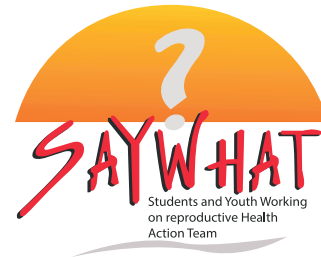


***Web for Life
Symposium Report***



Web for Life Symposium

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Web for Life Symposium was held during the 5th edition of the Southern African Regional Students and Youth Conference convened by SAYWHAT in partnership with the University of Botswana from the 17 – 19 of July 2024 in Gaborone Botswana under theme “Building Bridges, Navigating Emerging Issues: Advancing Equitable Access to Public Health and Education”.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

CSE	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
CSO	Civil Society Organisations
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
ICASA	International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa
ICPD	International Conference on Population Development
SADC PF	Southern African Development Community Parliamentary Forum
SARSYC	Southern African Regional Students and Youth Conference
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
TB	Tuberculosis
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization



Introduction

SAYWHAT convened the **WebForLife Symposium** on the 17th of July 2024, in Gaborone, Botswana. This event was held as part of the 5th edition of the Southern African Regional Students and Youth Conference on sexual and reproductive health (SARSYC). The WebForLife Symposium was one of the various side sessions of the conference, which serves as a regional platform bringing together students, young people, policymakers, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), governments, the UN Family, and other stakeholders to engage in solution focussed dialogues on all matters related to young people's health and wellbeing.

WebForLife is a young women's movement that was created to amplify the voices of young women regarding various health and wellbeing issues that affect girls and young women. The movement started in Zimbabwe and expanded into the region for inter-country collaborations in dealing with young women's challenges.

This report provides a summarised presentation of the key discussions that took place during the young women's symposium held during SARSYC in Botswana.



About SAYWHAT

The Students and Youth Working on reproductive Health Action Team (SAYWHAT) is a public health advocacy institution with 20 years of experience in championing health including Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) rights of young people. The organization addresses policy, structural and community level barriers to the full realisation of the health rights of young people.

SAYWHAT envisions **“A generation of healthy and empowered young people in Southern Africa”**, driven by the mission **“To promote students, youth, adolescents and children’s access to health and education rights, services & commodities across Africa”**. SAYWHAT’s programmatic approach is rooted in the health rights movement which is sustained through its strategic pillars of Youth and Students Organizing & Leadership; Youth-Focused Knowledge & Information Sharing; Advocacy and Campaigning; Health and Child Protection Services.

Demand generation for SRH and GBV services	Child Protection - Child Safeguarding	Mental Health	Gender Equality and Equity Advocacy	Right to Education Advocacy
Drug and Substance Abuse	Menstrual Health Management	Comprehensive Sexuality Education	Service helpline facility (Emergency toll-free number 577)	Safe and Legal abortion advocacy
Responding to young people’s health needs during emergencies and humanitarian crises		HIV and Tuberculosis	Climate change	Transnational advocacy on the right to health and education

About SARSYC

The 5th Edition of SARSYC was held from the 17-19 July 2024 in Gaborone, Botswana. This year's conference was held under the theme "Building Bridges, Navigating Emerging Issues: Advancing Equitable Access to Public Health and Education", reinforcing the critical role of strengthening the education system in the region as a strategic necessity to address the intersecting socio-economic and public health concerns confronted by young people.



This year's conference primarily focussed on 5 thematic areas which are:

ICPD30: As we approach the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) 30th anniversary, it is a time for celebration and introspection. SARSYC presented an opportunity for the youths to examine the ICPD's impact and relevance in today's context, ensuring that their voices contribute to shaping the future trajectory of population and development discourse.

