection on the importance of creating a safe and open space for young people's meaningful participation (Figure 2). We have learned that not only is this an essential starting point; it is also necessary to maintain that reflection throughout to prevent the 'creep' of

Figure 2: Bulgarian supervisors discuss their hopes and anxieties about supporting youth peer research in a reflective workshop

adult viewpoints back into the research, e.g., during analysis of the findings (Cheney and Okwany 2018).

Throughout the research process, in addition to striving to meet the Oak Foundation's expectations, we pushed our existing conceptual and methodological frameworks for research with adolescents to become even more inclusive, holistic, and participatory. Ultimately, the process yielded almost as many insights as the study's findings. By modeling healthy relationships in our very own practice, we were able to posit an alternative, adolescent-centered conceptual framework for future adolescent research and interventions. This framework can actually help demystify and diffuse power relations in participatory research and advocacy with adolescents in order to make more space for collaborative work with young people on issues that affect them, directly or indirectly. It should be noted that this framework constitutes a form of advocacy in itself, as well as contributing to meaningful interventions on behalf of adolescents.

Bulgaria

Selection of youth peer researchers for the project

Four schools were selected to participate in the project: two in the capital Sofia and two in the rural, eastern town of Aytos, in order to explore adolescents' perceptions of healthy relationships in diverse settings. The main selection criteria were based on the motivation of professionals at the schools to take part in such a journey as supervisors for young researchers. Other criteria were related to ethnic diversity: three of the selected schools (two in Aytos and one in Sofia) provided education to children and young people with diverse ethnic origins such as Roma, Turkish, and Muslim Bulgarian.

Four professionals (one per school) were selected to provide direct support to the Young Peer Researchers (YPRs). The supervisors participated in an initial training for supervisors and local researchers facilitated by ISS and ICDI. After the training, supervisors were supported by Animus' team to present the project to young people at their respective schools. Children and young people (aged 12-18) were invited to learn about the project. They were informed from the beginning that their participation was voluntary. The main selection principles were their motivation and curiosity related to the topic and in doing research.

The first four to five young people per school to join the team created posters inviting peers to take part in the project. Eight young people (aged 14-16) were recruited by their peers and joined the first research training at one of the high schools in Sofia, then another group of ten young people from the other Sofia high school received training. The same selection principles were used in schools in Aytos, where another twenty young people joined the project (ten per school).

Empowering young people to participate in a way they find meaningful

The initial workshops with the youth peer researchers (YPRs) focused on child and youth participation. YPRs were invited to share their knowledge and views about it. They thought it

was important to participate but for many of them it was a challenge to explain how they could benefit from such an experience. Actually, after the first workshops, our team learned that for most of the young people the concept of "participation" meant something very different from what real participation should be (according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). For example, in one of the groups YPRs shared that they participated in some projects but they felt like they could not say "no" when they were selected by their teachers. In the other Sofia group, they shared positive experiences in relation to their participation in the Student Council or other projects in which they decided to get involved. These initial workshops were very important in order to understand young people's perception of participation and to become more aware of their motivations for taking part in the project. YPRs were motivated by different reasons—from being able to talk about relationships to being able to have fun with their peers (all valid motivations, of course). The project team made clear that there was not a right or wrong way to join the research. Every participant was supported to participate in a meaningful and enjoyable way.

YPRs were invited to evaluate the quality of their participation using creative techniques. They were also able to share their level of satisfaction in terms of the way they participated in the process. This allowed them to be more sensitive towards their involvement. Measuring the level of participation was meaningful not only for the YPRs themselves, but also for the project team. It allowed us to be confident that we were empowering the YPRs and that they could take ownership of the process.

Formulating research topics, objectives and questions

Research training (one in each school in Sofia and Aytos) was provided during the first, quantitative phase of the project. It was facilitated in a series of short, after-school workshops[14]. These trainings shared a common structure, but the exact content was very much related to the specific context within each group setting. One of the main topics focused on the distinction between healthy and unhealthy relationships, based on adolescents' perceptions and their understanding of the concept of "relationship". Another important topic was dedicated to the purpose of the study, the research objectives (defining areas of interests, formulating research questions) and the target groups. Another part of the training was dedicated to ethical principles and gender issues when doing research.

YPRs were invited to think about relationships within the context of various activities and techniques in order to warm them up for the topic (Figure 3). They were also asked to discuss the topic of "relationships" in the settings they were interested in. Every group created their own list of settings (for example, the school setting, the family setting, the social media setting, the sexual setting, the friendship setting, etc.) and then explored the levels of proximity to each of the settings. YPRs were first stimulated to ask as many questions as they could in order to explore the topic in a certain setting. The topic of youth-led research was elaborated in-depth and in a comprehensive manner. Young people were able to connect to their personal experiences in research and to everything they already knew about different research methods. The training was designed in such a way that they were able to ask

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[14] 5 workshops in Aytos and 8 workshops in Sofia.

research questions and supported to recognize which of them were more relevant and informative than others. In the end, young people made a list of questions related to each setting that they were interested in. After the trainings, three different questionnaires were created by the four groups of young peer researchers (the two groups in Aytos worked together on this). Additional workshops were

Figure 3: First YPR workshops in Bulgaria, April 2017

held in order to support the YPRs to improve the quality of the draft versions of each questionnaire through feedback from staff at various levels of the circles of support (i.e. local and main researchers provided feedback). After that all the groups were invited to select the most reliable questions from the three sets and to create a common research tool. The YPRs piloted the questionnaire. After the pilot phase they provided new ideas about the way their research tool could be improved. The final questionnaire was then placed on tablet computers that were used to administer the survey. In total, there were 860 survey respondents in Bulgaria.

After quantitative analysis was performed on the data, reflection workshops were organized for the YPRs to share the challenges and positive experiences during the data collection process. For example, most of the Young Peer Researchers from Aytos shared that they found it easier and more enjoyable to collect data than to create the questionnaire. Some of the YPRs in Sofia said that it was a challenge to collect data but, in the end, they were glad they found so many respondents. In general, most of them found both the development of the questionnaire and the data collection process very interesting and a lot of fun. It was very important to hear their voices and to stimulate them to think about their personal experiences: what was meaningful and useful for them, what they learnt during the first phase, etc.

"I like the creation of the question sets. They provoked me to think about some of my own negative personality traits."
-Darina, 16, Sofia

Young people build upon their experience as researchers

In the second year, several workshops were organized in order to prepare the YPRs for the second, qualitative phase of the research project. They were supported in the interpretation of the results of the first project phase. YPRs discussed the findings of the survey and provided their interpretations. The groups were facilitated in order to be able to outline the results they found interesting from a research point of view. As a result of this creative process, new research questions were formulated to set the stage for the qualitative project phase that would deepen the knowledge of the data gathered in the first phase. YPRs then collected more in-depth information on the following topics: sexual relations, masturbation, friendships, family, school, dominance, and violence. Some of the topics were common for young people from Sofia and Aytos, but in each setting they created different sets of interview questions. They were also trained in interviewing techniques by the adult research team (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Bulgarian YPRs practice interviewing

Upon content analysis of the interviews, YPRs again went through a process of validating the findings and providing their interpretations, so that the data analysis also remained youth-centered. Once that was finalized, the research team—all levels of the Circles of Support—discussed the possible implications of the research for future interventions and advocacy. YPRs were also personally invited to reflect on their own journeys as researchers and how it was transformative for them. Many signaled their interest in participating in a subsequent advocacy and dissemination phase.

Tanzania

In collaboration with Nascent Research and Development Organization, in Tanzania, we explored adolescent's perceptions of healthy relationships as well as dynamics of such relationships by placing them within the socio-ecological framework by Ricardo et al (2005). This framework is useful for helping analyze the complex interplay between adolescents' relationships with others and the compound factors within an ecology, ranging from the socio-cultural, structural, the interpersonal, and the individual—the adolescent—in the center. This enabled our exploration of multi-level influences that impact adolescents' lives and shape their healthy relationships. Illustratively, these include the family, peers, school, community, the physical environment, socio-cultural and religious beliefs, and macro-economic changes that influence wellbeing.

