Gender-transformative sexual and reproductive health programming for very young adolescents in Kinshasa, DRC: Impact assessment findings from Growing Up GREAT!

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BACKGROUND
Very young adolescents (VYAs) ages 10-14 years face immense biological, social and cognitive change as they enter puberty.

During this time, intensifying social norms about gender and sexuality shape VYA attitudes and behaviors related to sexual and reproductive health (SRH), including family planning (FP).

This developmental period is therefore a critical window in which to intervene to improve SRH knowledge and support more gender equitable norms and attitudes for impact across the life course.

FINDINGS

SRH Knowledge
Growing Up GREAT! increased:
- Pregnancy-related knowledge and HIV knowledge among IS adolescents;
- Knowledge of where to get condoms among OOS adolescents; and
- Knowledge of where to get information about menstruation and contraception (asked only of girls), especially among younger VYAs (<12 years).

Gender Equitable and Non-Violent Behaviors
Growing Up GREAT! had mixed effects on gender attitudes & norms:
- Gender-equitable attitudes towards chores sharing increased over time, especially among OOS girls.
- No intervention effects on other normative perceptions.
- Gender-based discrimination increased among IS boys.

KEY FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS
Growing Up GREAT! improved SRH knowledge, key assets and gender-equitable attitudes, but ultimately did not shift a broader spectrum of gender norms.

- Results affirm the potential of early intervention to improve SRH outcomes for adolescents.
- Mixed results on gender-equitable attitudes and norms, also reported in other SRH programs for adolescents, reflect recent evidence showing young people hold a complexity of gender outlooks.

Growing Up GREAT!’s experience points to potential innovations.
- There is a need for improved segmentation and understanding of VYAs’ needs by gender, age, school status and other key socio-demographic markers.
- More programmatic and research efforts are needed to better understand how to engage adolescents’ key influencers across different levels of the socio-ecological model to achieve norm change. Growing Up GREAT! engaged caregivers, teachers, and health providers, but more time for targeted strategies to reach these adult influencers may be needed.