ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Let's hear it from the facilitators: Experiences of peer facilitators in engendering work with adolescent boys and young men in Cape Town, South Africa

DOI: 10.29063/ajrh2025/v29i6s.4

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Abstract

Working with men and boys is central to improving sexual and reproductive health and rights and contributes to gender equality and social justice. Focusing on two behaviour change interventions ("One Youth Can" and "SKILLZ Guyz"), embedded within a national HIV programme ("My Journey"), this qualitative, exploratory study explored the contextual and organizational realities faced by peer facilitators in implementing these two interventions and what it would take to integrate a gender-transformative approach into their practice. The research, conducted in South Africa, used three data sources: a curriculum gender analysis, observations of both interventions and capacity strengthening sessions with peer facilitators. The study found that facilitators have to manage an array of contextual challenges. The programmatic context in which they work is dominated by the need to meet quantitative targets, leaving the capacity strengthening and mentoring needs of the facilitators – and their own lived experiences insufficiently addressed. Our research confirms the pivotal role peer facilitators can play in implementing gender-transformative approaches with adolescent boys and men in South Africa, but recommends that their practice be accompanied by sustained capacity strengthening and organisational support to address the unequal systems of gender and intersecting power relations in the contexts in which they work and live. *(Afr J Reprod Health 2025; 29 [6s]: 48-64).*

Keywords: Gender-transformative approaches, adolescent boys and young men, sexual and reproductive health rights, South Africa, peer facilitators

Résumé

Travailler avec les hommes et les garçons est essentiel à l'amélioration de la santé et des droits sexuels et reproductifs, et contribue à l'égalité des genres et à la justice sociale. Axée sur deux interventions de changement de comportement (« One Youth Can » et « SKILLZ Guyz »), intégrées à un programme national de lutte contre le VIH (« My Journey »), cette étude exploratoire qualitative a exploré les réalités contextuelles et organisationnelles rencontrées par les pairs animateurs dans la mise en œuvre de ces deux interventions, ainsi que les conditions nécessaires à l'intégration d'une approche transformatrice de genre dans leur pratique. Menée en Afrique du Sud, la recherche s'est appuyée sur trois sources de données : une analyse de genre du programme scolaire, des observations des deux interventions et des séances de renforcement des capacités avec des pairs animateurs. L'étude a révélé que les animateurs doivent gérer une multitude de défis contextuels. Le contexte programmatique dans lequel ils travaillent est dominé par la nécessité d'atteindre des objectifs quantitatifs, ce qui laisse insuffisamment pris en compte leurs besoins de renforcement des capacités et de mentorat, ainsi que leurs propres expériences vécues. Nos recherches confirment le rôle essentiel que peuvent jouer les pairs animateurs dans la mise en œuvre d'approches transformatrices de genre auprès des adolescents et des jeunes hommes en Afrique du Sud. Elles recommandent toutefois que leur pratique s'accompagne d'un renforcement durable des capacités et d'un soutien organisationnel afin de remédier aux inégalités entre les sexes et aux relations de pouvoir croisées dans les contextes où ils travaillent et vivent. *(Afr J Reprod Health 2025; 29 [6s]: 48-64).*

Mots-clés: Approches transformatrices de genre, adolescents et jeunes hommes, droits en matière de santé sexuelle et reproductive, Afrique du Sud, pairs animateurs

Introduction

South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world and is characterised by complex and multi-dimensional historic and current intersectional inequalities resulting in unequal access to education, health, and other services.[1–3] One of the driving forces behind these fissures of inequality is the construction of masculinities. Dominant masculinities in South Africa have been constructed by colonialism and apartheid legacies of forced segregation, normalised disenfranchisement, broken family structures, and violence.[4] It is within this history and context of entrenched poverty, systemic discrimination and endemic unemployment that harmful forms of masculinity amplify high rates of crime, violence and gender-based violence (GBV) resulting in deepening cycles of ill-health and inequality.[5]

In response, a number of national sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) initiatives, aimed to improve the health outcomes of adolescents and young people have been implemented over the last three decades in South Africa – many of which have been donor-funded. One such initiative is the "My Journey" programme which includes two peer-facilitated, behaviour change interventions ("One Youth Can" and "SKILLZ Guyz") focusing on adolescent boys and young men [See Figures 1 and 2 for a programme description].

These interventions are based on considerable experience with working with boys and men towards achieving gender equality and positive SRHR outcomes.[6–9] Some of this experience indicated that male engagement in gender-transformative programming in SRHR, whilst offering promising possibilities, requires further development in terms of the conceptualisation, design and evaluation. Despite 56% of programmes focussing on gender equality and gender norms in health targeting boys and men[10], only 8% indicated using a gender-transformative approach when engaging boys and men in SRHR programmes.[11] This approach aims to address the root causes of gender inequality by challenging patriarchal societal norms and shifting unequal power relations into more equal and inclusive ones for women, men, and non-binary gender identities.[12] Critical reflection of gender-transformative programming in health with men highlights the importance of using an intersectional approach, which looks at the interconnected nature of systems of inequality based on race, class, and gender and thus looks beyond individual masculinities as well as, focussing on resistance to change, and sustaining progress.[13]

One strategy to support change in attitudes and behaviours in relation to rigid gender stereotypes and norms among adolescent boys and young men, is the use of participants' peers as facilitators.[15] Peer facilitators share a similar geographical location, life experiences, and age as their participants. There are multiple factors that shape how facilitators deliver interventions, including administrative elements, contextual factors, as well as their own lived experiences and understandings of their role in transforming gender and power relations, all of which impact on the process of gender transformation and how this shifts processes of change.[16,14] Yet peer facilitators' own lived experiences and understandings of their role in transforming gender and power relations is often invisible in GBV and HIV prevention programmes. Nonetheless, their training and ongoing support is central to effective delivery of health prevention programmes and gender transformation.[17] Facilitating critical discussions with young men about issues of masculinity is complex work as the facilitators must engage with challenging topics such as heterosexism, homophobia, and gendered power relations. These topics require nuanced and in-depth understandings as well as advanced facilitation skills to engage boys and men during the sessions.[18,19] South Africa has a number of initiatives in working with boys and men that aim to be gender transformative, using peer facilitators. However, there is not sufficient consideration of the complexities involved in ensuring that these programmes deliver on their transformative aims. Our paper aims to more precisely examine the lived realities of peer facilitators as they implement a pre-designed, social and behaviour change intervention in an urban, informal settlement in South Africa. The paper seeks to address an important evidence gap by considering what the possibilities are of integrating a more explicit gender-transformative