In terms of healthy relationships, relevant aspects of these influences include gendered and social norms; generational power relations that impact how adolescents relate with adults; norms about discipline and how these affect adolescents' efficacy in relationship decision-making; and mediating forces, including technology. Examining the ways in which different

levels of influence impact adolescents' wellbeing was important in acquiring an understanding of the dynamics within diverse spheres of the ecology and interactions which influence their perceptions of healthy relationships. What emerged was a grounded perspective of the ecological model and characteristics of its various spheres (Figure 5) that affect or influence the perceptions of healthy relationships within these complex interrelations. We contend that any intervention that aims to create an enabling environment for healthy relationships should target each of the spheres simultaneously.
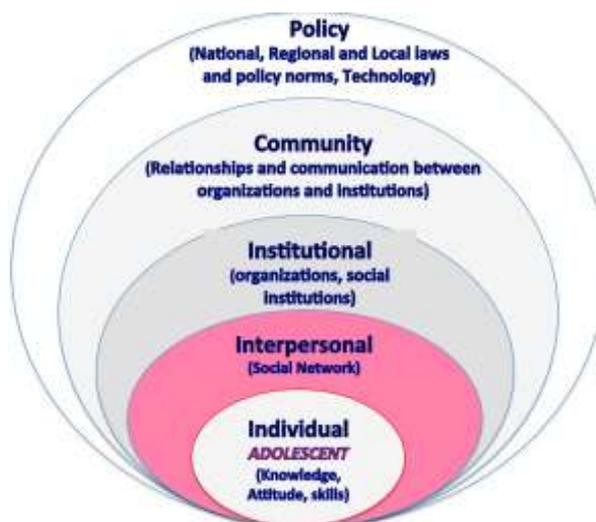

Figure 5: socioecological model

Approach and Methodology: A Youth-guided Peer Inquiry

In Tanzania, the research was carried out in the urban context of Kinondoni in Dar es Salaam, and in the rural context of Magu District in Mwanza. The research was conducted with both in-school and out-of-school youth ranging in age from 10-18 years. Thirty YPRs were selected (Table 1). We selected in-school YPRs from primary schools in class 5-6 (excluding class 7, the examination class) and secondary schools in form 2 and 3 (excluding form 4, the examination class). The out-of-school YPRs were selected from among youth who were willing to volunteer time for the project, had confidence, and possessed basic skills. The selection process was done by the community development workers who had worked in the research settings.

Table 1: The Tanzanian Youth Peer Researchers

Study site	In-school		Out-of-school	
Dar es Salaam	6 M	6 F	2 M	1 F
Mwanza	6 M	6 F	1M	2 F

To enhance rigor, youth peer researchers (YPRs) were supported by a range of people including sensitized and trained teachers in each selected school; study supervisors, professional researchers from the Center for Research and Development (CEREDEV) and Nascent Research and Development Organization, with technical backstopping from ISS researchers. The YPRs were central in the research process and participated at the different stages of the research process including (similarly to Bulgaria) brainstorming on research issues for exploration, development of research tools, pre-test of the tools and refinement of the tools, data collection with fellow peers, reflection on data, data validation, dissemination and advocacy.

The study employed a participatory approach undertaken by in- and out-of-school adolescents, with support from teachers and local supervisors as well as local researchers from CEREDEV, together with those from NRDO. Researchers from the ISS provided overall

support and guidance as outlined in the Circles of Support, where support to YPRs was provided at different layers of the circles, hence enhancing the degree of adolescent participation while not compromising research rigor, quality, or validity.

Selection of Research Participants and Methods

The research applied a mixed method approach to understand adolescents' perceptions and experiences of healthy relationships. As in Bulgaria, the study was conducted in two phases: a quantitative first phase in the first year and a qualitative second phase and the second year. Ethical clearance was obtained from relevant government bodies at the national, regional and local levels, and consent was obtained from adolescent research participants as well as from their caregivers for the in-school adolescents. A total of 8 primary and 4 secondary schools were purposively selected in both the Kinondoni district of Dar es Salaam and the district of Magu in Mwanza. One of the schools selected was a special-needs school. In Mwanza, participating communities were those located or engaged in major locational and economic activities of the area (highway trading, farming, fishing, and pastoralism) while in the urban Kinondoni district, we selected a low-income locale where most adults work in the informal sector as well as a middle-class residential area. This mix of locales was to provide a range of contexts for examining adolescent perceptions of healthy relationships.

The Tanzanian YPRs were trained in research techniques over the course of several workshops conducted by a combination of researchers from the Circles of Support. They learned about the research objectives, then they participated in the study's design and implementation (Figure 6). They fashioned survey and qualitative interview questions, and learned how to administer various research tools.

Figure 6: YPRs in Dar es Salaam discuss the scope of the research they intend to conduct

In the first phase, the YPRs collected data from a total of **927 adolescents aged 10-18 years**, 79.5% of them in-school and 20.5% of them out-of-school adolescents. We used a stratified sampling procedure (for in-school, it was proportional to the size of the school and participating class by gender), with questionnaires administered through a mobile handset. YPRs were trained on how to administer the questionnaire and transmit the results in real time. Where there was no mobile network coverage, completed surveys would be stored until a signal was detected and then uploaded. The data manager and researchers monitored the progress using unique identifiers given to each YPR and checked all data daily to ensure completeness and logical consistencies. To maintain confidentiality and data security, access to the web interface was protected through a password and firewall. The mobile handsets were also password protected. Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical analysis software SPSS version 20, to generate descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations. After the data collection, workshops were held with YPRs in Mwanza and Dar es Salaam, during which

the researchers and supervisors reviewed the data, exchanged experiences regarding fieldwork, and clarified findings.

For the qualitative study, a total of **583 in-school adolescents aged 10-18 years** from 8 primary schools (4 in Dar es Salaam and 4 in Mwanza) and 3 secondary schools (2 in Mwanza and 1 in Dar es Salaam) were selected. Information was collected through a range of methods, including semi-structured interviews, life history interviews with young mothers and fathers, photo narrative interviews, auto-biographical essays, creative drawing activities, focus group discussions (FGDs) and other participatory activities like using the 'beans in a bottle' exercise (Figure 7) to show the strength or weakness of relationships with others. YPRs were first trained in all of these techniques, which were piloted before data collection began. We also collected information from adults including teachers, religious/ community leaders, and parents/ caregivers to corroborate findings. Data was captured and organized through Excel and analyzed according to the themes that were guided by the research questions. Information from autobiographical essays was analyzed using qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti according to the themes generated from the other qualitative data.

Figure 7: YPRs in Mwanza discuss the importance of different relation-ships revealed in their 'beans in a bottle' exercise with local researchers. Through the activity and discussion, they learned how to run the exercise themselves in focus group discussions.

FINDINGS

BULGARIA: Striving for Better Communication

In the quantitative phase of the research (April 2017-January 2018), a 50-item questionnaire developed by the YPRs was used. A total of **851 respondents (11-18 years old)** took part. Boys comprised 41% and girls 58% of respondents. The respondents identified as Bulgarian (71.4%), Roma (1.3%) or Turkish (27.3%). Bulgarian YPRs also conducted over 350 interviews in 2018 to follow up on survey findings and explore the emergent themes more deeply. Below, a selection of the most notable findings are highlighted.

In general, young people value **trust, respect, and support** most in their relationships—though there was not clear consensus on what each of these means. Definitions of three concepts turned out to be rather individual, which might explain why there are sometimes tensions in relationships. For both boys and girls, the *family* and their *friends* seem to be the most important and closest relationships in their lives. They share important things with them, they feel most understood by them, they have the most patience with them, and they share problems in school with them. For the youngest age group (11-12 years old), the relationship with the family seems most important, whereas as children get older, friends seem to gradually become a more important group with which to share things (Figure 8). Challenges in love relationships are shared more with friends than with family, especially by girls.

Figure 8: Who do you share with when there is something important to you?
broken down by age of respondents
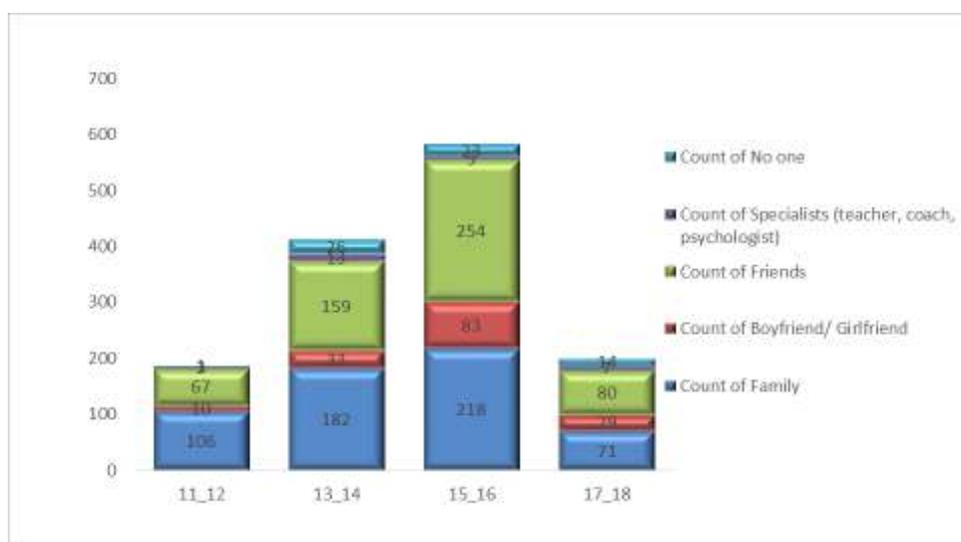
Family

A quarter of the respondents (25%) do not live with both parents. A majority (53%) says their mother is the person closest to them in the family. This is especially the case for girls, young children (11-12 years old), and Turkish children (65%). Although family relationships are among the most important ones for the respondents, they are not only perceived as positive or satisfactory:

- Two thirds of the respondents are not fully satisfied with the relationships with their family members: they would like their family to understand them better (34%) and they would like to spend more time together (22%) or share more with each other (9.5%).

