MORE THAN A GAME: SOCCER-BASED HEALTH PROGRAMMING FOR ADOLESCENT BOYS AND YOUNG MEN

Playing soccer, shooting pool, and drinking at the tavern – that is how many young men spend their free time. Despite facing many health challenges, young men tend to not go to clinics, contemplate their long-term health, or consider the harmful gender norms that leave them sick, unhappy and struggling to form healthy connections with the people who matter most to them. Adolescent boys and young men (ABYM) need effective interventions to improve their health, transform gender norms, and end sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV), but they are difficult to reach.

Harmful gender norms drive poor health-seeking behaviors and outcomes for ABYM, violence against women and girls, and men’s power over women in relationships. Adolescents with inequitable gender beliefs are more likely to have early sex, unsafe sex, and STIs, and their relationships are more likely to involve intimate partner violence. Men who adhere to dominant masculine norms have worse mental health and general well-being and are more likely to avoid health care clinics.

Adolescent boys and young men have diverse needs, interests, beliefs and unique barriers to accessing health services. Effective programming engages with the complex influences shaping their attitudes, decisions and behaviors; resonates with their lifestyles, identities and life stages; reaches them in spaces they already use; creates positive associations with health services; and sees men and boys as potential agents for positive change rather than viewing them as “the problem”. Grassroot Soccer harnesses the power of soccer to engage young men through a medium they know and love. Over 1.2M adolescent boys and young men have graduated from our programs and show improved knowledge of key protective behaviors for HIV, knowledge of, demand for, and uptake of local sexual and reproductive health services, and have more equitable gender beliefs.

GRS’s work engaging ABYM was showcased in UNAIDS’ 2017 World AIDS Day Report “Addressing a blind spot in the response to HIV — Reaching out to men and boys” and GRS is an active member of the Interagency Gender Working Group’s Male Engagement Taskforce, sponsored by USAID and co-chaired by the Population Council, Institute for Reproductive Health at Georgetown, and Jhpiego.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR WORKING WITH ADOLESCENT BOYS AND YOUNG MEN

Grassroot Soccer’s approach to working with adolescent boys and young men emphasizes five principles:

**USE SOCCER AS A HOOK AND PLATFORM**

Soccer is the world’s most universal interest. Roughly 3.5 billion people identify themselves as soccer fans.

**TRAIN MALE MENTORS WHO SHOW ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF BEING**

Trusted and relatable messengers, mentors, and role models are key to motivating ABYM—and the qualities of effective male mentors can be LEARNED.

**CREATE POSITIVE EXPERIENCES WITH HEALTH SYSTEM IN NON-CLINICAL SETTINGS**

ABYM benefit from opportunities to reflect and ACT. We bridge connections to the health system and help both providers and ABYM connect and increase uptake of health services (VMMC, HTS, Care and Treatment).

**DESIGN FOR NON-TRADITIONAL CHAMPIONS**

We design materials and programs that work for diverse and often unconventional educators (e.g. soccer coaches) to bring about large-scale change.

**TRANSFORM GENDER NORMS**

We use a gender-transformative approach, with intentional designs for engaging both men and women, boys and girls in single- and mixed-sex programming.
PROGRAM AREA 1: TRANSFORMING GENDER NORMS AMONGST ADOLESCENT BOYS

Grassroot Soccer’s trained male mentors (“Coaches”) deliver programs for adolescent boys to understand the impact of harmful gender norms, and collectively construct healthy norms and identities during the critical transition to adulthood. Our programs are gender-transformative: mentors challenge toxic notions of masculinity promoted in soccer spaces and culture, redefining the soccer pitch as a place where soccer, gender equality, and health are mutually reinforcing. Informed by our research findings and the literature on adolescent development, we take a life course approach, engaging very young adolescent boys aged 9-14 early on, to influence their attitudes, beliefs, and norms through mixed-sex programing before the worlds of boys and girls diverge during the onset of puberty.

In Nigeria, Grassroot Soccer and its local partner Youth Empowerment and Development Initiative (YEDI) designed an 11-session, soccer-based program for adolescent boys aged 12-18 (“SKILLZ Guyz”) that facilitates discussions on masculinity, gender equality, sexual health, violence, and substance use. An external evaluation of the program in 2018 indicated that starting conversations around anger management and masculinity appears to be an effective entry into changing ABYM knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors, particularly related to gender equality and violence against female partners. The evaluation found statistically significant improvements in gender equitable attitudes of SKILLZ Guyz participants and indicated the intervention is effective among both in-school and out-of-school ABYM. SKILLZ Guyz has been scaled up in 11 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa since its development in Nigeria in 2017, with over 31,000 ABYM beneficiaries to date.

“I had two girlfriends before SKILLZ came to our school. I was into a sexual relationship with the two. Having two girls was so prestigious and made me a jack of all trades at the campus. I felt like a king in other ways. After SKILLZ, I have learnt that having more than one sexual partner increases the risk of HIV transmission. I have since dropped all the two and refocused my vision to school, for education indeed is the key to success. The risk of having two partners would easily have landed me into STIs and possibly to be a father at a tender age. I do not think school would be so dear again if I was to be a father. “Risk factor,” a topic in one of the practices, helped me change my way of living. I am ready to go for an HIV test for that is where my future begins.”

