

# Meet Them Where They Are

Participatory  
Action  
Research with  
Adolescent  
Girls



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# Introduction

**B**eing young and female in many countries holds both peril and promise. Globally, girls and young women are more likely to be HIV-positive than their male peers, with females accounting for more than 60 percent of people between the ages of 15 and 24 living with HIV.<sup>1</sup> Girls are more vulnerable to HIV for a variety of reasons: some are forced to marry at a young age, often to much older men.<sup>2</sup> Some girls have multiple, concurrent partnerships. They engage in transactional sex, or they are subjected to coercive sex.<sup>3</sup> At the heart of these factors lies the reality that girls' lives are shaped by gender inequalities and norms that are harmful to their mental and physical well-being.<sup>4</sup>

But girls' lives and the proscribed roles to which they traditionally have been relegated can change. Around the world, researchers, development professionals and policy makers are learning that to protect and empower girls, programs must start with the girls themselves.<sup>5</sup> They must begin by understanding the vulnerabilities girls experience in their everyday environment – and then engage a variety of actors to respond to specific needs the girls identify.<sup>6</sup>

This type of approach – one that meets girls where they are in their lives – was the foundation for an innovative participatory action research pilot project conducted in Tanzania by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and Taasisi ya Maendeleo Shirikishi Arusha (TAMASHA). Funded by Viiv Healthcare's Positive Action program, the effort was carried out in partnership with Pact Tanzania and the Newala NGO Network.

The project *Vijana Tunaweza Newala* (or “*Vitu Newala*”), which translates as “Newala Youth Can,” took place in four rural, widely dispersed communities in Newala, one of the



least developed districts in Tanzania. While data from Newala are limited, the education and health infrastructure are believed to be among the weakest in the country. The school drop-out rate is high, and about 40 percent of girls do so because they are pregnant. Many girls head households and, as a result, are highly vulnerable to sexual exploitation by older men who offer to provide for their basic needs and those of their siblings.

What makes the approach that ICRW designed for *Vitu Newala* unique is that it does not treat adolescent girls as passive beneficiaries of a pre-packaged HIV prevention project. Instead, the project empowers girls to define their own needs, lead and interpret research on the issues that affect their lives, and educate their peers using activities that they developed. ICRW's experience also emphasizes the importance of building trustworthy, supportive relationships with vulnerable girls in order for interventions to be successful. ICRW recommends such an approach for programmers who aim to combat harmful gender norms and social influences that increase girls' vulnerabilities.



# Uncovering Girls' Realities

To understand girls' daily lives, ICRW and TAMASHA started with a round of participatory learning and action (PLA) exercises with 82 girls, ages 12 to 17, across four rural communities in Newala District. The PLA exercises, conducted in July and August 2010, were led by nine young women, 18 to 24 years old, who were chosen by their communities to be trained as Youth Researchers. In each community, the Youth Researchers carried out separate PLA exercises for younger girls (12 to 14 years) and older girls (15 to 17 years). See Box 1 for examples of PLA exercises.



## BOX 1: Examples of PLA Exercises Used with Girls

- Drawing of dreams and aspirations
- Discussion of obstacles to these dreams
- Voting on statements about gender roles and behaviors in the community
- Listing and ranking of perceived HIV-related risks
- Mapping of the dangerous areas in the community
- Identifying and prioritizing solutions for reducing these risks

Other members of the research team conducted interviews and group discussions with adults in each community – parents, community leaders, service providers – to find out their views about girls' vulnerabilities and how the community could safeguard girls' health and well-being. The formative research revealed that girls face numerous hazards in their environment. Among the vulnerabilities that the girls and community identified are:

- Pressure to have sex
- Forced sex and rape
- Few safe places
- Changes in family structure and community traditions
- Transactional sex
- Unintended pregnancy
- Lack of protectors and sources of support