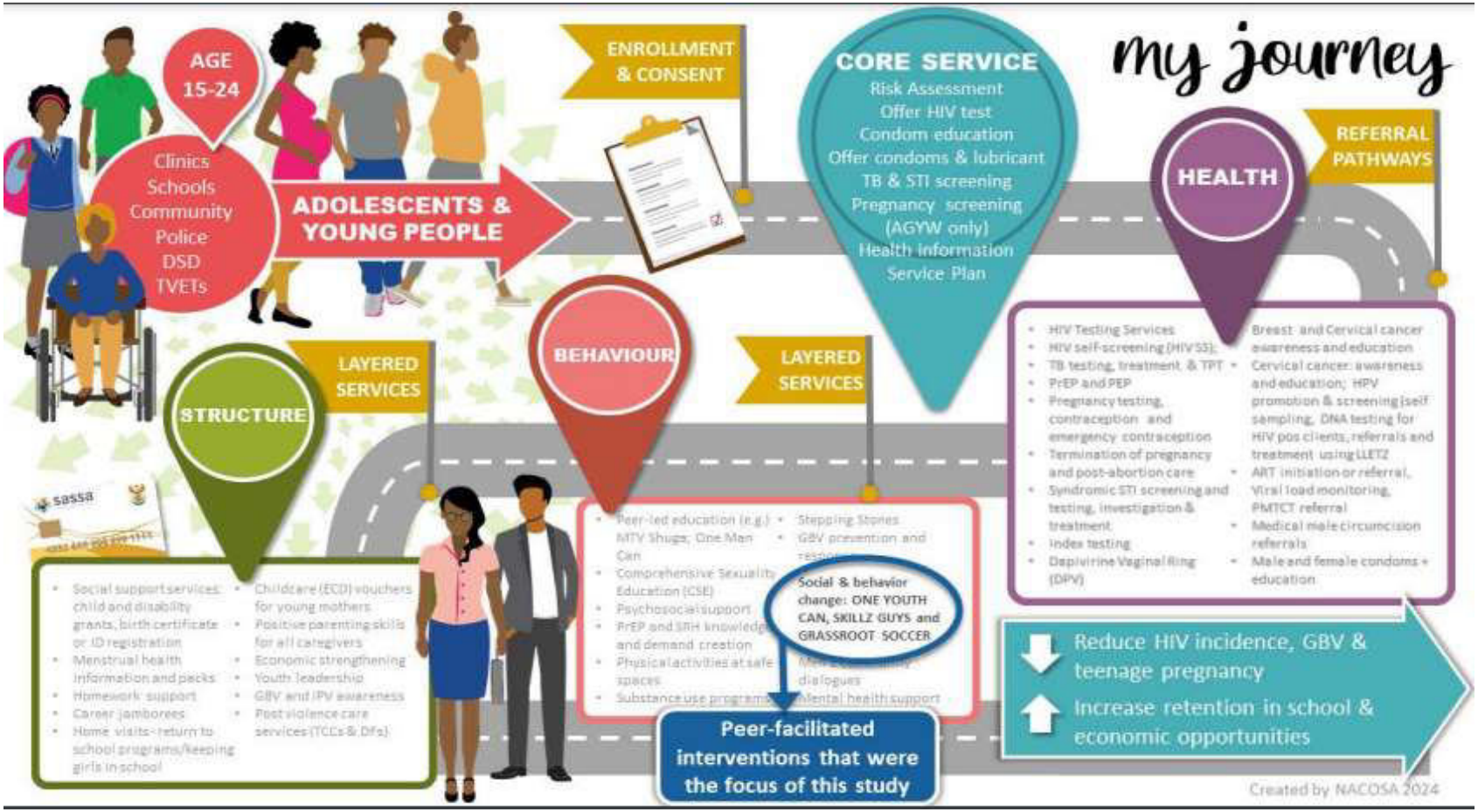

Figure 1: Illustration of the "My Journey" programmatic interventions.

As part of a suite of services offered to adolescent boys and young men enrolled in the "My Journey" programme, beneficiaries between the ages of 15 – 25 years are invited to join one of two peer-facilitated, social and behaviour change interventions, namely "One Youth Can" and "SKILLZ Guyz". Within the context of the "My Journey" programme, these two interventions are locally referred to as "IPs" because their curricula are regarded as the intellectual property of their developers - in this case: Sonke Gender Justice and Grassroot Soccer, respectively. Given the copyright restrictions governing the implementation of these "IP" interventions, there is an explicit understanding that there is no freedom to adapt, and that the original curriculum will be replicated and implemented across a range of diverse contexts. This, as we illustrate in our research results, gives rise to a number of challenges. Both interventions aim to be gender transformative and cover similar issues, such as, citizenship and human rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights (including HIV prevention), gender and violence, and issues related mental health, peer pressure and substance abuse. In the case of "One Youth Can", the curriculum is intended to be communicated over 12 three-hour sessions. Similarly, the "SKILLZ Guyz" curriculum, which uses the analogy of soccer to discuss the topics with participants, is designed to be implemented over 10 one-hour sessions.

These two interventions were prioritised for inclusion into the "My Journey" programme because they are locally-designed and evaluated. Like other social and behavioural change programmes, they rely on peer facilitators to implement curricula that aim to enhance knowledge amongst participants, generate critical thinking and behaviour change for gender transformation.