– SKILLZ Guz Participant, Nigeria

PROGRAM AREA 2: EMPOWERING YOUNG MEN TO LIVE HEALTHY OFF THE PITCH

Grassroot Soccer uses semi-structured discussions to create opportunities for dialogue about gender, health, and health services. Soccer-based events use positive peer pressure and provide mobile, on-site, and integrated health screenings to reduce stigma, normalize service utilization, and drive the uptake of high impact services, including biomedical HIV prevention (VMMC and condoms), HIV care and treatment across the 95-95-95 clinical cascade (HIV testing services, antiretroviral treatment, and adherence support), TB screening, mental health and psychosocial support, and substance misuse counseling and support.

“Make the Cut” is a single, 60-90-minute session designed to generate demand for VMMC and condoms and link ABYM aged 15-29 to VMMC service providers. The intervention was awarded Best-in-Class for HIV Prevention Demand Creation Demonstrated Impact by the USAID OPTIONS Consortium at the International AIDS Conference in 2018, and has been highlighted by UNAIDS and PEPFAR as a priority intervention. Since its development and evaluation through two randomized controlled trials (RCT) in Zimbabwe in 2012, the program has been scaled up to eight VMMC priority countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.
Coach-participant connectedness is central to our work: multiple studies on Grassroot Soccer programs have found that the coach-participant relationship is highly valued, directly contributes to learning, and shapes actions among adolescents and male coaches. Trained and effective coaches are a prerequisite for successful programs. Grassroot Soccer delivers differentiated male coach/educator trainings; creates user-friendly manuals for them to communicate men’s health messages; and provides ongoing support through routine visits and personalized feedback.

Grassroot Soccer and the South African Football Association (SAFA) have designed a 5-day coaching course and simplified sexual and reproductive health, gender, and HIV-prevention curriculum that soccer coaches deliver to their teams on the soccer pitch. The training provides soccer coaches with applicable adolescent-friendly teaching concepts and techniques and fun, educational games to use seamlessly during their soccer practices. With the support of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and PEPFAR, Grassroot Soccer has since built on this partnership to deliver a single-session evidence-based intervention on SGBV, VMMC, condoms, and HIV testing services to young men aged 20-29 through local football associations in South Africa.

With a range of research partners, GRS has conducted seven evaluations focused on its work with ABYM specifically, including two completed RCTs.

**KEY FINDINGS FROM STUDIES FOCUSED ON ABYM: % CHANGE FROM BASELINE TO ENDLINE**

- Know that unequal power in relationships can contribute to the spread of HIV: Baseline 57%, Endline 83%
- Know that males can get HPV: Baseline 48%, Endline 78%
- Willing to take a drug test: Baseline 59%, Endline 80%
- Know that drinking alcohol can increase HIV risk: Baseline 57%, Endline 89%
- Agree with equal decision-making between partners in a relationship: Baseline 50%, Endline 80%
- Communicated with a friend about HIV: Baseline 44%, Endline 67%

*Statistically significant results
ABOUT US
Grassroot Soccer is an adolescent health organization that leverages the power of soccer to educate, inspire, and mobilize at-risk youth in developing countries to overcome their greatest health challenges, live healthier, more productive lives, and be agents for change in their communities. Grassroot Soccer has implemented health programs for 2.7 million adolescents in 62 countries.

CONTACT
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RESEARCH AND IMPACT

ADDITIONAL EXTERNALLY EVALUATED ABYM FINDINGS

VMMC uptake among Make The Cut participants aged 14-19 was 2.5X higher than peers in a control group.

VMMC uptake among men aged 18-45 was 9X higher than those in the control group after Make The Cut.

The proportion of positive drug tests decreased 12% among unemployed young men and 29% (to 0%) among boys during Champions League (an all-male GRS program encouraging healthy behavior and social accountability).

SKILLZ Guyz participants showed a 18% increase in pregnancy and contraceptive knowledge over the course of the intervention.

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS FROM KEY ABYM PROJECTS

"[It] addresses more on violence and abuse because boys indulge more in such risky practices. It was designed [...] for boys alone which offer safer space for them to open up and disclose matters, unlike in mixed gender curricula whereby boys hardly open up due to their female counterparts, female coach, or both."

- SKILLZ Guyz Master Coach, Nigeria

"[SKILLZ] has changed [my son]. People respect him now and they can see that he is different from other kids. Some parents come to my house looking for him. They do not even know him but they say they heard that he is able to solve problems because he is part of Grassroot Soccer. He has really changed. He is willing to go to someone else's house and make positive change."

- Champions League Participant's Parent, South Africa

"A girl can make a fixed decision for example if you are making attempts to have sex with her, she can stand firm and say 'I meant what I said, I do not want to have sex', or, 'I am not ready.' At the end of the day, you will have to accept her decisions because she made the decision for a reason."

- Grade 10 SKILLZ Boy Participant, Sexual Violence in Schools in South Africa Project