### Pressure to have sex

Girls are expected by their peers and parents to refrain from having sex until they are adults, preferably until they are married. However, girls are confronted with contradictory expectations from the men in their communities, who constantly pressure them to have sex. As a result of these mixed messages, girls feel responsible for fending off men's advances while also not offending men by refusing too strongly:

**"If a man sees you outside, he'll approach you and ask you to go with him. Even if you say no, he'll ask every day and you have to find a way to refuse without making him angry."**

YOUNGER PLA PARTICIPANT

### Forced sex and rape

Girls and parents, village elders, religious leaders and service providers overwhelmingly identify coercive sex as a significant and persistent risk to girls. Because of constant pressure from boys and men to have sex, girls say they must ultimately decide between giving in or being raped:

**"If a boy wants you for sex, he will get you no matter how many times you say 'no' to him and try to avoid him every time you see him coming near. It doesn't matter if you don't want him, it matters that he wants you."**

OLDER PLA PARTICIPANT

### Few safe places

When girls mapped areas in Newala District where they are met with unwanted sexual advances and threats, they noted few places in their communities where they feel safe, regardless of the time of day. (See risk map right.) Girls are accosted on the way to school, to the water well,



to neighbors' houses and to the pharmacy. They are harassed by male passersby and neighbors, often in the form of catcalls, invasion of personal space and groping. Many girls even feel unsafe in their own homes. And they identify school as the single most dangerous place for them:

**"You go to school to learn from your teachers but it turns out that they don't want to teach you. Some of them just want to have sex with you."**

YOUNGER PLA PARTICIPANT



Parents fear and distrust the formal education system, stating that school is a place where their daughters constantly face sexual pressure from peers and teachers. While some parents expressed an appreciation of the value of education for their daughters, school is largely seen as a place where girls' futures get interrupted because of pregnancy:

**“The worst moment for a parent is when their daughters are selected to join secondary school. Most of the girls get pregnant before completing secondary school.”**

MOTHER, FGD

### **Changes in family structure and community traditions**

High levels of divorce, migration and adolescent pregnancy have altered families and compromised parents' involvement in the upbringing of their children. Many PLA participants live with only one parent or with an-

other family member. Often, grandmothers are responsible for raising children left behind after a divorce.

In Newala District, the celebration of a girl's initiation to womanhood, called *ngoma*, has also changed in recent years. Songs with educational messages about transitioning into womanhood have been largely replaced by melodies laced with profanity and vulgar references to sex. *Ngoma* has devolved from an afternoon dance attended by only women and girls into one held at night that includes boys and men. Forced sex also is strongly associated with the traditional *ngoma* dance. When returning home from *ngoma*, girls often are at risk of unwanted fondling or rape by groups of boys:

**“If a man attends the ngoma, he believes he must have sex with a woman. If he comes home and says it was a bad ngoma, that means he didn't find anyone to have sex with him that night.”**

FATHER, FGD

### **Transactional sex**

The economic deprivation in which girls live strongly motivates them to exchange sex for money and material goods, such as clothes. Because of family break ups, girls often are left to fend for themselves:

**“I will have sex to get those basic needs I am lacking.”**

YOUNGER PLA PARTICIPANT

But many adults in the community view girls who have sex for money, clothes or favors as greedy. Transactional sex, often with older men who have disposable income, places girls in a powerless position:

**“The way these children start having sex at an early age and the *tamaa* (greed) they have for money, they have no power to tell a man to use a condom and so they don't use condoms.”**

MOTHER, FGD



And older men typically do not use condoms, as they have the ability to pay for their female partner's contraceptives or illegal abortion, should she become pregnant.