- b) **HIV, TB, and other communicable diseases:** Southern Africa continues to face a high burden of HIV and tuberculosis (TB). These not only strain healthcare systems but also cast shadows over economic productivity and social stability. SARSYC is an opportunity for students and young leaders converge to dissect policies, evaluate the intersections of communicable diseases with other aspects of life, and forge actionable plans.
- c) **Emerging Issues in Public Health:** The Southern African Regional Students and Youth Conference (SARSYC) is a strategic opportunity to address critical emerging public health concerns. In this edition, the focus areas were climate change, the AI revolution, and its negative and positive implications in the youth's wellbeing.
- d) **Intersecting Quality Education, Gender Equality, and Public Health: Advancing SDGs 3, 4, and 5**
The African Union's proclamation of 2023 as the Year of Education comes at a critical time when millions of girls drop out of school in Sub-Saharan Africa due to constraints such as vulnerability to sexual harassment, menstrual health challenges, and early marriage. These barriers not only disrupt individual lives but also impede the region's progress. SARSYC ignited dialogue on these matters and foster partnerships to develop educational interventions that are responsive to the emerging challenges within the region.
- e) **Research:** SAYWHAT recognises the power of research to address the contemporary challenges that young people confront. As part of the SARSYC V, SAYWHAT conducted the 2nd Edition of the Regional Research Indaba with the aim of contributing to evidence-based programming in the organization and offer research proposals that address contemporary challenges faced by young people. The regional indaba promotes and strengthens the linkages of research, training, policy, and practice to achieve universal access to health services in Southern Africa

WebforLife's discussions revolved around these thematic areas bringing out young women's perspectives. Young women in Southern Africa bear the brunt of most SRH challenges including Sexual harassment, gender-based violence and systematic exclusion from life-transforming opportunities.

WebForLife Symposium in the SARSYC Movement

At the SARSYC, WebForLife plays a pivotal role in championing the voices and perspectives of young women across the region. As a dynamic and growing movement, WebForLife brings fresh insights and innovative approaches to addressing issues pertinent to young women. Their presence at the conference highlights the importance of youth engagement in regional dialogues and underscores the necessity of inclusive policies that consider the unique challenges and aspirations of young women. Through their active participation, WebForLife members facilitate meaningful discussions, forge strategic alliances, and inspire other young leaders to act within their communities.



The key roles of WebforLife are as follows:

Advocacy and Representation: WebForLife ensured that the voices of young women were heard in key discussions, advocating for policies and initiatives that address their specific needs and challenges. The issues raised by young women during the symposium and other conference tracks and activities were included in the conference declaration which was handed over to the secretary general of the SADC PF.

Capacity Building: By participating in workshops and panel discussions, WebForLife contributed to the capacity building of young women leaders, equipping them with the skills and knowledge to drive change in their communities.

Networking and Collaboration: The conference provided a platform for WebForLife to establish and strengthen partnerships with other organizations, policymakers and women's rights champions, fostering collaboration and collective action on regional issues affecting young women.

Innovation and Creativity: WebForLife introduced innovative ideas and creative solutions to persistent challenges, demonstrating the value of youth-led approaches in regional policymaking and program development.

Awareness and Education: Through their engagement, WebForLife raised awareness about the importance of young women's participation in socio-economic and public health spheres, educating other stakeholders on the critical role young women play in sustainable development.

These strategic roles underscore the importance of including young women in regional dialogue platforms like SARSYC, ensuring that their contributions lead to more holistic and impactful outcomes.



Symposium Delegates

- The symposium was attended by the following delegates:
- Students and young people from the region
- Representatives from youth movements
- Civil society actors
- Representatives from regional and global bodies like ICASA
- Feminists
- Policymakers from the region
- Staff representatives from tertiary institutions in the region



Symposium Proceedings

Who are we, where are we coming from and where are we going?

Esinathy Sibanda, a Programs Officer from SAYWHAT, led this session. She noted that WebForLife was created as a platform to amplify the voices of young women in advocacy on various health and wellbeing issues. She added that the movement started in Zimbabwe, driven by the need to address specific challenges faced by young women in the country.