Figure 2: The "My Journey" programme and the two embedded interventions: "One Youth Can" and "SKILLZ Guyz".

approach into interventions like these – particularly when they are part of a complex, target-driven national SRHR initiative. In so doing we seek to better understand the individuals and contexts involved in these interventions to explore opportunities for more explicit gender-transformative peer-facilitated interventions with adolescent boys and young men to support the desired intention of creating gender equality and social justice.

Methods

Study design and study setting

This qualitative, exploratory study was nested within a learning partnership aimed at strengthening gender-transformative programming in the "My Journey" programme in Klipfontein sub-district, City of Cape Town, South Africa. An economically deprived area, with an unemployment rate of 32%, the sub-district reflects the legacy of apartheid spatial injustice and socioeconomic exclusion. Gangs and gang violence are features of marginalised communities in the Klipfontein sub-district and shape the construction of masculinities.[20]

Study participants

Drawn from the same neighbourhoods in which they worked, the entire team of eight peer facilitators that were the focus of this paper were early-career facilitators, all with a secondary school qualification. Half had completed an additional year of study, with three being qualified as Social Auxiliary Workers. The peer facilitators ranged in age between 26 – 38 years and were, on average, six years older than the oldest programme beneficiary. In addition to implementing the "One Youth Can" and "SKILLZ Guyz" sessions peer facilitators are also required to recruit beneficiaries into the "My Journey" program. The recruitment target was set between 7 – 10 adolescent beneficiaries per day – a target which has been established at a national level. They earn the equivalent of USD 385 a month.

Data collection

Qualitative data was collected as part of a series of participatory research and capacity strengthening engagements held with facilitators. The data was collected over a 17-month period, between April 2023 – September 2024, and included three key sources:

- the recordings of 10 monthly sessions that the research team implemented with the peer facilitators between November 2023 – September 2024, which enabled the researchers to accompany the facilitators in an iterative process of reflection and learning about their personal experiences of gender socialisation and the possibilities of incorporating a gender-transformative approach into their professional practice.
- a gender analysis of the "One Youth Can" and the "SKILLZ Guyz" curricula was conducted, using the WHO Gender Responsive Assessment Scale (GRAS) as a guide for the review. The documented findings of the desk review were shared with all members of the partnership and their additional reflections and interpretations recorded as part of the review process.
- the documented observations of the implementation of two cohorts of "One Youth Can" and two cohorts of "SKILLZ Guyz" trainings, facilitated in isi-Xhosa by the peer facilitators and attended by approximately 90 adolescent boys and young men between the ages of 15 – 24 years. Between November 2023 and August 2024, 16 two-hour sessions were observed by 4 members of the research team. An observation tool, based on the WHO GRAS, was designed to record key aspects of the content and process of each session. The GRAS is a five-level classification system used to assess gender in policies and programmes and ranges from gender-unequal through to gender-transformative. [21]

Data analysis

A coding framework was developed using a combination of the areas of interest outlined in the study objectives, and some of the significant patterns emerging from the data. The coding framework was applied to two of the three sets of data, 1) the transcripts of sessions with peer facilitators and 2) observations of the implementation of the "One Youth Can" and

"SKILLZ Guyz" sessions. Data from the desk review provided researchers with an understanding of the desired outcomes and content of the interventions, and supported data triangulation. Guided by the work of Braun and Clark[22], two researchers developed a set of preliminary themes and a thematic map. This work was validated and refined in three sense-making workshops with members of the partnership, one of which included peer-facilitators.

A number of strategies were used by the research team to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the study's findings: data triangulation or the use of multiple data sources; member-checking , and the prolonged engagement in the field (17 months).[23]

Ethical considerations

This research study is embedded within a collaborative research project started in 2021. Ethical clearance was obtained from University of the Western Cape's Biomedical Research Ethics Committee (BMREC REF: BM22/5/4). All study participants provided their written informed consent to participate in the study, and counselling support was made available. Participant anonymity was ensured through pseudonymisation and the removal of all identifying information.

Results

The results are presented in two interrelated sections, starting with the social context in which the facilitators live and implement "One Youth Can" and "SKILLZ Guyz" and then the particular programmatic context in which they work.

Interpersonal violence, gangsterism and trauma

This research revealed that facilitators have to manage an array of contextual challenges related to the presence of gang-related interpersonal violence and the normalisation of trauma combined with patriarchal and homophobic gender norms.

The embedded presence of neighbourhood gangs meant that facilitators not only had to be mindful of their own safety in the streets when recruiting young people for their interventions, but also to be cognizant of possible affiliations the participants might have to a gang - and how this, in turn, could potentially lead to conflict between some of the participants. As a facilitator shared in a group session:

"Here's this thing of [gang] territories …you can't come to this area if you are from another area, otherwise it's going to cause a conflict…So it causes, to the facilitators, it causes tension when you are busy facilitating, and some of the boys, they also, they did fight [in the sessions]."
(Peer Facilitator 1, Group Session, April 2024)

The facilitators' personal experiences of living within the same geographical area as the participants provided them with a unique understanding of how endemic and normalised violence had become within their context and how it in turn contributed to the complex trauma participants and facilitators encountered in their daily lives. As one of the facilitators noted:

"This trauma thing isn't a joke. Like for real. We live in these communities. We are traumatised every single day. But because of where we come from that's the norm… They shot whoever. It's fine. We just have to hope it does not happen to us...We are all from different communities and different areas and …there might be shooting in Mitchell's Plain, but in Gugulethu, maybe it's hijackings. It's all different types of things, but it's all the same, crime is crime…And the one thing that's common in every community is drugs. It's sad how all these traumatic things have become the norm, and we just carry it."
(Peer Facilitator 2, Group Session, Nov 2023)

Not only are participants immersed in violence, but they themselves enact violence in a normalised way. Facilitators recalled, for example, how violence was often referred to by participants as a primary way in which to respond to difference (be that of sexual orientation or of a general opinion), assert their authority, and resolve a disagreement:

"There was a situation where the participants had a difference in opinion… There was one boy who said, [if I was] living with a moffie in the house, I would beat them every day. And then the other guy said: What if it's your brother? And it's your older

brother, will you [still] beat that person? And then the other one was like…no, if he is older than me, I will send another guy to go and beat [him up]."
(Peer Facilitator 3, Group Session, April 2024)

Anticipating that some of the consequences of this trauma would be 'triggered' by the content and process of the sessions, one of the facilitators reminded his colleagues how important it was that their approach to facilitation required both an understanding and a sensitivity to the context. As one facilitator noted in a session:

"Voice projection [in the sessions] is important, but also, don't shout man. We don't like shouting, because like we come from areas where there's shouting and screaming and this type of trauma"
(Peer Facilitator 2, Group Session, April 2024)

Related to their concern of potentially triggering past traumas, the facilitators described their role as 'knocking on the door of the participants' and asking them to open-up and think about their ideas of masculinities, gender and violence. However, the concern they face then - if participants do open up, is bearing the responsibility of unravelling so many layers of trauma – a possibility which feels overwhelming in the context of limited time, their limited capacity to manage such trauma and having to attend to the other key aspect of their work, namely, the recruitment of beneficiaries.

Internalised harmful hegemonic masculinities

Facilitators described how they experience past and current systems of inequality, intergenerational trauma, the normalisation of interpersonal and gender-based violence, and how this shaped them, including their masculinity. There was a theme of shared experiences of gender socialisation and how this shaped their expressions of masculinities, echoing dominant harmful masculinities in South Africa, as described by a facilitator:

"So, to be a man or a boy, you need to be strong. You don't have to cry... If you are crying, oh, now you're a moffie [gay man]. Don't cry, be strong... You are the person who doesn't have tears…. You are a man. You don't have to share whatever. If I'm having a problem here, when my girlfriend is cheating…You know, just beat her. Don't ask anything, she's going to lie. Just beat her... So, be independent as a man."
(Peer Facilitator 5, Group Session, Nov 2023)

Facilitators talked about the tensions and challenges they have to manage, including reflecting on their own dominant ideas around masculinity, as part of what it takes to be a facilitator. For example, they mentioned that amongst themselves and in the "One Youth Can" and "SKILLZ Guyz" sessions, they are able to demonstrate a more positive masculinity i.e. be more emotionally expressive and less aggressive. However, when navigating the patriarchal and violent social and political contexts, they have to perform a different, hegemonic and more harmful masculinity. This was described as follows in a session:

"Stepping outside I feel very different, because my friends are there. They are all angry, and you can't let people see [your soft side] you have to be that macho man now…We're these guys. So, if they make a joke about, whatever, I need to laugh, otherwise I'm going to be like, the odd one out…So, it's difficult being a man who is like soft, there's different expectations of what a man is. ...I can't be seen as soft, you need to have that face of strength you understand? So, it's challenging, because everybody has a different expectation of what they want."
(Peer Facilitator 2, Group Session, May 2024)

In addition, facilitators also described their relationships with the participants as a complex set of dynamics to manage, in wanting for example, to be positive role models and encourage change, however this was often met with homophobic and rigid notions of masculinity from the participants, which they noted was difficult to positively shift in the short space of time allocated for the sessions. An example of what they were up against was shared by one of the facilitators in one of the monthly sessions:

"When we're hearing what the participants have to say about what their ideal man is, or what a man is, sometimes it's sad and hurtful. It also gives me a lot of red flags, because some participants will say

things just for the sake of saying it, like, 'beat the woman'. Others will actually say it with the meaning of, "I really do mean to do this, beat the woman, because that's what I've seen, that's where I come from."
(Peer Facilitator 2, Group Session, May 2024)

Curricula, capacity, timeframes and targets

It is against this backdrop of traumatic and deeply internalised harmful gender norms and intersectional gender power relations and violence that facilitators are required to implement the interventions. The curriculum content is developed by external organisations holding the intellectual property rights and these curricula are implemented across diverse contexts.

The curriculum review revealed that whilst the intent of the curricula of the two programmes may be to consider gender and be gender-transformative, the particular topics and individual sessions exist on a very broad continuum as per the WHO GRAS. This ranges from being gender-blind (where they fail to consider gender) to being gender-transformative (addressing the root causes of gender inequality). This is illustrated in relation to the "One Youth Can" curriculum in Figure 3.

Furthermore, our review of the "One Youth Can" and "SKILLZ GUYZ" curricula also noted that a binary notion of gender (i.e. male / female) was presented in many of the exercises, and some that was significantly heteronormative. Programmatically, the expectation within the "My Journey" programme is that after a 5-day orientation training with the curricula, as participants, the facilitators are then expected to replicate the training as facilitators.

Facilitators shared how they did not feel sufficiently equipped to transition into such a role and to discuss some of the more challenging topics such as Sexual Orientation Gender Identity and Expression Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC). They also expressed feeling under-capacitated to address homophobia from participants and how to ensure LGBTIQA+ participants felt sufficiently included in the sessions. Linked to the concerns about being insufficiently prepared to facilitate specific aspects of the curriculum, was the anxiety facilitators' frequently felt in needing to come across as competent to the participants:

"I feel like preparation is key for this line of work because participants can smell if you don't know what you're doing. And they can see it. And once they know that you are weak, they're going to jump on you."
(Peer Facilitator 4, Group Session, April 2024)

However, facilitators mentioned that in reflecting on their own lived experiences of gender socialisation, intersectional experiences of systems of power and inequality as part of the learning partnership sessions they developed a deeper sense of their own masculinities. They reported that this strengthened their empathy with the "One Youth Can" and "SKILLZ Guyz" beneficiaries, hence enhancing their professional role and capacity as facilitators. Further analysis of the learning partnership capacity strengthening process and pedagogy is beyond the scope of this paper and will be published elsewhere.

