

EMPOWERING BOYS AND YOUNG MEN TO LEAD HEALTHY LIVES: SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY OF VOLUNTARY MEDICAL MALE CIRCUMCISION

YOUTH ADVOCACY BRIEF

In 2015, approximately 350 000 new HIV infections occurred among young people aged 15–24 years in eastern and southern Africa. Two thirds of these (68%) occurred among young women. Over the past few years, the increasing HIV incidence among young women in the eastern and southern African region has led to the development of new programmes aimed at preventing the spread of HIV in this group. These prevention efforts are urgent, however, they cannot be targeted at girls and young women alone. Involving adolescent boys and young men in sexual and reproductive health (SRH) interventions is critical for HIV prevention and for the wellbeing of *all adolescents*.

In eastern and southern Africa, health services have traditionally been oriented towards women and children, with SRH viewed as a women's issue. As a result, adolescent boys and young men typically have minimal contact with health services or SRH education – often leaving them in the dark about their responsibility for healthy sexual behaviour or their role in creating positive sexual and romantic relationships. This plays a part in the perpetuation of harmful gender norms, and is damaging to both young women and men. Adolescent boys and young men are a diverse group with different needs and vulnerabilities. In addition to poor

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access to medical care, this group may experience harsh or abusive punishment, sexual assault, bullying, peer pressure to use violence, depression, substance use and hazardous work conditions.

Voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC) is one of the most powerful and cost-effective HIV prevention options currently available, and offers an opportunity to integrate boys and young men back into the healthcare system. VMMC reduces the risk of heterosexually acquired HIV infection in boys and men by approximately 60%. Since the rollout of VMMC programmes in 2008, more than 14 million adolescent boys and men have been circumcised, half of whom were aged 10–19 years.

VMMC has become highly accepted by many communities in the eastern and southern African region, especially among parents, who view it as a safe and easy way to protect a boy's health and also associate it with a rite of passage to adulthood. Boys who engage with VMMC programmes can also be linked with and integrated into other HIV and SRH services and provided with relevant information. Adolescence is a stage of life when young people

form opinions and ideas that they carry into adulthood; research indicates that health behaviours developed during adolescence impact a person's health throughout his/her life. Therefore, adolescence is the right time to positively influence the health seeking behaviours of boys and young men, and to transform gender roles and promote gender-equitable relationships.

The 2016 WHO/UNAIDS Framework for VMMC, Effective HIV Prevention and a Gateway to Improved Adolescent Boys' & Men's Health in Eastern and Southern Africa by 2021 sets out a people-centred approach to VMMC service delivery that tailors services to individuals in different age groups and risk profiles. Reaching adolescent and young men is a main focus of the new framework, which outlines essential service packages for young adolescent boys (10–14 years), older adolescents (15–19 years) and young adult men (20–29 years). In March 2017, key stakeholders from 15 (as South Sudan has been added) priority countries for the scale-up of VMMC in eastern and southern Africa met to discuss the implementation of this new framework. Fourteen youth advocates from across the region attended. In addition to contributing their perspectives throughout the meeting, they also developed key advocacy messages aimed at encouraging policy-makers and implementers to pay more attention to adolescent boys within the HIV response, including in the context of VMMC and SRH programmes.

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The following advocacy messages are intended for youth organizations, activists and allies to use at the country and international levels to inform conversations with policy-makers, healthcare providers and other advocacy targets.

Overall messages

- Adolescent boys and young men are a diverse group, with different needs and vulnerabilities.
- Reaching boys during adolescence is crucial in order to challenge harmful concepts of masculinity that perpetuate gender inequalities and gender-based violence.
- It is urgent to increase HIV prevention efforts to address gender disparities; however, programmes cannot be targeted at girls and young women alone. Boys and young men have an equal role to play in preventing HIV transmission, yet currently few programmes involve or target them.
- Programmes that aim to lower HIV incidence among girls and young women must include specific components aimed at boys and young men, including (but not limited to): testing and treatment services for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections; the promotion of safer sex practices; the provision of male and female condoms and the promotion of their correct and consistent use; accurate sexuality education; VMMC; and activities to transform gender norms.
- Boys and young men can be advocates for expanding access to VMMC and other SRH services and raise awareness about these issues among their peers.
- Adolescent boys have a right to participate in decision-making about whether or not to get circumcised. **"Involve us from Day 1!"**

- Girls and young women can be mobilizers who engage their brothers, friends, boyfriends and sexual partners in VMMC and SRH services.
- VMMC is a critical entry point for opening up dialogue around SRH, gender dynamics and other critical issues. **"Let's get the conversation started!"**

Messages or the service provision

- Healthcare providers need skills and support to implement VMMC and SRH programmes that have different components depending on a client's age and development.
- VMMC and SRH programmes require collaboration between communities, young people, parents and healthcare workers. **"Everyone should be involved in the discussion!"**
- Depending on the local context, VMMC can draw on community traditions and become an integrated part of a symbolic transition from adolescence to adulthood.
- Youth-friendly health services place young people's agency and leadership at the centre of VMMC and SRH efforts, providing young people with opportunities to educate their peers, create demand and serve as community liaisons.
- All VMMC and SRH services should be provided in the context of quality youth-friendly health services that are tailored to age and development. Youth-friendly health services include providers who are open and welcoming. These services also give young people choices, including the ability to select their service provider.
- Health services should be flexible and seek to reach young people, including boys and young men, in convenient locations and at appropriate times, for example through mobile services, schools and youth centres.

- VMMC can never be a stand-alone intervention. It should always be accompanied by linkage and integration with other services, including: testing and treatment for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections; and the provision of behaviour change information, skills and counselling. VMMC reduces a male adolescent's risk of HIV, but it is only one step on a continuum of providing ongoing health services, information and skills for leading healthy lives.

Tips on getting the message out there

- Share the messages with fellow HIV and SRH youth advocates.
- Map out upcoming opportunities to share the messages in local, regional and international platforms such as ICASA.
- Consider existing and new potential channels to share the messages such as newsletters and list serves for HIV advocates.
- Create a social media campaign by sharing the different advocacy messages over a set timeframe. Remember to use AfriYAN and key organization hashtags and social media handles, for example @AfriYANBUzz #AfriYANESA #VMMC2021.
- Translate the messages into your local language.
- Use the message to guide content for presentations, speeches and media interviews.

For more information on AfriYAN visit www.youthleadglobal.org/afriyan

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