Adolescence is a time of high risk for girls who face unique risks that can jeopardize their health. Gender inequality, violence, economic exclusion, and a lack of access to education are just some of the compounding factors that threaten the potential of adolescent girls and young women (AGYW). Among other poor health outcomes, including gender-based violence and unintended pregnancy, adolescent girls are 8x more likely to contract HIV than their male peers. Furthermore, nearly 70% of AGYW in sub-Saharan Africa need contraceptives but are not using a modern contraceptive method, contributing to high rates of pregnancies, of which nearly half are unplanned (Ameyaw, et al., 2019; AVERT, 2019).

Combined with the transformative power of soccer and play-based learning, Grassroot Soccer (GRS) is working to change the game for AGYW around the world. The GRS approach takes gender, power dynamics, and the complex influences and structural factors shaping the life of a girl into account. At the core of it all are GRS’s female near-peer mentor COACHES, who create a safe space for AGYW to learn and improve their health and life skills ASSETS, including their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) knowledge and self-confidence to use it, facilitate ACCESS to youth-friendly health and social services, and promote ADHERENCE to biomedical treatment and healthy behaviors.

To date, over 1.5M AGYW have benefited from GRS programs globally – accounting for 56% of GRS SKILLZ programming beneficiaries.

**REALIZING THE DREAM OF A HEALTHIER FUTURE FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN**

**GRASSROOT SOCCER**

**DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR WORKING WITH ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN**

Grassroot Soccer’s approach to working with adolescent girls and young women emphasizes eight principles:

- **Girl-Centered Design**: From program/curriculum design to implementation to evaluation, we put girls at the center. We engage AGYW as decision makers in developing solutions that are age-specific and tailored to their own needs. We amplify the voices of AGYW by training girls as change agents and advocates through youth-led participatory action research.

- **Reaching the Most Vulnerable AGYW**: Vulnerability and Risk Screening allows us to ensure our programs reach the most vulnerable AGYW and respond to their unique risk factors.

- **Gender-Transformative Power of Soccer**: Through participation in sport-based health activities, AGYW have fun and challenge harmful gender norms on the field and in their communities.

- **Creating Safe Spaces**: Our Coaches act as caring near-peer mentors and provide physical and emotional safe spaces for AGYW to engage in sensitive conversations.

- **Fostering Agency and Leadership Through Social Asset Building**: SKILLZ builds on the assets girls already have. Using Positive Youth Development principles, girls employ their agency to act and become leaders in their peer networks and communities.

- **Expanding Access to Youth-Friendly SRHR Services**: We give AGYW youth-friendly touchpoints along their SRHR journeys through Adolescent-Friendly Corners at facilities. Coaches trained as Youth SRHR Assistants, and on-the-job mentorship/capacity building to clinical providers.

- **Layering Multi-Sectoral Services**: We address the social determinants of health by providing AGYW with linkages to layered economic empowerment, education, child protection, and other social services.

- **Creating an Enabling Environment for AGYW**: We engage with parents/caregivers, families, adolescent boys and young men, community gatekeepers, and government institutions to challenge structural barriers and create an enabling environment for improved AGYW health and well-being.
With a range of research partners, GRS has conducted 14 evaluations focused on its work with AGYW specifically, including one completed and two ongoing randomized controlled trials (RCTs).

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

![Graph showing changes from baseline to endline for various key findings.]

*statistically significant results

**PROGRAM AREAS**

**PROGRAM AREA 1: EMPOWERING AGYW WITH HEALTH AND LIFE SKILLS ASSETS**

GRS programs reflect the needs, interests, and behaviors of AGYW (aged 10-24) while strengthening their SRHR and life skills assets. Over the course of 10-12 sessions, our single-sex, age-segmented programs are delivered by female Coaches (aged 18-35) who create a safe space to mentor and engage young females in relevant discussions about HIV prevention (HTS, PrEP, condoms), risk reduction, FP/RH, SGBV, substance misuse, and help AGYW navigate health services through facilitated linkages.

SKILLZ combines soccer language, metaphors, and activities for AGYW to enable reflections and meaningful discussions around gender norms, goal setting and achievement, and peer support. The program has been employed as an evidence-based social asset building intervention on PEPFAR’s DREAMS HIV prevention initiative for AGYW in both South Africa and Zimbabwe.