Facilitators were also required to navigate the complexity of the curricula within a limited time frame. For example, in the case of the "One Youth Can" intervention, only particular components of the 36-hour curriculum are selected to be facilitated over a period of 8 - 10 hours with participants. Based on some basic guidelines provided by the "IPs", their own interpretation of the needs of each cohort of beneficiaries and the time available, the facilitators make a strategic decision about which session to include or not. As one facilitator suggested, their role becomes an act of 'juggling': in keeping to time, facilitating the content, managing the logistics and being mindful of the participants' needs:

"So, on the first day, you do a pre-questionnaire and two sessions. And … you juggle around, and juggle around, running around, facilitating, making sure all these boys understand the questions…[and] you also have the content [which] you have to present to them."
(Peer Facilitator 3, Group Session, April 2024)

Critical in this act of 'juggling' is the facilitator's ability to also 'read the room' and be responsive to the information needs that are raised by the participants in their pre-training questionnaire. Facilitators are often faced with the dilemma of having to decide whether they explore an issue in depth, and thus not complete the minimum number

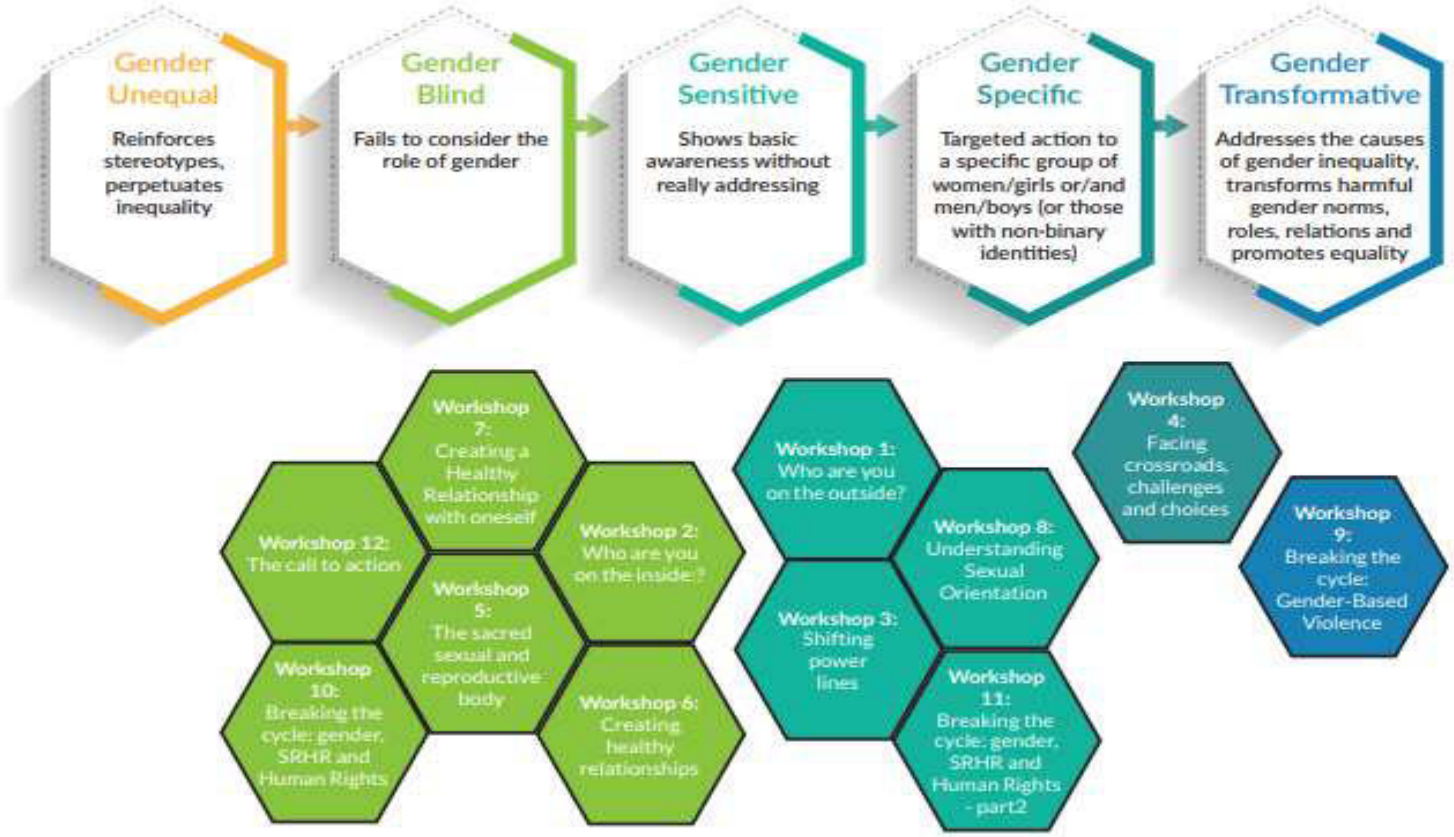

Figure 3: Mapping of the "One Youth Can" curriculum per workshop across the WHO GRAS.

