



**The Impact of Empowerment
Programs on Adolescent Girls and
Young Women's Uptake of SRHR
Services in Pakwach District.
Experience from MEMPROW, Uganda**

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of empowerment programs on the uptake of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) services among adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in Pakwach district, West Nile region of Uganda. It highlights MEMPROW's experience in utilizing the empowerment model to increase the uptake of SRHR information and services.

The Mentoring and Empowerment Program for Young Women (MEMPROW) has been utilizing empowerment approaches such as the 'Social survival skills training', a model that integrates comprehensive awareness creation, skill-building, peer mentorship, and the community engagement components such as community dialogues, to address barriers to SRHR service access and utilization among adolescent girls and young women in its interventions in West Nile region of Uganda.

This paper will share MEMPROW's experience involving partnerships with local schools, healthcare providers, and cultural and religious institutions. MEMPROW's experiences indicate that empowered adolescent girls and young women have increased knowledge, confidence, and self-esteem to seek, and share SRHR information and utilize SRHR services.

In conclusion, MEMPROW's experience underscores the importance of empowerment strategies in enhancing SRHR service uptake. Empowerment approaches significantly contribute to improved health and well-being of adolescent girls and young women in Uganda.

Key Words: *Empowerment, SRHR, social survival skills training, AGYW*

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Introduction

The Mentoring and Empowerment Programme for Young Women (MEMPROW) is a feminist Human Rights Organization that was set up to create space for building the capacity of young women, (14 – 29 years) to engage more actively in leadership for transformation, and creating an environment based on respect for social justice and for women's worth, women's rights, and gender equality.

MEMPROW was established, and formally registered, in January 2008 in to address negative mind-sets and the pervasive social devaluation of women and girls, and to build their self-esteem. Oppressive societal dynamics create barriers to women's full participation and enjoyment of their rights in all areas of life. Since it was established, MEMPROW has facilitated empowerment training for thousands of in-school girls and sensitized boys and men to gender oppression and inequality, as well as gender-based violence. MEMPROW provides direct mentoring to a large community of young women and men. Through advocacy, MEMPROW works directly with teachers and community leaders specifically to address negative mindsets that compromise girls' and young women's participation in education and other development sectors.

Secondly, MEMPROW was established to bridge the credibility gap between older feminists and young women who usually perceive each as opposed rather than complementary in gender equality activism. MEMPROW is filling this gap with cross-generational dialogue, training as well as mentoring.

We work towards building a generation of girls and young women who are informed, self-assured, and with the agency to speak out against social inequalities and injustices. Through training, ongoing mentoring, and counseling aimed at developing young women's self-esteem and confidence as a means of enhancing their participation in education and increasing their leadership capacities.

MEMPROW operates mainly in the central districts of Kampala, Mukono, and Wakiso and West Nile Region of Uganda in the districts of Pakwach, Nebbi, Zombo, Arua, and Terego.

MEMPROW's Transformational Programs

MEMPROW's programmes focus on shaping a 'MEMPROW GIRL'. A 'MEMPROW GIRL' is knowledgeable, self-reliant & confident. She has marketable skills and is passionate about justice & equality for all, and, she advocates for girls/women's rights. In addition to organizing learning and teaching events that transform in-school girls MEMPROW has developed programmes that transform girls, young women, communities, and the feminist activist field. These programmes are aimed at individual girls, communities, learning institutions as well as social-cultural environments. MEMPROW programmes ensure the realization of our vision, mission, and strategic objectives.

MEMPROW's Mentorship Programs

The Mentoring and Empowerment Program for Young Women (MEMPROW) has been utilizing empowerment approaches such as the **'Social survival skills training Model'**, in its interventions in the West Nile region of Uganda. The model involves equipping young people with information and skills on SRHR and building their confidence to claim their SRHR rights. This in the end addresses the barriers to SRH service access and utilization among adolescent girls and young women

"Social survival skills training programme"; is a rich set of life skills packages designed for in-school girls to build their capabilities for leadership, and to equip them with survival skills to navigate the unique challenges and pressures of our rapidly changing landscape. We organize these for girls in schools in Kampala, and the West Nile region. We do the same programme for child mothers (out of school) in the West Nile region.

The **social survival skills training model** integrates comprehensive awareness creation, skill-building, peer mentorship, and community engagement components such as community dialogues.

About MEMPROW's Social Survival Skills Training Programs

Social Survival Skills Training

Currently, the major context and venue for Social Survival Skills Training (SSST) are within the institutions of learning. SSST is a two-week personal empowerment and social survival skills training programme. The outcome of this programme is improved girls' educational performance and attainment. This is achieved through building girls' self-esteem & self-knowledge and by enhancing their knowledge of key issues that pose challenges to their continued survival in learning institutions. Critical topics addressed in SSST are patriarchy and gender; sexual and gender-based violence; sexual and reproductive health and rights; HIV/AIDS & other STDs; career choices; and, women's rights.

This training is facilitated by senior professionals who are comfortable with their image, as they inspire confidence and role model empowered women. The content that has already been tested covers the following:

a) Personal Empowerment & Social Survival Skills

To enhance skills in analyzing self-worth and carry out a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis for personal development management. Most girls and young women have never been given/taken the time or initiative to evaluate their skills. However, knowing who you are cultivating a positive self-image, and how you use your interpersonal skills is essential for social survival. This session unpacks concepts of: social survival; individual/gender/social identities; personal strengths and weaknesses; and, the power of personal social intelligence. Participants learn how to apply social survival skills through role plays and small group work.

b) Peer Pressure & Communication

The objective of exploring **peer pressure** is to assist participants to appreciate and understand the concept of peer pressure and how it influences their choices & behavior, especially in accessing SRHR services. This session gives an overview of the meaning of peer pressure; explores different types of peer pressure; and also helps participants acquire skills in dealing with it. It further assists participants to appreciate the positive effects of peer pressure and how it can help them grow. Many young people wrongly assume that peer pressure is bad. However, it has both positive and negative effects.