- One in five respondents (20%) rarely or never communicate with their parents, and 10% rarely or never feel that parents respect their opinions. The older respondents get, the less they feel respected in their opinion. Although the group of Roma respondents was small, a high percentage of Roma adolescents (38%) rarely or never feels their opinion is respected by parents.

- Almost half of the respondents (48%) state that violence occurs in Bulgarian families, with 5% saying that it happens always or often. The older the respondents are, the more they express of violence in their surroundings. Most respondents think that violence (22%) happens between parents, but they also state that it also occurs between father/mother and child (18%) or among children (11%).

In interviews, YPRs found out that one of the most important quality a mother should have, according to adolescents, is the ability to understand her child. Young people also responded that a mother should be able to listen to her child. YPRs interpreted these results as something they believed would support adolescents' relationships with the members of their family.

Another interesting result was related to young people's understanding that a mother should be strict and tolerant at the same time in order to maintain a healthy relationship with her child. In addition, respondents stated that support—emotional as well as financial—is another important element of a healthy family relationship.

The results showed that young people are satisfied by the relationships with their parents because parents are able to provide meaningful support. Although YPRs themselves evaluate the result as positive, they commented that the quantitative phase also indicated that there are a lot of adolescents who were not so satisfied by the topics they are able to discuss with their parents. For example, the respondents said that the most popular topics they discuss with their parents are related to everyday activities, plans, school, work, problems they faced, etc. However, there were other topics they would like to be able to address in the relationship with their family—to be able to share their feelings, to know more about their parents' lives, to be able to talk about bullying at school, to be able to discuss social topics, sex, etc. YPRs said that there were many parents (they talked mainly about parents of their friends) who were unable to talk about young people's emotions, their relationships with friends or intimate partners (topics which young people found very interesting and important). According to the YPRs this was one of the reasons why some of their friends were not able to communicate such topics with their parents. Some of the YPRs shared that their parents are often too focused on their grades. They added that they would be happier if their parents would **listen more to them** about other things, too.

Friendship

In relationships with peers, young people value **trust, honesty, respect, support, and humor** most. Hypocrisy, envy and lack of understanding are considered as most harmful aspects. Being accepted by peers also seems important, considering the following findings:

- 75% have experienced feeling isolated by friends.

- 45% would or might do something they don't want to do, in order to be accepted in a group.

YPRs researched what 'trust' and 'respect' mean to young people. Adolescents defined them in various ways, with trust meaning being able to rely on somebody, sharing, acceptance, support, keeping secrets. 'Respect' to them meant appreciation, acceptance, compliance, understanding, and acknowledgement of others. Although young people shared that respect is one of the qualities they appreciated the most when it comes to friendships, the quantitative phase showed that many of the respondents do not feel respected by their friends. In addition, many of the young people indicated that they do not share personal topics (for example, family issues, past relationships, feelings, etc.) with their friends. YPRs discussed whether this could be explained by the lack of respect in a friendship as well as what could be done to improve this in peer relationships (Figure 9). They suggested that creating a space for young people to discuss the concept of respect and trust in friendship could empower them not only to think about the way they relate to others but also to explore how to make their friendships healthier.

Figure 9: Bulgarian YPRs engage in data validation and analysis

School

The study explored the reasons for bullying in school. The respondents believed that bullying is based on young people's desire to compete with each other (mainly when it comes to intimate relations). According to the respondents there are also other reasons which could lead to violence at school—for example, the family model, the inability of young people to cope with conflicts, hate speech, the inability to communicate with peers, etc.

According to the respondents, students should spend more time communicating with each other in order to prevent bullying. They said that students should learn how to control their negative feelings in order to be able to think before they act in different situations. Most of the respondents believe that they are responsible for the way they communicate with others and that they are the people who have the power to do it in a healthy way.

However, respondents also said that parents should play a role in coping with school bullying: they believe that parents should pay more attention to their children, as this could influence the way children behave in conflict situations. They added that teachers and their ability to communicate with the students could influence young people's attitudes towards their classmates. According to the respondents, family models could also play an important role in providing a basis for healthy relationships.

Sexuality and Intimate Relationships

It is very clear from the findings that young people do not think they learn anything about sex in their school settings. Many schools offer no sex education at all, and where they do, the curriculum tends to focus on negative aspects and risks such as early pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. YPRs said that they were not surprised by such a result, but still they found it very problematic. Many of the young researchers talked about the way their sexual education was provided and most of them were convinced they did not have any sexual education at all. Some respondents spoke of receiving some degree of sex education through NGO programs, and also from their peers.

Despite the dearth of sexuality education, adolescents in the study saw the role of sex as essential in order to keep a relationship healthy. YPRs explained that there is a need for a program focused on sexual relations. They believe that such a program could provide space for young people to talk about other aspects of sexuality and intimacy. They suggested topics based on some of the things that came up in the quantitative phase: love and romance; exploring young people's understanding of sex; the role of the sex in a healthy relationship; sexual experience as a pleasant one, etc.

> "I was shocked about the ideas some people had in relation to sexuality... I think it is very bad that we do not have sexual education at school. I think that we should have such a program at least for a school year."
>
> —Iva, 16, Sofia

Another interesting finding was related to young people's perceptions of the role of pornography and masturbation in healthy relationships. One of the main results indicated that even when young people identify that pornographic videos could distort their perception about sex, they also believed (more boys than girls) that it could also provide a positive experience. For example, respondents said that they could gain some knowledge from watching porn. They believed that it was healthy to watch porn from the age of 15 or 16. They were also able to recognize that watching porn could distort perceptions (e.g. that it can lead to unrealistic expectations towards intimate partners).

Only 25% of the respondents reported being involved in serious romantic relationships (long-term and exclusive), with very low percentages in the younger age groups.

- 20% are sexually active (more boys than girls, and the percentage goes up with age, with 51% of the 17-18-year-olds reporting to have sex).

- 11% (more boys than girls) think it is normal for one partner to have power over the other, whereas 24% do not know whether it is normal or not.

Because homosexuality has been a topic of public debate in Bulgaria for the last several years, it was also a popular topic of discussion amongst adolescents, who are in the process of defining their own sexualities at this particular life stage. Although there are organizations trying to raise awareness of sexual diversity and human rights in Bulgaria, the issue still provokes very negative social attitudes. In 2018, the Sofia Pride parade had 3000 supporters, but protesters threatened physical violence against marchers, and hate speech spread on social media. Moreover, Bulgaria failed to ratify the Istanbul Convention on violence against women mainly because many politicians, journalists, and citizens in Bulgaria associate the term 'gender' with homosexuality and transsexuality, believing that gender education will promote LGBTIQ lifestyles to children.

The YPRs therefore wanted to explore the topic of homosexuality's social acceptability in more depth. They found that:

- 20% of the respondents would hide their homosexuality from their parents, another 20% would be afraid of their parents' responses. However, 47% *would* disclose being homosexual to their families.

- On the other hand, 44% of the respondents would disclose their homosexuality to their friends. However, this percentage was particularly low among the Turkish respondents--31%--indicating less social acceptance of homosexuality in the Turkish community within Bulgaria.

YPRs tried to unpack the concept of **equality** and to explore whether it is present or not in young people's intimate relations. The findings showed that for most of the respondents to be equal in an intimate/romantic relation means that partners are understanding each other, and are making decisions together. It is interesting to note that most of the respondents said they knew young people who maintain equality in relationships with their intimate partners. On the other hand, there were still many of them who said they have not encountered such a relationship (yet).
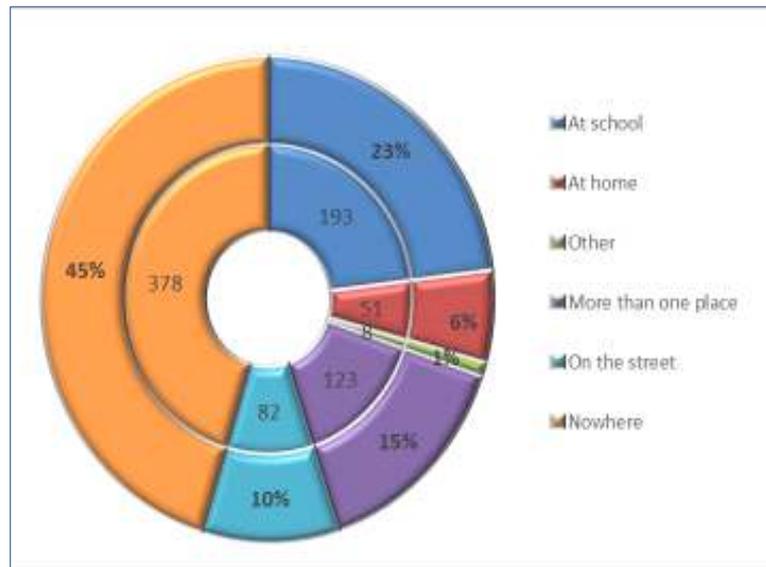
Respondents' answers also indicated that they were aware of the concept of **dominance**— one person exerting power, influence, or control over the other--in intimate relationships. Young people provided many ideas about the way a person or an intimate partner could cope with such a problem. For example, most of the respondents said that better communication between intimate partners could help them make a change. They also said that respecting each other's opinions and making compromises in the relationship could solve the problem. Although the respondents provided various ideas about the way young people could cope with dominance, most of them also said that intimate partners should separate if they are involved in such a relationship.