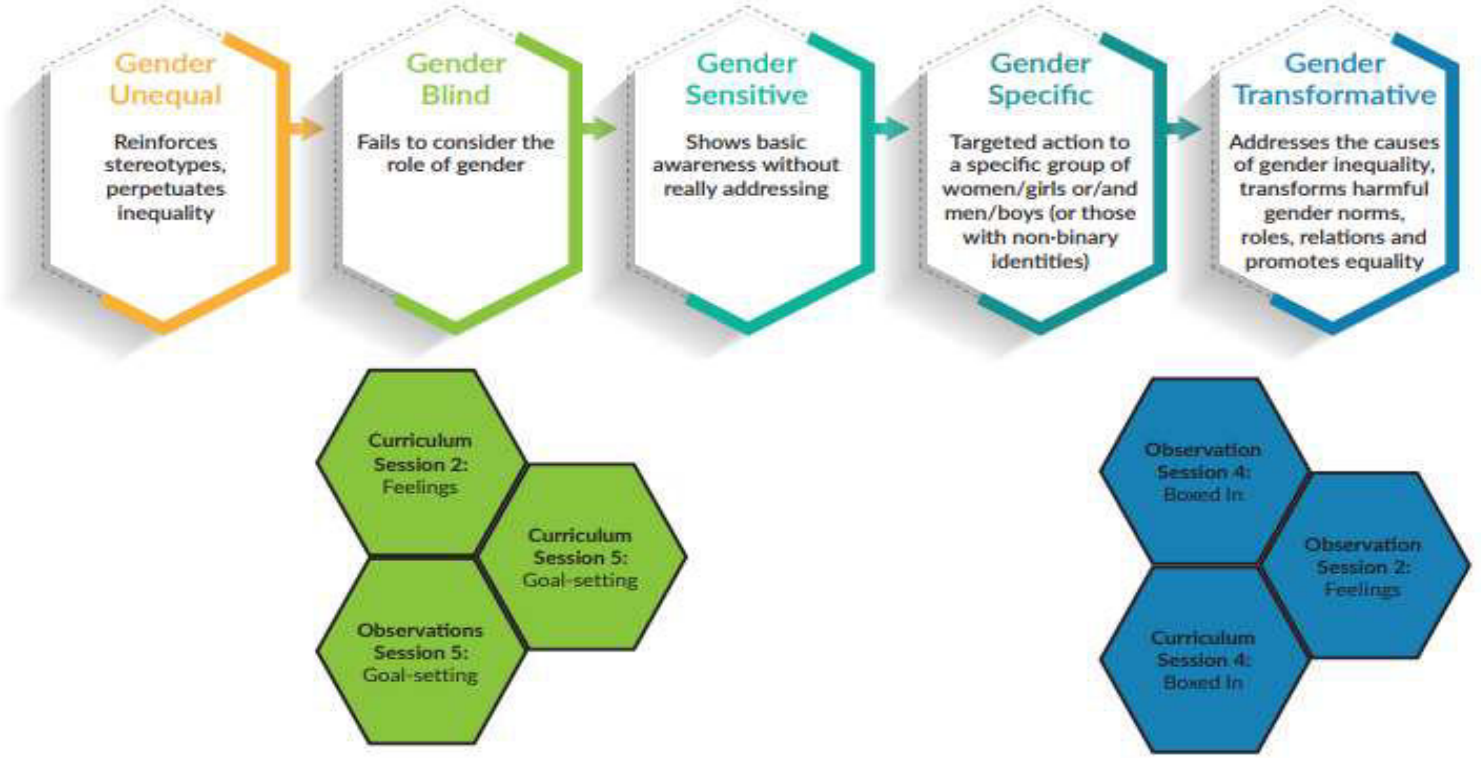

Figure 4: Mapping of the "SKILLS Guyz" curriculum versus implementation on the WHO GRAS.

of sessions required for implementation in the two training programmes, or to push on in-line with the curriculum and tackle more of the core issues in a 'lighter' way. This dilemma was described by a facilitator as follows:

"I have a challenge facilitating vital conversations that can lead to many discussions. Many discussions that will evoke someone's anger or anything… So, if I see that my watch says I must be done in 20 minutes, but you can see this, this topic is raising up so many concerns and questions…must I delve into it or maybe stop or must I just go to the floor and ask others so that all of us can learn."
(Peer Facilitator 3, Group Session, April 2024)

Facilitators also spoke of the tensions and challenges this brings to their role as facilitators and how the density of the "One Youth Can" and "SKILLZ Guyz" curricula, coupled with the time constraints, sets them up to feel as though they are somehow 'failing' at being a facilitator. This was both related to the short duration of the programmes which does not provide the opportunity to facilitate and discuss some of the complexities related to gender, having to manage the dominant ideas about masculinity while trying to subvert it, as well as the absence of any clear sense of what 'success' looks like under these circumstances.

Lastly, facilitators work in an organisational context where targets are prioritised and serve as both a critical indicator of the accomplishment of the programme objectives and as an accountability mechanism for contracted service providers. The pressure to recruit such high numbers of adolescents into the programme is linked to a set of performance indicators and contractual obligations the implementing agencies must deliver on – one of which includes the percentage of adolescents reached by SRHR services within the sub-district. Whilst the peer facilitators play a dual role in both recruiting their peers into the "My Journey" programme and facilitating such social and behaviour change programmes, the former is programmatically prioritised and this impacts on their ability to give the latter the required attention.

Despite the multiple challenges observed by the research team and reported by the peer facilitators, there were instances which revealed the positive power of the facilitators to draw on their lived experience and personal resources to create positive learning opportunities in relation to gender transformation. For example, the observation data revealed that a facilitator used one of the sessions ("Boxed In" in "SKILLZ Guyz") [See Figure 4] to add elements related to intersectionality within the discussion - a concept that is not considered in the curriculum. As the research team member observed:

"I observed that the facilitator touched on some elements of intersectionality when he was explaining how men are defined in society in different ways e.g. socially, economically and in relation to their cultural background. …The facilitator explained how some harmful gender norms - conveyed in some of these definitions, negatively affected men, women and the LGBTQIA+ community and emphasised inclusion, tolerance and acceptance. He was emphatic on why and how we need to change these gender harmful norms."
("SKILLZ Guyz" observation, Session 2 (Boxed in) - April 2024)

Discussion

This study describes peer facilitators' experiences of the array of contextual and programmatic challenges in which they implement two social and behavioural interventions, "One Youth Can" and "SKILLZ Guyz". The findings highlight how these challenges impact on their pivotal role as peer facilitators and provides insights as what it would take to integrate a more explicit GTA as part of contributing to gender equality and social justice.