“I TELL MY FRIENDS MESSAGES FROM OUR COACHES, LIKE HOW TO BEHAVE, HOW TO PREVENT YOURSELF FROM GETTING HIV AND OTHER DISEASES, AND HOW TO TREAT OTHER PEOPLE. WE MUST TREAT EACH OTHER EQUALLY AND LOVE EACH OTHER LIKE WE LOVE OURSELVES. I THINK ALL YOUNG GIRLS SHOULD BE PART OF THE GRASSROOT SOCCER PROGRAMS SO AS TO LEARN ABOUT THESE TOPICS IN A FUN AND SAFE WAY.”

– SKILLZ GIRL PARTICIPANT, SOUTH AFRICA
PROGRAM AREA 2: EXPANDING ACCESS TO YOUTH-FRIENDLY SRHR SERVICES

GRS collaborates with trusted clinical partners to expand SRHR service quality and accessibility while promoting youth-friendly and youth-led approaches and innovative recruitment strategies for AGYW. Through training and on-the-job mentorship aligned to WHO Global Quality Standards, GRS promotes youth-friendly service provision among providers by equipping them with the necessary soft skills to create non-judgmental, trusted, and safe spaces to encourage AGYW to discuss and reflect on the social and emotional factors driving their relationship choices and sexual behaviors. GRS places Coaches to manage youth-friendly corners at partner facilities – and adolescents frequently note the importance of having a “friendly face in an unfamiliar place” when accessing services.

In Malawi, GRS Coaches were trained as Youth Reproductive Health Assistants to provide support to youth-friendly corners to strengthen contraception access and uptake for local youth and provide referrals for youth-friendly health services. Program data showed this approach increased uptake of SRHR services by adolescents ages 12-18, including increased use of contraception, HIV testing, and averted teen pregnancies. GRS has adapted this model in Zimbabwe in partnership with the Zimbabwe National Family Planning Council to expand access to youth-friendly SRHR services for AGYW.

PROGRAM AREA 3: SUPPORTING REPEAT UPTAKE OF SERVICES

To ensure long-term engagement with AGYW, GRS supports SKILLZ graduates through differentiated longitudinal programming focused on repeat service uptake and adherence to protective behaviors. Delivered at schools, in communities, and on-site at health clinics, SKILLZ Teen Clubs are designed to: support long-term adherence to protective behaviors; promote repeat uptake of SRHR services including modern contraception, HIV testing, and PrEP; and support adherence to ART, retention in care, and mental well-being for AGYW living with HIV.

"I ALSO OPENED UP TO MY COACH WHEN SHE TOOK ME THROUGH THE RISK ASSESSMENT SESSION, THAT I NEEDED EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE. I WAS REFERRED TO ONE OF THEIR PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS AND I AM VERY MUCH HOPEFUL THAT I WILL BE ASSISTED AND ACHIEVE MY GOALS IN LIFE."

– SKILLZ PARTICIPANT, ZIMBABWE
Embedded within a socio-ecological framework, we address factors interacting at multiple levels – individual, relationship, community, and societal – that put AGYW at heightened risk of SGBV, HIV, child marriage, pregnancy, and other adverse outcomes. This includes employing mixed- and single-sex programs for male peers or sexual partners of AGYW, home visits to engage siblings, parents, and guardians, and community dialogues and gender norms change activities with gatekeepers. Beyond mitigating risk factors, we actively engage key influencers in the life of a girl as positive champions for AGYW rights, health, and well-being.

“WE PLAYED A GAME CALLED ‘SOCCER EQUALITY’ AND THAT FURTHER OPENED MY EYES TO GENDER EQUALITY. NOW, I'M A VERY GOOD BOY AT HOME; IF YOU SEE MY MOTHER AND SISTER, ASK THEM. I'M A CHANGED PERSON RIGHT NOW.”

- SKILLZ GUYZ PARTICIPANT, NIGERIA

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
For partnership inquiries or for more information on our work with AGYW please contact:
innovations@grassrootsoccer.org
www.grassrootsoccer.org