Violence

Violence was an important topic for the YPRs, as reflected in many of the questions as well as in the findings. More than half of the respondents (52%) has ever been a victim of aggression (verbal, physical or other). Aggression is most often experienced in school (23%). Also, 6% experienced aggression at home (Figure 10).

- When asked about the school setting, a staggering 80% say that violence exists in school. Most violence happens between students, according to 75% of the respondents. Almost 7% responded that violence also happens between teachers/principals and students.

Figure 10: Where did you become a victim of aggression?

- Sexual violence is said to occur mostly at parties or on the street, but 12% states that it happens at home or at school.

- 58% responded that violence always, often or sometimes occurs in romantic relationships between teenagers—mostly psychological violence.

- 18% have been direct victims of cyberbullying. However, 75% have heard about situations of cyberbullying, mostly concerning online threats and offensive messages.

Overall, Bulgarian adolescents presented a rather positive picture of their relationships with others around them. However, the research also helped pinpoint areas where Bulgarian young people strive for better intergenerational communication—particularly about sexuality and violence. The YPRs hope that as we move into advocacy, we can start to address these issues with the broader society in a constructive and respectful manner.

TANZANIA: Constructions of Adolescence, Reciprocity in Relationships

Linguistically, the notions of adolescence and youth are synonymous; both translate as *Ujana* in the Swahili language, and the terms *kijana* (singular) and *vijana* (plural) are used for adolescent(s) or youth. The distinction made between the two is that adolescence is perceived as the younger end of youthhood, biologically as the period of puberty (*umri wa kubaleghe*). Adolescents and youth are thus referred to in everyday discourse as *vijana*. We thus use adolescence and youth synonymously in this study.

Discussions with young people and adults indicate that young people in Tanzania are variously defined according to their work, values, character, conduct and behavior. They are seen as both enablers and disablers. These constructions are gendered, with female adolescents and youth perceived differently from males: a majority of descriptions of male adolescents are more negative and even derogatory, especially when linked with class and out-of-school status. According to one participant, "Youth are taken as people who have less to contribute to the community. This is because most of them engage themselves in drugs, hence they do unpleasant things like they steal and damage people's properties."[15] Also seen as the future, though, young people are expected to study hard and excel in education to develop the country. As one 14-year-old female participant said, "Adolescents in the community are perceived as pillars of their societies."

While some adolescents and youth bought into these constructions by appropriating the voice and perspectives of adults and society, others (especially those out of school) perceived these constructions as burdening and as leading to their loss of self-esteem. They argued instead that the lack of educational and livelihood opportunities for out-of-school youth should instead be problematized, rather than the personhood and the identity of young people themselves.

These norms may affect the self-efficacy of young people so constructed in forming relationships with various others in their communities. For example, those constructed as a 'problem', and who internalize these perceptions, may have problems in their interactions with others, and may either over-invest in behaving like good adolescents and youth or demonstrate strong feelings and react negatively—thus reaffirming those constructions. On the other hand, such norms are also indicative of the extent of communities' collective efficacy in providing young people a safe environment for healthy relationships.

Healthy Relationships: '*It is Give and Take'*

We established that adolescents attach different values, attributes and qualities to what they consider to be a healthy relationship (Figure 11). Some of the parameters they attribute to a healthy relationship with their caregivers include love, provisioning, and communication. Seventy percent of all adolescents noted that a key value that constitutes a healthy relationship is love: love for self, for and from family members, relatives, peers and community members. Our analysis reveals that love sums up several other values which

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[15] Due to the need for brevity, many of the quotes in the Tanzania findings section are heavily edited and/or composite quotes.

define a healthy relationship including care by parents or caregivers as well as selfless action including supporting each other. Other important values include honesty, transparency, communication and willingness to give support in the form of spiritual, social, moral support. We established that a healthy relationship ought to begin with an individual who then relates well with others.

Figure 11: A YPR in Mwanza goes over some of the collected responses to questions about components of healthy relationships.

The teachers we interviewed maintained that relationships, both healthy and unhealthy, are contagious and push one to do good or bad to others and to behave or misbehave. Good relationships enhance a positive learning and interaction atmosphere because when one is happy, s/he also interacts well with others, is motivated to study, arrives early to school, actively participates in school activities, helps and supports friends. Adolescents who were not treated well reported feelings of anger, a need to get revenge, isolation, loneliness and generally reported negative behavior. Religious adolescents who were not treated well wanted to redeem these feelings by being good to others.

Adolescents' Significant Relationships
We explored the most significant relationships for adolescents and established that generally adolescents have healthy relationships with self, family members, community members and the environment though they also experience unhealthy relationships with people meant to be close to them. For each of the healthy relationship they have, they have reasons as to why they consider them healthy.
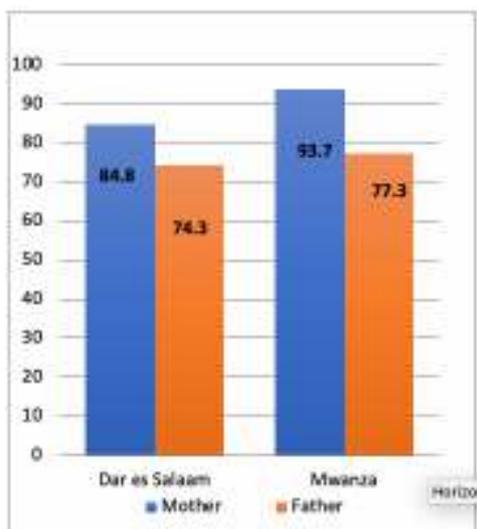
Figure 12: Percent of in-school adolescents who report good relationships with their parents

Most adolescents reported positive relations with their parents (Figure 12), although more with mothers than with fathers. A clear majority (70%) said that the most important attribute of a healthy relationship with their parents is parental love. Most adolescents' primary caregivers were female (87%). A higher proportion of in-school adolescents (92%) have a female primary caregiver, versus 68% of the out-of-school adolescents. Adolescents indicated that parental communication (easy to talk to, interaction), listening, and forgiveness are significantly more important to older (27%) than younger adolescents (6 %), and to those in Mwanza (16%) than to Dar es Salaam (8%). As they grow older, their sense of need for communication also grows even as they develop a sense of independence. It is also likely that at this stage, the influence of generational power relations on perceptions of relations are key.

Mothers

A majority of the adolescents (84.3% in Dar es Salaam and 93.7% in Mwanza) said that they have strong, healthy relationships with their mothers because their mothers support them emotionally and listen to them. Mothers also 'responsibilize' adolescents, provide for their needs, nurture them and sacrifice for their children.

> *I love my mother because she cooks food for me also washes my clothes. When I come from school and find food at home I am very happy. Unlike when she is not around, when I reach home I have to cook for myself. She also buys clothes for me and warns and teaches me when I do something wrong.*
> —In-school female, 13, Mwanza

The perspective that mothers are always available could explain these perceptions and it is no wonder that even though some adolescents had or lived with both parents. Adolescents not only recognized their mothers' contributions to their well-being but also their own obligations to reciprocate one day. As one 11-year-old boy in Dar es Salaam said, "*Nitamtunza kama mboni ya jicho langu* (when I grow up I will take care of [my mother] like I care for the pupil of my eye)."

> "Mothers lay down their lives for their children."
> —male, 14, Dar es Salaam

Fathers

Relationships with the father emerged as an important aspect in the ecology of adolescents' relationships. Some fathers were perceived as having healthy relationships with their children because they were present and engaged—and fathers provided for the needs of children,

respected, and defended adolescents against relatives who may not value them or meet their emotional and material needs.

> *In my family we are all girls and because of this, my father's relatives do not like us. I thank God because my parents especially my father believes in us and he always encourages us to study hard so that we attain our dreams.*
>
> —*In-school female*, 17, Mwanza

However, we noted that compared to mothers, many adolescents have weak relationships with their fathers. The main reasons include: fathers' absence in their lives, disengagement, and failure to provide for the needs of their children. Many were not straightforward with their children and did not listen to them or spend time with them. Some were not providing nurturance and were perceived as less concerned with the wellbeing of their children in general. As one 17-year-old girl from Mwanza stated, "There are few benefits that I have gained from my father; he does nothing for me completely."