The objective of covering **communication skills** is to underscore the importance of communication in every aspect of life. In this session, we train young girls and women on knowing what to communicate, when to communicate, with whom to communicate, and how to communicate. This session also covers: types of communication; elements of effective communication; listening; decision-making; and assertive communication.

c) Patriarchy & Gender Identity

In this session we build participant's awareness of gender and its impact on girls and women; to explore values, attitudes, and cultural practices that form gender relations; we focus on the effects of discrimination and stereotypes in society and its impacts on SRHR service access. This session aims at both awareness raising and sensitization about gender issues in society. Women and girls are usually discriminated against and such exclusionary and discriminatory practices result in imbalances and inequities in society. This session covers: the meanings of gender; the difference between gender & sex; gender identity; and, patriarchy. By the end of this session, participants are able to: appreciate that gender is socially constructed and that sex is a natural order; identify gender-related discrimination; examine stereotypical attitudes they may hold towards a group of people; SRHR service access, identify the manifestation of patriarchy in different social settings; and find responses to discrimination at different levels of society.

d) 'You and Your rights'

This training is conducted to empower girls & young women with knowledge and skills for accessing SRHR services and advocating for their rights. Getting young girls & women to understand their human rights is very important to ensure access to SRHR services and uptake. This session is used to inform participants about SRHR services, problems, and also how to access these services.

During this session several topics are covered: different categories of human rights; national and international human rights law; and, reasons for emphasizing & protecting women's rights, youth-friendly services, SRHR frameworks and policies, challenges and barriers to accessing SRHR services the end of the session participants are made aware about the available SRHR services, how they can access them, where and able to: understand & discuss their rights as young women; and, be able to advocate for their rights to SRHR services..

e) Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights

These sessions are held to raise young women and girls' awareness about their sexual health and rights. Sexual health is part of reproductive health. It includes: healthy sexual development; equitable & responsible relationships; and, sexual fulfillment & freedom from illness, disease, disability, violence, and other harmful practices related to sexuality. In this session, the following topics are covered: sexual health; sexuality and sexual rights; gender; romantic relationships; dealing with rejection by a romantic partner; life skills; common conditions affecting reproductive health; reproductive health conditions; and, reproductive effects of sexual abuse. By the end of this session, participants would have developed a comprehensive and holistic understanding of sexuality in society; increased their knowledge on sexuality issues at community, national, and international levels; learned basic concepts and explored factors that affect sexuality; and, learned how to deal with romantic relationships.



f) Career Planning

This session is conducted to engage participants in a process of self-discovery about their strengths, skills, interests, values, and job satisfiers, as they map out their career prospects and consider career change.

Career planning is a process of identifying one's skills, talents, and interests; how and where participants think they want to use them, based on individual values, preferences, and satisfaction, in work and personal life.

This session helps to equip participants with knowledge to understand what career planning is; gain personal insight into their unique & personal interests; understand their responsibility in planning their career; identify personal strengths, skills, and preferences that provide optimum job satisfaction; create a profile of their values/ life purpose and satisfiers in terms of work assignment; set realistic career/ development goals based on who they are and what they want to be; understand critical skills and strategies for career success; and know how & where to seek

career opportunities.

The social survival skills training is normally conducted in both primary and secondary schools, targeting both learners and their teachers.

The schedule for this mentorship session is as follows:

- ✓ A 10-day training for 40 girls on different topics; these include SRHR, peer pressure, gender and patriarchy, violence against girls/women, human rights, leadership, and personal empowerment among others
- ✓ 2 days of training for teachers on gender, patriarchy, and human rights to enable teachers to appreciate and support girls. Teachers are supported to understand Gender sensitive structures in schools.
- ✓ 2 days of training for boys on gender, patriarchy, and human rights to enable the boys to appreciate girls and act as their sisters' keepers.
- ✓ Ongoing individual counseling sessions.

Results /Impact

Social survival skills training has significantly improved access to and uptake of SRHR services in the following ways:

- ✓ **Addressing Negative Cultural and Gender Norms:** this program has been challenging harmful gender norms, stereotypes, myths, and misconceptions that restrict access to SRHR services thus improving access and uptake of SRHR services.
- ✓ **Built self-esteem and Confidence of Girls:** By equipping the girls with social survival skills, they have become more confident in asserting their rights and making informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health. This empowerment has led to increased access to SRHR services.
- ✓ **Peer Support Networks:** This program has fostered peer support, Created a safe space where the girls share their SRHR needs, and experiences with their peers, and also encouraged others to seek SRHR services.
- ✓ **Awareness raising,** the girls trained in Social survival skills have been involved in spreading awareness about the benefits of SRHR service thus increasing SRHR service uptake.
- ✓ **Enhanced information and health-seeking behaviors among Adolescent Girls and young Women** enabling them to seek information and services confidently and discuss other SRHR issues with healthcare providers and their teachers.

Conclusion

The **Social Survival Skills Training Model**, an empowerment approach that has been adopted by MEMPROW for over 16 years has had a significant impact on the uptake of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) services among adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in Pakwach district, West Nile region of Uganda. This approach has improved access to and uptake of SRHR services by raising awareness, building the self-esteem and confidence of AGYWs, challenging negative and cultural norms that hinder access to SRHR services, and reducing stigma and discrimination related to SRHR. This created a more supportive environment for AGYWs to access services without fear of judgment.



Sustaining Women's leadership

This is a publication by Mentoring and
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