Sibanda highlighted that the WebForLife has successfully expanded beyond Zimbabwe, fostering inter-country collaborations to tackle shared challenges, and the movement now includes a network of young women across several countries, working together to drive change.

Core Objectives:

- To advocate for policies and programs that address the health and wellbeing needs of young women.
- To empower young women through capacity building and leadership development initiatives.
- To create a supportive community where young women can share experiences, resources, and strategies.

In terms of future directions and goals, the program officer indicated that they are exploring ways to separate Web 4 Life from SAYWHAT even though this initiative is a brainchild of SAYWHAT. She further noted that the network seeks to continue its expansion to include more young women from different regions and strengthen partnerships with other organizations, governments, and stakeholders to enhance the impact of their advocacy efforts.



Catching up with the girls; What are the current issues?

In this session, representatives from various countries highlighted the major problems facing young women in their regions, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and collaborative efforts to address these issues effectively.

Here are the key issues raised:

Gender-Based Violence: Across all countries, there is a high prevalence of gender-based violence, with South Africa experiencing the highest rates. Activism has empowered young women and girls, giving them a voice, which has, in turn, threatened some men who feel the need to reaffirm their power through violence. While most colleges and universities have progressively formulated sexual harassment policies, the implementation of the policies remains weak with the majority of students not even aware of such policies exist, and the reporting mechanisms in the tertiary institutions.

Mental Health Challenges: Mental health issues such as Premenstrual Disorder and depression are common, leading to increased drug and substance abuse as a coping mechanism.

Teenage Pregnancies and Child Marriages: High rates of teenage pregnancies and child marriages are a significant concern. Abigail Miranzi from Zimbabwe shared details about their "Not in My Village" campaign, launched in Mashonaland Central. This initiative involves traditional leaders imposing punishments and fines on perpetrators to prevent these practices.

Sex Work and Child Exploitation: In Angola, there are high levels of sex work and child exploitation, especially in areas around Chinese mining areas.

Lack of Access to Feminine Products: There is a widespread lack of access to essential feminine products like sanitary wear.

Sexual Exploitation: Sexual exploitation remains a pervasive issue. Alarmingly, women are increasingly becoming perpetrators, with authors romanticizing and profiting from these exploitative narratives.

Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Services: In Zambia, access to SRH services is limited, primarily due to the distance to health facilities. Additionally, the high rate of backyard abortions is a major issue since the country's restrictive abortion laws require approval from three doctors, a challenging requirement in areas with few medical professionals.

Proposed Solutions

Informed by the above stated challenges, the young women came up with suggestions on how these could be effectively addressed within the varying contexts within the region. Some of the key resolutions established were as follows:

Safeguarding Programs in Higher and Tertiary Institutions: The young women advocated for stakeholders to partner with universities to increase support for programs to promote safeguarding against sexual harassment and gender-based violence in higher and tertiary institutions. These programs must include clear accountability measures to ensure a safe and supportive environment for all students.

Male Engagement in Advocacy: There is a need for increased male engagement in the advocacy space for women. By involving men in these efforts, they can better understand the experiences and feelings of women, fostering a more supportive and empathetic environment.

Youth Involvement in Policy and Decision Making: The young women emphasized the need for young people to be involved in key decision-making processes and policy formulation. They noted that their perspectives and insights are crucial for creating policies that accurately reflect their needs and challenges.

Affordable Mental Health Services: The young women called for stakeholders to immediately establish a clear roadmap to address drug abuse as an urgent public health and socio-economic challenge that calls for multi-sectoral and inter-disciplinary measures for the scourge to be addressed. Further, there is a need for the provision of affordable mental health services tailored to meet the needs of young people. These services should be accessible and designed to address the specific mental health challenges faced by youth.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Schools need to provide comprehensive sexuality education. This will equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health. The young women acknowledged the work that has been done so far by partners like UNESCO to ensure that CSE is mainstreamed in the education system, but highlighted a concern that the continuity of implementation of that approach has not been standardized across all schools.