The "make or break" role of peer-facilitators

A key learning emerging from our research about gender-transformative programming, is the need for empathetic and skilled facilitators, able to promote shifts in perspective and challenge hegemonic ideas around harmful masculinity and gender power

relations. Moreover, their ability to facilitate is key to success in terms of creating space for the participants to critically reflect and build new ideas around, especially gender equality and power, as also noted by Stewart *et al*[15] and Gibbs *et al*.[13,24]

Similarly, our findings provide insight and understanding of the peer facilitators themselves and how important it is that they share a similar background to, and are able to relate to the lived realities of their participants, as also described by Promundo.[17] Our findings echo their insights that skilled facilitators are essential to the success of gender-transformative programs and adds to the literature from other gender-transformative programmes that engage men a nd boys that highlight the importance of high-quality facilitation to achieve program objectives and transformative change.[18,19]

Based on our interactions with the peer facilitators our research has underscored that in order to optimise the potential of the facilitators within these programmes, it is important to understand the intersectional perspective on the social and political contexts that have shaped participants' and facilitators' past and current traumas and notions of masculinity, especially in the South African context. We would argue that this is essential when considering what it takes to integrate GTA in programmes focussed on adolescent boys and young men, as also described by Gibbs *et al*[24] and Graaf.[25]

In addition, our findings add insights into the complexity and gravity of the multiple roles they step into, as facilitators (for example, as a 'messenger', a role model and as mentor to their peers), and as recruiters of their peers as they persuade them to enrol in the "My Journey" programme to achieve the programmatic targets. These multiple responsibilities can rest heavily on the shoulders of the facilitators - highlighting the importance of them being supported with on-going capacity strengthening and supportive supervision. Importantly, our research has revealed tensions and dilemmas when considering how to integrate gender and GTA in pre-designed programmes working with boys and men, similar to the promises and pitfalls described by Keddie[19,25] who argue for critically analysing different programmes for boys and men in terms of the factors that shape their implementation.

The importance of ongoing capacity-strengthening and mentoring support

The learnings from this research also suggest that opportunities for further integrating a GTA is premised on the pivotal role of *capacitated* facilitators, working over a sufficient duration of time, as characteristics of effective GTA interventions with boys and men, as also documented by Ruane-McAteer *et al* (2020).[11] An important part of the support provided to facilitators would be to locate their role and contribution as peer facilitators in the overarching and longer term goals of GTA, which aim to transform deeply entrenched harmful power relations as the root causes of gendered inequalities.[19,26] Their contribution to these longer-term goals ought to be made explicit at the start.

The gender-analysis of the curricula is unique to this study, and it shows that the facilitators may not have the appropriate and sufficient capacity training tools provided by the "IPs" for implementing "One Youth Can" and "SKILLZ Guyz".

Furthermore, given the context specific nature of transforming masculinities it raises important questions around the need for training, adaptation of gender and masculinity theories and ongoing mentoring to help facilitators adapt the curriculum to suit their context.[27,28] This also talks to the work done by the Community for Understanding Scaling Processes (CUSP) which call for attention to complex processes underlying the scaling of gender-transformative norm change and that programmes overlooking those process may fall short of its transformative potential but can also do harm.[29,30]

Our engagement with peer facilitators suggest that apart from updating and complementing updating the curricula provided, a key opportunity to further strengthen gender-transformative elements of their work lies in ensuring on-going capacity strengthening of facilitators, which builds on their contextual knowledge and understanding of their

communities, is responsive to their needs in practice, and provides them with an understanding of the conceptual elements, as well as what exactly their role as a facilitator entails. A key insight from this research is that on-going capacity strengthening and supportive supervision of facilitators, provided by colleagues who have gender and SOGIESC expertise, is critical in assisting them to adapt the standardized curriculum to suit their contextual realities.

Our findings have highlighted the importance of creating space for the facilitators to reflect on and understand what it takes to develop critical consciousness on complex topics such as their own gender socialization and masculinities, as part of bigger goals of inclusive, equal and just societies.[19,26] Navigating the complexities of these topics not only takes time but, importantly, based on our research, we argue that it also matters how they are capacitated, starting with their own lived experiences, taking an intersectional perspective on their masculinities and the complex systems of power and inequality they (and the programme participants) have to navigate on a daily basis. In this study, the importance of "working from the inside out" and using the facilitators' own gender socialisation and construction of masculinities as a point of departure and personal reflection is, we believe, an integral part of the capacity strengthening aspect, as also noted by others.[31] Facilitators need to de-brief, trouble-shoot problems they were experiencing in their sessions, and provide one another with collegial support, as also described by others.[18,24]

A decade ago, in a study focusing on two similar, peer facilitator-led interventions, South African colleagues Gibbs *et al*[16,24] reflected on how the emphasis on capacity strengthening and support for facilitators appeared to be "at odds with the global push for task-shifting and delivering interventions at low-cost". We further argue that when attempting to implement interventions like these, and specifically in exploring how a GTA can be made more explicit, prioritising the capacity-strengthening and on-going support needs of those who are central to such interventions ought to be re-prioritized and adequately resourced.

Suggestions for future gender-transformative programming, policy and research

Whilst there are a number of significant and critical interventions, like "My Journey", focusing on the high prevalence of HIV, teenage pregnancy and GBV in South Africa, their service delivery response tends to be short- term and respond to the immediate needs in a gender-sensitive and -responsive manner. They often fall short of being gender-transformative and in addressing the underlying determinants and power relations for longer term change. This is understandable given the extent and urgency of these public health issues, and the shorter timelines favoured by international donors. We remain concerned however that certain opportunities in the curricula and implementation for GTA, may be overshadowed by the high levels of violence and inequality in the social and political context and pressurised organisational contexts described above. For example, the longer-term goal of working towards gender equality and gender transformative change requires significant time and deep processes of power relations change, with skilled human resources and adequate financial resources and changing the status quo will require this type of investment across micro, meso and macro levels of the system.[6,11]

We believe that the opportunities for a GTA lie at the intersection of - and in the inter-relationship between - the curriculum, initial capacity strengthening of the peer facilitators by the organisations holding the intellectual property rights of the curricula the implementation practice, as well as in the on-going capacity strengthening of the facilitators. This is visually represented in Figure 5.