In some cases, adolescents perceived that their fathers were not supportive because they were away fending for the family. They however noted that when these fathers *were* available, they catered for the emotional and material needs of their children. Not being close does not therefore always mean that the adolescents did not like their fathers. It also points to the need for the fathers to balance their breadwinning roles with nurturing roles.

Relationships with Stepparents

Many adolescents in the research sites lived with non-biological caregivers. We noted that in cases of death of parents, separation, or after their mothers/fathers remarried, children live with stepparents. While some young people reported that they were happy with their step parents, others narrated that life was difficult in such arrangements:

> *My relationship with the father who raises me is not good because he hates me, and he never checks on me to see whether I am well or not... He says harsh words... He says I should ask my mother who my father is.*
>
> —Female, 13, Dar es Salaam

> *...my mother remarried a certain man and our life was good but immediately when my mother got pregnant life became horrible because my stepfather started mistreating us and beating my mother.... Three months later, my stepfather passed away and life was still hard but not so hard because we were not mistreated.*
>
> —Male, 13, Dar es Salaam

Indeed, although this was not always the case, adolescents associated staying with a stepfather with incidents of children skipping school, running to the streets, or smoking marijuana. Others end up dropping out of school, engaging in child labor, or marrying at a young age. Stepmothers were also generally perceived to be difficult or uncaring but there were also those who were perceived as nurturing. One 13-year-old in-school female reported that her stepmother was caring and provided for all her needs even after the deaths of their

mother and their elder brother who was providing for the family. Yet she noted that other people in the community imagined that her stepmother would not take care of her. Community norms and stereotypes therefore influence perceptions of stepparent-stepchild relationships.

Perceptions of Relationships with Siblings

This relationship was seen as important in supporting each other and giving the children a sense of togetherness and family. Some of the qualities that young people said they like in the siblings were **thoughtfulness, politeness, getting along well and being good listeners**. Though 25% (significantly more girls than boys) of in-school adolescents report harassment by brothers or sisters, older siblings also tend to support their younger brothers and sisters emotionally as well as provide them other support, guidance, and protection. Siblings in some cases assume **the role of caregiver**—especially when parents die—thus assuming a double position of sibling and parent at the same time. When the older siblings do not play this role, the relationship with their siblings breaks down. It is therefore important to support siblings of orphaned children to play the caring role.

Relationships with Extended Family Members

In both rural and urban Tanzania, adolescents were cared for by other relatives when their parents died or were unable to financially provide. While some of the children reported that they were treated well by their caregivers, others reported that relatives were uncaring. The main extended-family caregivers were identified as grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. In some cases, relationships with paternal aunties—though significant—tended to be problematic. A significant number of adolescents who participated in FGD exercises indicated that they had broken relationships with their paternal aunts. Some of the aunts financially support the adolescents when parents are deceased or are unable to, but many of the aunts have conflicts with the mothers of the adolescents—something which shapes and affects niece /nephew -aunt relationships. In some other cases, the relationship with members of extended family was seen as negative and young people described it using words like 'torture', 'hate', 'oppression', 'discrimination', among others.

Adolescents also noted that even when parents were deceased, some others like teachers acted as surrogate caregivers. Teachers can also play an important role of being a nurturer. Moreover, while some adolescents noted that they did not receive support from the community when their parents died, some non-relative foster families supported them. This is a window of opportunity in building the community's efficacy in supporting orphaned adolescents.

Peer Relationships

Peers were reported to positively shape each other to be more responsible and supportive. They even often help each other with advice and counseling, or when in trouble. Seventy-one percent of in-school adolescents reported peers counseled them about careers. Significantly higher peer-to-peer counseling occurs between adolescents in Mwanza (85%) than in Dar es Salaam (61%) and amongst older adolescents (79%) than younger adolescents (69%).

Peers can also be negative influences, engaging them in antisocial behaviors or bullying them. Out-of-school youth also did not have reliable networks—especially those who straddle youth and adulthood—because some were married or had children.

Adolescents report some peer pressure, to engage in sexual relations. 29% of in school adolescents (boys or girls) have been asked to have sex by peers, with significantly more girls (35%) than boys (23%); more urban (Dar es Salaam, 33%) than rural (Mwanza, 23%). Nearly half (49%) also know of another boy or girl who has ever been asked to have sex by a peer. Nearly 60% of adolescents approved of a boy or girl to be asked to have sex by a peer with significantly more girls than boys approving of peer-to-peer sex.

However, not all relationships between adolescent boys and girls are sexual in nature. One out-of-school female adolescent in Dar es Salaam complained, "Our parents think that when we are in the company of boys, the next thing we are going to do is engage in sexual intercourse." In an FGD, one mother in Dar es Salaam confirmed this: "It is now that I have understood the clear relationship issues of adolescents. I only thought that young people of different sex, whenever given an opportunity to be together, only indulge in sexual intercourse." Sometimes this assumption can even lead to violence: as one respondent shared, "One evening while we were returning from school, I was walking with a male classmate. The teacher had given us an assignment and so I needed my friend to help me... My brother and father were in the trading center and when they saw us, they immediately ran towards me and started beating me... They accused me of 'prostituting', that I was going to become pregnant."

Perceptions on Relationships in Different Spaces

Beyond understanding how adolescents perceive their relationships with their parents/ caregivers, siblings and their other relatives, the study sought to find out how they perceive relationships in the main spaces of the home and the community. In this section, we explore the friendliness of these spaces and how they influence healthy relationships.

Home

Many adolescents suggested that home provides a sense of peace, emotional satisfaction, and relief from stress. However, some youth felt that home was not a safe space due to domestic violence or the perception that one of the parents was not nurturing to the children. This made them uncomfortable at home:

> "I treasure my home; it is my everything. I spend most of my time there, and it is at home that all my needs are met."
>
> —In-school male, 14, Mwanza

> My mother was going through a bad time because my father would beat her every day. My father is a drunkard and doesn't care about his family... My mother suggested

that I leave the village and go to stay with my uncle, but I feared that when I go away, my father will kill her.

—Out-of-school male, 14, Dar es Salaam

Domestic violence made home a place where kids were scared of interacting. Young people therefore recommended that their parents should ensure that they live harmoniously and avoid domestic violence.

An important finding was that relationships are not limited to human beings but with important non-human objects, including animals and ecological spaces. Where some of the adolescents were facing hardships in their home environments, researchers encounter-ed their peers taking refuge in outdoor tasks like taking care of animals (Figure 13). Such narratives provide a broader understand-ing of the variety of relationships that young people value and how they can be strengthened through contextualized ad-vocacy efforts.

"The cows cannot quarrel with you; they play with each other and look happy. Sometimes I think they are better than human beings."
—Out-of-school male, 16, Mwanza

Figure 12: A boy's photo of his cattle, and his reflections on it.

The School Environment: A Contradictory Space

We established that school is important to in-school adolescents as the place where they spend a considerable part of their normal daytime, form lifelong childhood and adolescent friendships, and shape careers through interacting with teachers. School was reported as *'a place of refuge'*. Adolescents liked school because it was where they could engage in sports and leisure activities, meet friends, shared ideas and views concerning different things, and gave each other advice like how to avoid early pregnancies, how to avoid sexual advances that may result in undesirable consequences, and shaped/protected their life and career dreams.

However, the school was not always a space where adolescents enjoyed positive relationships. Teachers were seen as important in molding behavior including teaching them values, how to interact with other children and other traits. However, adolescents related negative experiences of mistreatment and corporal punishments by the teachers.

Influencers of Healthy Relationships

Religion

> "At our church I have learnt how to love, forgive, respect others, know how to conduct myself, know God. Church is a safe place for us as young people to share, play, pray… and even our parents are not worried about us."
>
> —In-school male, 15, Mwanza

Survey findings revealed that religion influences adolescents in different ways. Religion encourages adolescents to love other people (63% in-school and 56% out-of-school). Discussions with local leaders indicate that religion (both Christianity and Islam) shapes adolescent behavior in a way that they are well disciplined, they respect their parents, community members and friends, and are also loved. They are also less likely to join bad peer groups and take on risky and illegal behavior like robbery, theft, drugs and fights. The adolescents mentioned that religious leaders teach them key values such as sharing, helping, and treating others including strangers with respect and love. This helps adolescents understand that everyone around them is important and that they need to be in good relationships with them. Many adolescents named religious leaders as their role models.

Economic constraints

Young people indicated that in some cases, economic challenges were also a route to young parenthood because some girls were forced to seek economic favors from boys in exchange for sex. One female participant related,

> *Because of my parents' inability to pay my school fees, I was pressured by peers and I got a guy who lied to me that he was going to provide for me… I became pregnant, then he refused responsibility… My relationship with my parents is now broken and my relationship with the guy is no more.*

It should, however, be noted that not all adolescents who come from resource-constrained households experience challenges in forming good relationships. Indeed, some adolescents described that they had positive experiences and indeed their parents, though resource-constrained, were still able to 'sacrifice' for them.