Parent-to-Child Communication and Youth-Friendly Centers: The young women bemoaned the lack of parental involvement in youth SRH issues. They noted that communities should be sensitized on the importance of effective parent-to-child communication. This can help bridge gaps in understanding and support, particularly on issues related to health and wellbeing. To further strengthen these community level interventions, the young women indicated that advocacy is needed to establish more youth-friendly centres, especially in marginalized areas. These centres should provide inclusive access to services and resources, promoting both equity and equality.

Youth Friendly Service Provision Training for Healthcare Providers: The young women were unhappy with the quality of service provided to young people. They shared concerns about the attitude of some of the healthcare service providers especially in public healthcare facilities. They recommended that Healthcare providers should be trained to improve their attitude towards clients, and this can help reduce stigma and discrimination, making healthcare services more accessible and welcoming for all.

Legislative Measures for Government Accountability and Decentralization of Investigative Procedures: WebforLife delegates noted that adopting legislative measures to hold the government accountable is essential. This ensures that policies and programs are implemented effectively and that the rights of young people are protected. Further, procedures for investigative committee councils need to be decentralized. Students should be included in investigative committees which look into cases of sexual harassment in tertiary institutions. This can improve access to justice and ensure that investigations are conducted efficiently and fairly.



Motivational Talk-Dean Sarafina Mudavanhu -Harare Institute of Technology

Dean Sarafina Mudavanhu from the Harare Institute of Technology delivered an inspiring motivational talk to the young ladies present. She encouraged them to strive towards becoming respected individuals within their communities. She outlined what can be termed an empowerment Blueprint, highlighting seven key pillars for ambitious young women. These can be summarized as follows:

- i. Money Has No Gender:** Dean Mudavanhu emphasized that financial success is not limited by gender. She encouraged the young women to pursue their financial goals with determination and confidence, breaking away from traditional gender roles that might limit their potential.
- ii. Step into the Field, Not the Bed:** She advised the ladies to focus on their careers and professional growth rather than relying on relationships for financial stability or success. This message was aimed at empowering them to seek independence and self-reliance.
- iii. Trade Your Brand, Not Your Private Part:** Dean Mudavanhu stressed the importance of building a personal brand based on skills, talents, and professional achievements. She urged the young women to avoid compromising their integrity and self-worth for short-term gains or societal pressures.
- iv. The Instrument of Money-Making Is Under the Hat, Not the Skirt:** Highlighting the value of intelligence and hard work, she encouraged the ladies to utilize their brains and skills as the primary tools for making money. This lesson underscored the importance of education, innovation, and perseverance in achieving financial success.



v. Never Pray to Marry a Rich Man but to Become the Rich Girl: Dean Mudavanhu inspired young women to aspire to be wealthy and successful, rather than depending on a partner's wealth. This lesson was about fostering a sense of ambition and self-empowerment.

vi. Never Trade Your Relationship with God for Anyone: She reminded the ladies to hold on to their spiritual beliefs and values, regardless of external influences or relationships. Maintaining a strong moral and ethical foundation was emphasized as crucial for personal and professional integrity.

vii. The Internet Never Forgets: Dean Mudavanhu warned about the permanence of online activities, advising young women to be mindful of their digital footprints. She stressed the importance of using social media responsibly and the potential long-term consequences of their online actions on future opportunities.

Conclusion

The discussions and sessions held during the SARSYC WebForLife Symposium provided invaluable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by young women across the region. From addressing the high prevalence of gender-based violence and mental health issues to advocating for comprehensive sexuality education and improved access to essential services, a multifaceted approach is needed to support and empower young women effectively. The sessions highlighted the importance of involving young people in policymaking, the need for comprehensive education and resources, and the crucial role of male engagement in advocacy efforts.

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