### ***Unintended pregnancy***

Girls' and parents' main concern is unintended pregnancy because it poses immediate consequences. On the other hand, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are seen as less of a source of worry:

**“We know about HIV and using condoms to avoid it, but right now we have to make sure we don't get pregnant. If we do, we can't finish school and we'll just be at home with people calling us names all the time.”**

YOUNGER PLA PARTICIPANT

### ***Lack of protectors and sources of support***

Despite the numerous community-based dangers cited by girls and adults, girls feel that no one in Newala takes responsibility for helping them stay safe. Many girls feel frustrated because they are blamed for not avoiding the risks from which nobody else helps protect them:

**“If your family sends you to the farm to work and you get raped in the bush, people ask you why you went to the farm alone. But why did they tell you to go there alone when they know it's dangerous?”**

OLDER PLA PARTICIPANT



# Putting Girls' Ideas into Action

In response to these findings and the solutions identified in the formative research, ICRW, TAMASHA, Pact and the Youth Researchers developed and piloted *Vitu Newala*, a life skills education (LSE) program to address the multiple vulnerabilities girls face. They also created the case studies and scenarios used in the program's curriculum. The aim of *Vitu Newala* is to empower young people to advocate for themselves and reduce their HIV-related risks through safer decision-making and communication.

TAMASHA and the Youth Researchers trained eight girls and eight boys as Peer Educators (two girls and two boys in each of the four communities). The 16 youths were nominated by their peers to represent their respective communities. The project also trained eight women and eight men to serve as guardian advocates for the Peer Educators and help initiate community dialogue around issues of concern to girls' safety. The selected Guardians, perceived by youth as trusted adults, were also nominated for their role in *Vitu Newala*.

Because girls' vulnerabilities are profoundly influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of boys and men, those involved in the participatory process felt it was important to involve both sexes as Peer Educators, Guardians, and program participants.

The LSE curriculum covered sexual and reproductive health, empowerment, self-awareness and an array of other social and interpersonal issues such as communication, peer pressure and goal setting. It provided a set of core activities that Peer Educators carried out in groups. The Peer Educators also were encouraged to design their own activities to reach youth and adults.

## BOX 2: *Vitu Newala* Achievements

Over the 7-month pilot period, *Vitu Newala* Peer Educators held 60 sessions in schools and the community, reaching more than 1,600 young people with participatory activities and information about pregnancy, HIV, self-awareness, puberty, love and sex as well as setting goals and forming friendships. Peer Educators also conducted other activities to raise community awareness and attract a larger audience. These included dramas, soccer matches and dance groups, which blended traditional dance with the hip-hop style that is very popular among youth in Newala.

After seven months of project activities, the research team conducted a second round of PLA exercises with the same 82 girls and an evaluation workshop with Peer Educators, Guardians and community leaders. The team also carried out a series of interviews before and during the project with 16 girls and boys living in the target communities. These informants reported the following changes:

- Communities are taking steps to make places safer for girls.
- There is more frequent communication on sensitive topics.
- Girls feel safer in their communities.
- Young people are more aware of their attitudes and behaviors.



### **Communities are taking steps to make places safer for girls.**

By the end of the project, each community was working on creating dedicated space for a Youth Center. Some communities are re-writing the by-laws to restrict male participation during the *ngoma* initiation ceremony. Others are making sure that video parlors impose age restrictions to view adult films. These structural changes indicate that the communities have begun to take action to protect girls.

### **There is more frequent communication on sensitive topics.**

Most girls and boys acknowledged that talking about such topics as puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, sex and STIs still is very sensitive and embarrassing. But they also recognized that the information Peer Educators share is essential for their well-being and that of their friends:

**“I was so happy at the first sessions because we talked about these things. Nobody else talks to us about these things, so the peer education sessions were the first time I got to learn about this.”**

YOUNGER GIRL

And participants are sharing the information and their experiences with others:

**“I talk to younger girls about what I’ve learned. My younger sister used to go to *ngomas* but after I told her what I learned at the sessions about how dangerous they are, she doesn’t go anymore. I’m so happy I was able to share this with her, and she appreciates my help. She feels that I’ve helped make a change for her own good.”**

OLDER GIRL

**“When I’m with my peers, I tell them about what I learned. Some of them insult me and say that I have nothing to teach them, but at least three of them have listened to me. Now, they’re having fewer girlfriends and having sex less than before. Now they’re more concerned about their studies.”**

YOUNGER BOY

### **Girls feel safer in their communities.**

Compared to the risk maps girls drew during the first round of PLA exercises, the ones they created during the second round indicate fewer places where they face unwanted sexual advances and threats. However, girls continued to feel the same high level of risk at school.



