

## **Abstract**

**Introduction:** Sub-Saharan Africa bears the highest burden of HIV worldwide. Youth aged 15 to 24 are a unique and vulnerable group, at high risk of acquiring HIV/STI's. Girls face the additional danger of early/unwanted pregnancy. In rural Zambia there is a paucity of secular sexual and reproductive health preventive interventions targeting youth. We performed an evaluation of a youth intervention program operated by Bumi Bwesu Youth Centre (BBYC), a community based centre located in rural Zambia. BBYC provides workshops in sexual and reproductive health, performs HIV voluntary counselling and testing, and distributes condoms free of charge.

**Methods:** We assessed program quality, degree of implementation, and sexual behaviour outcomes using quantitative and qualitative methods. We performed a survey of knowledge, attitudes, practices and perception (KAPP) in 51 9<sup>th</sup> graders who had attended BBYC workshops compared 151 9<sup>th</sup> graders who had not attended BBYC. Focus group discussions (FGD) were carried out with 48 9<sup>th</sup> graders.

**Results:** BBYC's curriculum was focused on transmitting knowledge. VCT and condom distribution were well utilized. BBYC was not able to implement its adult mentor training program due to lack of funds. We detected a modest effect of BBYC on positively influencing knowledge, attitudes and perception, but no effect on gender issues or on reported sexual behaviour. BBYC attendees demonstrated better knowledge of sexuality, a more positive attitude toward condom use, a more critical attitude toward use of coercion to obtain sex, and more appropriate personal risk perception than non-attendees. FGD's with girls revealed pervasive gender based violence. FGD's with boys revealed high-risk behaviour in spite of adequate knowledge and appropriate risk perception.

**Conclusion:** Reasons for BBYC's limited effect on sexual behaviour were the narrow focus of the curriculum on knowledge, lack of a strategy to understand young people's sexual behaviour, inability to influence dominant social norms in the community due to lack of implementation of the adult mentor workshops, and inability to change contextual factors in the community such as poor economic and educational opportunities for youth and gender inequality.