Complementing the adolescents' perceptions, teachers also indicated that poverty in families creates tension and conflicts, and children tend to interpret failure to provide as lack love for them. One of the teachers from a secondary school in Mwanza noted that poverty is a source of unhealthy relationships between parents and adolescents. He gave the following example:

There was a young lady who used to complain about her parents who were not supplying her needs. They encouraged her to fend for herself [a veiled indication that she can look for a lover], including buy herself paraffin oil for revising at night. This girl came to me asking me for a small job. Some children work after school or on weekends. I keep wondering what these parents are up to because if their children can start selling themselves…

Sexual Coercion and Violence

A significant finding of our study in Tanzania was in relation to the seeming ubiquity of child sexual abuse and exploitation. Adolescents typically know their abusers, who are mainly relatives, teachers, or friends. Our survey results indicated that 26% of the adolescents have been approached for sex by relatives, either through grooming and enticements, or by force or coercion. More than one third (37%) of the adolescents know of another boy or girl who has been approached for sex by a relative.

Young people expressed pain at how they were being sexually exploited by their relatives. However, they feared reporting abuse due to power relations with adult perpetrators and the fear of causing family break-up; that they may not be believed; and/or that they may lose financial support when the perpetrator is a caregiver. For example, some said that they had faced sexual abuse from a parent, but that the other parent refused to believe them. Mothers admitted that they are aware that their brothers or brothers-in-law sometimes force their daughters into sex, but they also noted that it is difficult to address because it can cause marriage breakdown.

Besides sexual abuse from family members, adolescents also face sexual abuse in schools. The existence of sexual relationships, including sexual harassment of students by teachers, creates unhealthy relationships between adolescents and teachers with serious negative consequences for the adolescents. A secondary school student in Mwanza stated,

…there was a teacher who hated a student because the student refused his sexual advances. So the teacher failed the girl each time and later she was expelled from school. When this was discovered, the girl was brought back to school and the teacher was suspended, though the girl had lost a year.

A sixth of in-school adolescents have been asked to have sex by a teacher, especially in urban areas—15% of which are 10-14 years old. Of those who have ever experienced teachers' sexual advances, significantly more reported multiple incidents in Mwanza (47%) than in Dar es Salaam (30%). 43% of all in-school adolescents knew of a boy or girl who has been asked to have sex with a teacher.

Many female adolescents in particular are coerced or forced into sex, such as 'house girls', who are sometimes sexually exploited by their male bosses. There are also cases where **parents push their children into transactional sex**, euphemized as '*forced to look for sugar'*. One of the mothers noted that in her neighborhood, she has heard a mother shout:

"'I have prepared tea. There is no sugar, no bread… The tea is there; it's up to you kids!' Imagine, a mother of three…10-16-year-old children... What does this mean? It means the kids who are still young should go and look for a source of income and bring sugar and tea, and then what happens if the kids go running to bodaboda [motorcycle taxi] drivers and exchange sugar for sex?"

Though adolescents expressed discomfort with adult sexual advances, they also expressed a certain **acquiescence to the prevalence of child sexual abuse**. Given the dimensions of power and resources that are intertwined with intergenerational and gendered sexual relationships, some adolescents ultimately felt that if they could not change the situation, they might as well acquiesce and even use it to their advantage. Moreover, it seems that transactional sex has become so common that young people have to some extent **normalized** it, as reflected by the 82% of adolescents who said that it is acceptable to receive money or gifts in exchange for sexual intimacy. Survey results indicated that 71% of in-school adolescents have received money or gifts for sexual intimacy, and 73% percent know of another boy or girl that received money or gifts for sexual intimacy. Sexual abuse and exploitation are therefore an urgent area for intervention but also for more in-depth research to understand the complex dynamics that perpetuate it.

The Role of Culture

Culture and social norms are significant in social interactions, though in this study we established that adolescents often erroneously equate 'culture' with 'tradition' which they more or less perceive as outdated—and therefore its role in influencing healthy relationships was not always well understood. Indeed, as reflected in the survey results, less than half of the in-school adolescents (48%) stated that they are influenced by cultural values in relating with other people. However, those who were influenced by culture noted that culture shapes how they relate with peers of the opposite sex—namely that cultural norms endorse adult surveillance of those relationships. In other words, culture sets the rules of relationships, including do's and don'ts which include norms against premarital sex and girls not staying out late at night. Culture also often teaches respect for elders and outlaws vices like drug abuse, though as mentioned, some cultural norms may actually serve to normalize sexual violence against children.

Discussions with teachers and leaders revealed that that the culture of Tanzania is rich and has potential to shape healthy relationships among young people and adults as well. However, these perspectives still indicated a need for control over the sexuality and behavior of young people with *adult* perspectives that culture was being eroded by the youth themselves.

By contrast, young people tended to understand culture to mean negative, outdated 'traditional' practices like witchcraft. They felt that cultural norms controlled their relations with the opposite sex by drawing on heteronormative constructions of male and female sexuality to govern the consequences faced by adolescents when they defy them. Culture was seen to impose a gendered burden on young people where young men were seen as more privileged that their female counterparts. In one FGD, a participant pointed out that "A male
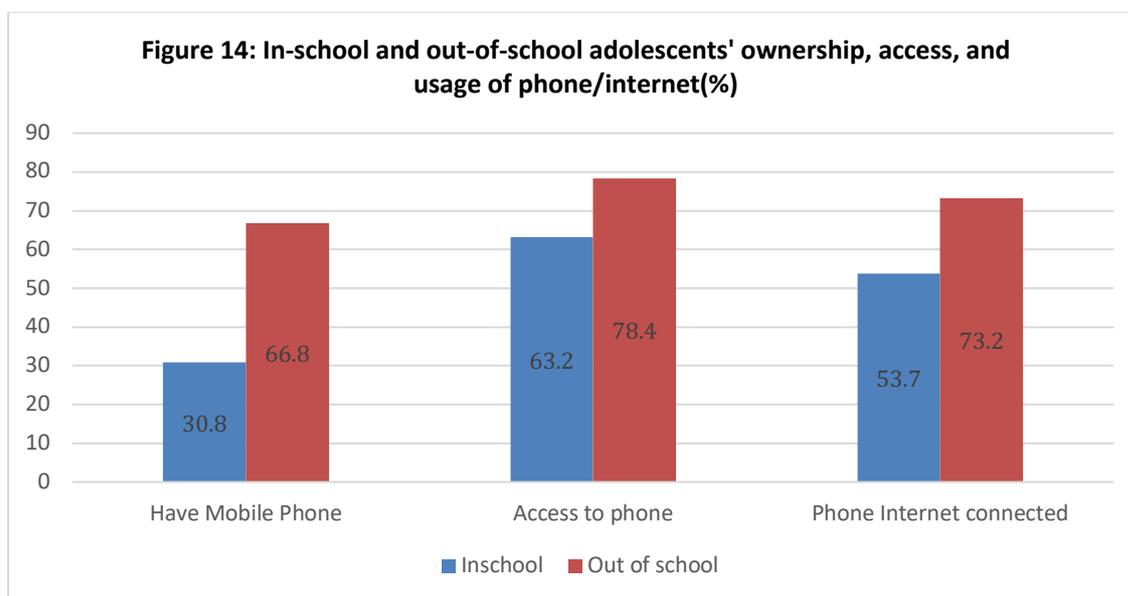
youth is the decision maker—even if he is young—if the parents are not around at home." Another one added, 'When a young man reaches the age of 18, he will always sit on a stool when they are eating while the females, although older, will sit on the floor—including the mother."

The Role of Technology in Perceptions of Healthy Relationships

Technology and especially television and social media are important symbolic sites for enacting relationships, hence their usage is important in shaping interactions among young people. This move away from an 'analogue' to a 'digital' way of life implied that technology, especially mobile telephone usage (Figure 14), was a major communication and learning channel. Though in-school youth do not always have access to mobile phones because of school regulations banning their use, technology can provide spaces for healthy relationships, especially for out-of-school youth who lack networks. They can connect with parents and friends, they can be used to dispel myths about youth, and are useful for passing information.