Part of the challenge when advocating for the further and systematic integration of a GTA in curricula such as these, is that it requires the simultaneous advocacy of an accompanying and continuous investment in those who facilitate such interventions at the coal-face – where sufficient time, attention and resources are required in order to do what it takes to shift and transform gendered power relations. It is not only more capacity strengthening that is required but also *how* it is done

Figure 5: Opportunities for greater integration of gender-transformative approaches.

and this requires on-going capacity building and supportive supervision, focussing on personal transformation and professional capabilities to work with GTA in patriarchal, violent and socially unequal contexts. Building in more time for peer facilitators to de-brief – both individually and as a group of peers, would undoubtably provide them with valuable opportunities to problem-solve collectively and based on their deep knowledge of their own context, allow them to adapt and make the curriculum more relevant to their local neighbourhood context. It would also allow them to gather their collective 'strength' and reflect together about how to engage with the patriarchal gender norms encountered in their training sessions.

We strongly advocate for this element in any future programmes, and that such learning be shared with other partners (e.g. programme developers, donors and implementing agencies) so the understanding the longer-term goal of working towards gender equality and how gender transformative change requires time and deep processes of power relations change, with skilled human resources and adequate financial resources.

The above programmatic recommendations have significant policy implications for how SRHR programmes like "My Journey" are designed, resourced and implemented. At the organisational level there needs to be several institutional policies and operational guidelines that support, for example, both the systematic integration of gender and the on-going provision of capacity strengthening and de-briefing for peer facilitators. Without such a supportive policy and organizational environment, one risks reproducing the status quo without changing gendered power relations and the associated positive SRHR outcomes.

Lastly, in order to deepen our collective understanding of 'what it takes' to integrate a more explicit GTA into such SRHR interventions, aimed specifically and adolescents and young people and

delivered by their peers, further research with facilitators – and participants themselves, could reveal further insights into the social and political context and intersectional systems of power that construct their gender socialisation and masculinities, and what investments in time, capacity and support are required within such programmes to ensure their success.

Study strengths and limitations

The strength of this paper is that it emerged as a result of an extended process of co-learning with the peer facilitators, allowing their voices and their lived experiences to be highlighted. One of the contributions of this paper is that it foregrounds the depth and interrelationship of their personal and professional experiences as peer facilitators and how these need to be more carefully considered in the design of pre-designed, large scale SRHR interventions. Despite its strengths, the paper also has limitations. The key being that the research team was only able to observe sessions in one of the two languages in which the interventions were presented (i.e. isi-Xhosa and not Afrikaans).

Conclusion

Our research has highlighted the challenging circumstances in which the peer facilitators work and the obstacles to their achieving their aim of applying a gender-transformative approach to achieve equal, inclusive and just societies.

We suggest that a programme that intends to be gender-transformative is only as good as its facilitators and investing in them will optimise their power as facilitators of learning. However, this investment needs to start with shining the light on their own lived realities: understanding better the social contexts they come from and operate in; their own process of gender socialisation, and their values. It also requires that their practice be accompanied by appropriate and sustained capacity strengthening, organisational support, and broader strategies to acknowledge and address the unequal systems of gender and intersectional power relations in the contexts in which they work and live. Donors, programme developers, grant managers and implementing agencies should recognize that the contextual realities and goals of social justice and gender equality require a considerable investment - otherwise they merely scratch the surface and do little to change the status quo. In order to work towards these goals all stakeholders need to listen more closely to what peer facilitators have to say: about the reality of their context and the world in which they live and work.

Funding

This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada. The views expressed herein do no necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following colleagues in contributing to the development of this paper:
The H.O.P.E Africa peer facilitators who shared their rich personal and professional experiences with us and without whom this paper would never have been possible: Sinethemba Gama, Lusindiso Mbayana, Sivuyile Hlwati, Khanyisani Xanywa, Micah Francis, Timothy Johannes, Wesley October, Thoriq Wagiet, Madoda Feni, Sibabalo Ngxumeko, Wayden Petersen, Brandon Frazenberg and Nathan De Bruyne. The invaluable support offered by Mr Brighton Khumalo (H.O.P.E Africa) and Mr Siseko Ngqoza (NACOSA) as core members of the Learning Partnership and for supporting the logistics associated with this research. Mr Suleiman Henry (NACOSA) for his co-facilitation of the 2023 capacity strengthening activities with the peer facilitators and for his review of the "One Youth Can" curriculum. Our fellow GT4Africa colleagues: Dr Caroline Kabiru, Ms Cynthia Kairu and Mr Witness Alfonso, for their review of an earlier version of this paper. Dr Sundari Ravindran for her in-depth and insightful review of the final draft of this paper and for helping us shape the storyline. Ms Carnita Ernest and Dr Wolde Amde (SOPH, UWC) for their invaluable project management and facilitation support of the *Learning Partnership* and *Gender Transformation for Africa (GT4Africa)* projects, and to Ms Caroline

Newbert (NACOSA) for partnering with SOPH, UWC at the outset to make the South African project a reality. Ms Sophie Hobbs (NACOSA) for Figure 1 and Mr Nathmee Arnold for Figures 2 – 5. Funding for this particular research study and the initiative (*The Learning Partnership for Gender Transformation in South Africa*) in its entirety was obtained from the International Development Research Council (IDRC Project Number: 109849-001). SOPH UWC with IDRC (Grant number 109847-001) provided editorial support and publishing cost.

Contribution of authors

TJ & NS & AS conceptualized the study; TJ, PO, VM & AN collected the data; TJ, PO, VM & NS analysed the data, with additional interpretation from all members of the Learning Partnership; TJ & NS prepared the manuscript with input from AS; PO, VM, CW, BD, UW, AN, OA, AS reviewed and edited the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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