***Young people are more aware of their attitudes and behaviors.***

Some boys and girls, particularly the Peer Educators, now think and act differently about sex, relationships and their future.

**“Before, my sister and I used to lock my grandmother in the house so we could go out and do whatever we wanted. We’d never listen to her when she told us to come home or do anything around the house. We would go out with our friends and I was having sex all the time and smoking bang (marijuana). Now, I’ve learned that these behaviors are only harming me. Even if my grandmother can’t make me stay at home; I do it now because I respect her and I respect myself.”**

MALE PEER EDUCATOR

**“My friends used to say that a real girl has to have at least three lovers: one is taking care of mobile phone expenses, another one is for providing clothes, and the third one is providing very little but you love him so much. I was implementing this principle very well. But now I know that this it’s not working for me. I can work and get my own money and plan for what I want. What I need to do is set my goals, plan for my future life by working so hard and be aware of myself and determined to get where I want to reach.”**

FEMALE PEER EDUCATOR



# Learning from Girls

While *Vitu Newala* was limited in reach and the number of issues it could address in the pilot period, the project nevertheless stimulated dialogue about girls' rights, their role in society and how communities can better respond to their needs. Moreover, it garnered support from girls, boys, parents and influential community members. ICRW believes that *Vitu Newala* offers a promising model for reducing girls' vulnerabilities that can be applied in a variety of settings. Key to this model is to identify and address powerful gender norms and social influences through participatory methods that engage young people as researchers, educators and champions.



This project also presented multiple opportunities for ICRW and TAMASHA to learn unique lessons from young people. Among them:

## 1) Align Project Priorities with Youth Priorities:

Although the core objective of the *Vitu Newala* pilot focused on adolescent girls' vulnerability to HIV, discussions with the girls revealed their most pressing concern was preventing unintended pregnancy. With that, ICRW and its partners shifted the emphasis of project activities from HIV only to also include pregnancy and other sexual risks. Interventions to reduce girls' vulnerabilities will have greater impact if they are designed around the particular needs that girls themselves identify.

## 2) Relationships Matter:

The same TAMASHA facilitators accompanied *Newala* youth throughout the research and action process, building a friendly and supportive rapport. Creating such a trusting environment is critical to engaging vulnerable youth such as the girls in *Newala*, many of whom live in tenuous financial situations, haven't completed secondary school or are already parents. When project implementers can earn girls' trust and respect, girls are more likely to be committed to the project and participate enthusiastically in it.

## 3) Vulnerable Youth Need Extra Support:

Girls and boys want to know that others believe in them. Therefore, it is important to provide consistent, intensive encouragement when working with youth whose families or communities aren't supportive. In the case of *Vitu Newala*, this meant offering several opportunities for refresher training to build Peer Educators' self confidence as well as providing a welcoming atmosphere for those who became pregnant, had an early marriage, or experienced difficulties within their families during the project.



# Next steps for *Vitu Newala*

*Vitu Newala* now is in the process of becoming formally incorporated as a community-based non-governmental organization. TAMASHA has committed to provide ongoing training to *Vitu Newala* Peer Educators and to involve them in its national youth network. TAMASHA is seeking funding for follow-on support to strengthen *Vitu Newala* and expand the intervention model to other communities.

Further detail about the methods used for and the findings from *Vitu Newala* is provided in the project documents: *Using Participatory Research and Action to Address the HIV-related Vulnerabilities of Adolescent Girls in Tanzania* and *Vijana Tunaweza Newala: Findings from a Participatory Research and Action Project in Tanzania*.

To download these documents, please visit our website at [www.icrw.org/publications](http://www.icrw.org/publications).



## Endnotes

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