> *I can get access to a phone when I need it, and most of the time I do communicate with my parents, relatives and friends. I like talking to them about school work and just saying hi to them. Through different applications I get to send and receive pictures. News is what I enjoy listening and watching since I get to know what's going on around the world. Music gives me pleasure whenever I am depressed... From these programs, I get to learn of the injustice that children face in our community and how I can defend them.*
>
> —In-school female, 18, Mwanza

Figure 14: In-school and out-of-school adolescents' ownership, access, and usage of phone/internet(%)

Perceptions of Discipline and Healthy Relationships

We also explored the role of discipline and punishment in adolescents' perceptions of healthy relationships. Findings from both the survey and the qualitative perspectives indicate that there are contradictory perceptions. Disciplinary norms tend to draw on local constructions

of generational power issues and age-based authority. Punishment is meted by a range of actors, including parents and caregivers, older siblings, and teachers as well as class prefects and other student leaders. **Corporal punishment** as a mechanism of punishing and disciplining young people is prevalent in the research communities, and caregivers and parents use their power to discipline/punish their children without listening to the children's side of the story. Teachers justified corporal punishment on the condition that all avenues for redress were exhausted with no impact. Even then, according to teachers, the punishment they normally gave was light and consistent with the fault and how many times the wrong was repeated. Though some adolescents also justified corporal punishments as a tool to transform their lives, they more often tell a very different story: "Things that make me unhappy are things that teachers do for me when I am at school. You tell them the truth about something…but they don't listen and instead punish you heavily not comparing the punishment with what the students have done" (In-school female, 16, Mwanza).

The survey indicated that corporal punishment has less effect on the behavior of children than commonly believed; it merely causes them to dislike the person who meted the punishment and can lead to negative relationships. Adolescents say that harsh punishment turns them into '*sugu*' (hardens them more): "It is a bad way because we get used to the punishments and we don't change. But if someone talks to you about it, it will hurt you more and you change (In-school, female, 12 Mwanza). Adolescents emphasized that they yearn to be listened to before they are punished or vilified for (perceptions) of mistakes: "My opinion about punishments is for us students to get less punishments and instead the teachers need to know the reason why you did the wrong thing before you are punished" (In-school male, 14, Mwanza).

Conclusion

The Tanzanian research has revealed that adolescents generally experience healthy relationships with their mothers because of their perceived proximity to their children as well as their nurturing role. But young people are often supported by other people around them including grandparents, aunties, uncles, and stepparents. Each of these relationships is significant to adolescents, although they are not always positive. Young people also consider relationships with their siblings to be important, especially where a sibling is a primary caregiver. There is a need to build capacity of older siblings where parents have died or separated. The event of death itself is difficult, and children need psycho-social support. Teachers have emerged as important in nurturing healthy relationships and acting as surrogate caregivers.

Home has emerged as a contradictory space where young people feel welcome and safe but can also be a threatening space due to abusive relationships. Adolescents made it clear that sexual violence is happening and that they know their abusers—but because of circumstances surrounding care arrangements and family relationships, they find it hard to report abuse, and to have it addressed. So they feel they have no other choice but to acquiesce and figure out how to live with it. This is leading to a normalization of child sexual abuse.

Peers play an important role in enhancing positive relationships in their families, communities, and schools. This is especially so for in-school youth who see school as a site where they can enhance a sense of camaraderie with peers. However, for out-of-school youth who lack positive networks in the community, they often feel the sting of being perceived in a homogeneously negative way. Much of the problems pinpointed by the research can be overcome through constructive intergenerational dialogue.

Overall, the study has yielded some very rich data. We have only scratched the surface in this report, in order to give a broad overview of the findings most relevant to Oak's programming focus. However, the research team intends to continue to mine the data with a view to not only publish more detailed findings but also identify areas for more focused, in-depth research and advocacy.

The Transformative Impacts of Youth Participatory Research

Impact of the Process on the Youth Peer Researchers

Our youth peer researchers (YPRs) changed and grew during the process through active participation.

Figure 15: YPRs work with each other and local researchers to co-create knowledge on adolescents' perceptions of healthy relationships.

In Bulgaria, young people learned how to cooperate better. In the beginning, it was a challenge for many of the YPRs to listen to each other and to respect other people's views. Some of them were friends and were initially not ready to cooperate with other people from the group. But during the process, they learned how to convey opinions in a more empathetic way, also allowing others to convince them (Figure 15).

We also observed differences in the way boys and girls interacted with each other. In one group in Sofia, for example, there was only one boy in the team. The girls learned how to create space for him to speak out and learned to listen to him and his perspectives. In another group of YPRs, it was a challenge for them to formulate questions, but boys and girls, who might have been discouraged from interaction in the broader society, were tasked with working together to come up with quality question sets. We observed gradual changes in the ways they related to each other, with less hesitance and greater respect. In this way, we can say that youth participatory research can already start to transform gender attitudes amongst adolescents through cooperation to reach a certain goal.

In addition, it could be a challenge for the project team to encourage YPRs and keep them motivated. But in the process the YPRs learned how to support each other. Many of them initially had low self-esteem. During the process we could see how their self-confidence increased because they were supported by their peers and the Circles of Support team to develop skills and share opinions. Many YPRs felt unsure at first, but after the first project phase, they were very proud of themselves because they had collected the data faster than had been expected. The YPRs also learned how to cope with negative reactions of respondents, how to deal with that in a positive manner, which will help them in other situations, as well.

> *"There was a situation in which the parents refused to let their children participate in our survey. We had to communicate with those parents and explain why we want to interview their kids."*
> —Jasmina, 17, Sofia

There was a particularly moving example of transformation in Tanzania. In our first YPR workshop in Mwanza, we met Remi, a 14-year-old out-of-school recruit. She seemed very hesitant to join in and was almost mortified when we asked her to share. Over the course of

the day, we came to realize that this was not because she was disinterested—quite the opposite—but because she could not read or write. At first, some members of the team doubted she could succeed, but Remi insisted she wanted to be involved. She brought a friend the next day to help her participate and promised to improve her reading and writing in order to enable her to continue to be involved in the project—which she did.

Christine was the friend whom Remi brought with her the next day. Christine enjoyed it so much that she asked to participate as a YPR in her own right. Over the project's two years, Christine became an excellent researcher and even improved her vocal skills, which she then used at home to effect positive change. She even gained the confidence to talk to her parents: they had lived together for years without wedding, but she convinced them to formalize their marriage. She also helped grow her mother's business (a vegetable kiosk) and took it over when her mother fell ill. Unfortunately, Christine's eventually mother passed away, but her father is confident that the business is in good hands with Christine. The rest of the local YPR team supported and comforted her at the funeral.

Both Remi and Christine would like to continue as youth peer advocates in the next phase. In fact, we lost no Tanzanian YPRs during the study, except for one whose family moved. In describing their journeys in the last workshop, the Tanzanian YPRs drew bumpy roads (challenges), hills (achievement), and trees bearing the fruits of their labors. But they also described gaining confidence and authority with each new challenge met, and they are eager to carry forward their new skills.

Impact of the Process on the Supervisors

> "I am so proud of our YPRs. They have changed so much during the process. Now they are able to learn from each other. I am impressed by the questions they formulated and explored in depth."
>
> —Anna, supervisor, Sofia

We believe that the supervisors also learned a lot about research and youth participation from this project. More importantly, the supervisors changed the way they perceived young people and their ability to do research. In many cases, it was more challenging for us to convince adults that young people are able to create research tools and collect data. Because of such beliefs, some of the supervisors as professionals found it challenging to create a space for active YPR participation. But the local researchers supported the supervisors with regular meetings and remote contact in order to be aware of the challenges they faced during the process. In Tanzania, our supervisors from CEREDEV also found the process transformative, not only of the young people but of their own perceptions of adolescents. Some had never heard of youth participatory research and were thus pessimistic about its efficacy in the beginning. But as they engaged in the process, they came to see just how capable the YPRs were to conduct peer research. They were impressed, and their respect for the YPRs grew.

Although the international and local researchers facilitated the workshops with YPRs, we also encouraged the supervisors to participate and give inputs. They eventually felt more confident to share opinions during the workshops or even to facilitate warming-up activities

with the YPRs. They were also able to recognize the changes in YPRs and their behavior. In Bulgaria, the project encouraged them to lobby the school management for follow-up activities to help disseminate the study results at the school level. In Tanzania, the supervisory team grew because more and more CEREDEV staff got interested and also wanted to work on the project in order to learn to facilitate youth participatory research. It stretched the budget, but some insisted they would work *pro bono* in order to continue to be involved. In this sense, youth participatory research builds the capacity of multiple stakeholders—not just the young participants.

Impact of the Process on the Local Researchers and Organizations

> "YPRs inspired me to explore new horizons in terms of youth participation and research. I was being challenged to reflect on and analyze our shared experiences. I was able to create space where they felt confident to discuss meaningful and important questions."
>
> —Kristina Nenova,
> Bulgaria lead researcher

Finally, the local researchers and their organizations also grew and changed during this journey. In Bulgaria, Animus, as an organization working with children and youth, tried to lobby for children to enhance their participation on topics which they find important and meaningful. The project allowed them to hear so much more diverse adolescent voices and to gather ample data about young people's understandings of healthy relationships in various settings. They challenged themselves to constantly analyze the process and to use individualized approaches in order to maintain young people's curiosity and motivation. The techniques and methods they used with YPRs were based on the input young people made during the meetings. Many of the data collection exercises were also co-designed or revised by young people during research workshops. According to Kristina Nenova, Bulgaria lead researcher, "This is the highest level of involvement of young people that we have achieved for such a long period of time."

In Tanzania, the research undertaken by young people emerged as self-empowering, but it was also empowering to others who participated in the research. Even researchers who had previous experience with participatory research with young people were surprised by what they learned. Annah Kamusiime, the lead local researcher for Tanzania, said she learned a lot from the young people. "Up to now, the thing that really touches me is that we actually tried to chase Remi [see her story p. 32] away on the assumption that someone who had never been to school could not do research. But she wouldn't let us; she insisted on staying, and she was willing to learn to read and write for the sake of the project—and she actually did. She proved us wrong, and it was amazing." From this, Annah learned to continually challenge even her own prejudices and assumptions about young people.

> "We have to reconsider the rationale of only having literacy as a requirement for participation. Perhaps interest and motivation are more key."
>
> —Annah Kamusiime,
> Tanzania lead researcher

> "We often think advocacy follows research, and that transformation can only come after advocacy. But our YPRs have shown us that research IS already advocacy; it IS already transformation. Participatory research with young people, if done well, already models healthy relationships."
>
> —Kristen Cheney, APHR project leader

It could be challenging at times to maintain a safe space for youth participation and co-creation of knowledge—particularly as we also had a strong instinct to protect adolescents—but we all grew as a team in the effort to give youth a voice and maintain the space for them to share their perspectives, including dissention. We recommend that modalities ensuring that this dialogue on healthy relationships continues be put in place in homes, schools, and communities—but also in our own research and advocacy practices.

The Healthy Relationships Model: a better conceptualization for interventions with adolescents

This process of working closely with adolescents in a research environment to co-produce knowledge has pushed us to constantly reflect on healthy intergenerational relationships within the project itself, and on how to model them in order to continually create and maintain spaces for quality engagement with adolescents. We are therefore able to define and promote our Healthy Relationships model of working with adolescents in policy-relevant research and advocacy. The model is one not only of co-creation but of individual and collective transformation.

Over the course of the one-year advocacy campaign described above, the project partners will continue to develop and refine our Healthy Relationships model of working with adolescents, begun during the research process and aimed at generating more constructive engagements between various stakeholders and young people in other spheres, such as advocacy, policy conceptualization, and decision-making.

Our Healthy Relationships model is based on our philosophy that foregrounds young people's perspectives, voices and actions in research, programs, and policy. In our adolescent-centered Healthy Relationships model, we view advocacy as a continuous process that starts with the conceptualization of a project and is an ongoing conversation throughout—and beyond—the process. Quite simply, in order to advocate for healthy relationships, we have to model them in our own interactions with young

Figure 16: YPRs and supervisors in Mwanza participate in an energizer together during a research workshop

people (Figure 16). This allows for the intergenerational dialogue necessary for transformation of relationships, emphasizing positive deviance rather than negative or pathological perspectives placed on adolescents. We therefore wish to share the practical applications of the above described processes of working with YPRs, in order to increase public awareness of adolescents' perspectives as well as engender opportunities for transformation of intergenerational relationships in more positive and healthy directions.

Parallel to focusing on the research findings, the partner organizations will co-produce various tools that detail the transformative process and outcomes of our innovative methods of conducting participatory research and advocacy with young people. These materials will include academic publications, practitioner toolkits, conference presentations, and media campaigns directed at stakeholders on various geographic and policy levels.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Many of the findings have implications for Oak's new strategic planning, both directly and indirectly. The below recommendations, also compiled in cooperation with the YPRs, speak to Oak's goals to: (1) promote, advance and scale up solutions to reduce child sexual abuse; and (2) engage with and hold global institutions accountable to prevent abuse and to end impunity for child sexual abuse.

Bulgaria

There are interesting conclusions to be drawn from the findings which could be used for the advocacy phase of the project:

- **Sexual education:** young people want to lobby local and national authorities for more comprehensive sexual education in schools and communities;
- **Violence at school:** young people can promote new ways of addressing violence. Enhancing effective communication between peers on topics such as hate speech, (cyber)bullying, coping with negative feelings (anger, envy, sadness) and conflict situations in order to stimulate conflict resolution and prevent acting out;
- **Promoting equality and equity:** advocating for equality in (intimate) relationships, combatting (gender) stereotypes, and addressing sexual diversity and dominance amongst young people;
- **Participation:** advocating for more space for young people in schools and other settings to develop and express their opinions and influence decision making.

The research phase was very broad, but in the advocacy phase it is important that the YPAs narrow their projects down to a few specific topics and transform their findings and ideas into concrete actions. The techniques that the YPAs will use for advocacy should be simple and realistic.

In their last research workshop, the YPRs came up with a few possible ideas on how shape their advocacy efforts, such as:

- small follow-up research projects;
- presenting the findings to other students/teachers/parents/other stakeholders;
- doing interviews on homosexuality, for example at the Gay Pride parade;
- making videos to raise awareness;
- writing about the findings in, for example, articles or blogs;
- discussing the topics among peers (advocacy meetings);
- alternative ways to provide sex education to peers (outside of the school), while lobbying for an in-school curriculum.

The YPRs participating in the advocacy phase will start working on an advocacy plan to define what specifically they want to address and who they want to reach, how to make that happen, and what support they would need. Several YPRs already showed interest in participating in the next phase of the project. However, to create a bigger group, it could be necessary to include other young people, such as some of the young respondents that participated in the research and who showed interest in the research findings.

Tanzania

In building the self-efficacy of young people to engender healthier relationships, the positive aspects of adolescence should be highlighted and appreciated while social norms that misrepresent youth—especially those out of school—should be challenged. Building on positive relationships for in-school youth would enhance them. Fundamentally, structural issues like lack of education, unemployment, and early parenthood need to be tackled, as well as adults' negative judgements of adolescents based on these circumstances. The creation of self-help groups as well as other positive spaces would provide a space for healthy peer relationships for out-of-school youth. Use of mobile apps that enhance their networks would be a possible route.

Building on the capacity of mothers to provide a nurturing role would be an important intervention. Building the capacity of the fathers to provide for their children as well as enhancing their skills in psycho-social support is important.

Children in abusive relationships not only need to be protected by government authorities, but their capacity should be enhanced to enable them to **identify and report abuse**. This means that networks of care also need to be sensitized to the harms of sexual abuse and build their capacity to respond. This requires targeting interventions at both the culture of impunity around—and the conditions that create dependence on—potential sexual abusers. Starting with this generation of boys and girls, we can change gender attitudes that currently create a climate of tolerance for sexual abuse and transactional sex. There is also a need for broader **community dialogue and conscientization** on how the community can collectively support and protect children in situations of sexual abuse.

We recommend **enhancing the capacity of schools** to play a more nurturing role for adolescents. This might mean building a process of identification of signals for unhealthy relationships at home, at school, or with significant others. We also need to establish modalities for safe reporting by abused children.

Interventions that **enhance positive relationships at home** would lead to better relationships in other spheres. This could be done by enhancing the economic capacity of caregivers as well as their capacities to communicate more openly and effectively with adolescents. Caregivers in communities can be supported to regularly hold dialogues on how to listen to adolescents, avoid corporal punishment, and create community mechanisms for child protection from physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.

Advocacy for Transformation

With the approval of our regrant application, the team hopes to apply the above recommendations based on the 2017-19 youth participatory research project exploring adolescents' perceptions of healthy relationships in Tanzania and Bulgaria to design and implement youth-centered advocacy and dissemination activities. The advocacy activities will be aimed at getting broader buy-in of the findings at local, national, and global levels.

By the end of the advocacy campaign, our youth peer advocates (YPAs—many of them former YPRs) will have designed and implemented an advocacy plan based on their own research findings. Using the Healthy Relationships model developed in their training, YPAs will have informed the broader community of their research findings and engaged them in discussion about the findings' implications. Through intergenerational dialogue, they will co-create innovative and context-specific solutions for engendering more healthy relationships for the betterment of child protection and empowerment.

The study and advocacy campaign will assist the Oak Foundation in the following areas:

- Generate knowledge on young people's perceptions of healthy relationships to inform strategy for the Prevent Child Sexual Abuse Program
- Prompt reflection around current programming of work with adolescents by various actors such as practitioners, policy makers and researchers from different sectors (ASRH, child protection, GBV, livelihood strengthening, etc.) and inform the development of new work, challenging or affirming existing approaches through the Healthy Relationships model
- Provide young people's input on solutions, innovations, and accelerated strategies for tackling child sexual abuse prevention

Finally, we wish to thank Oak Foundation for the opportunity to conduct this study. This project has been very rewarding and transforming of all of us involved at every level of the Circles of Support. However, none of it would have been possible without Oak's vision, support, and understanding of the importance of amplifying young people's perspectives in their work. This has energized us to now carry the task forward into advocating for more youth participatory research as well as the development of adolescents' capacities for (self)advocacy. We equally look forward to working with Oak to continue to privilege young people's perspectives, and to address the challenges they face, together.

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