

FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE ADVANCING ADOLESCENT RIGHTS AND YOUTH-FRIENDLY HEALTH SERVICES FOR A HEALTHIER ZAMBIA

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the heart of Zambia, young people are navigating a healthcare landscape filled with both promise and obstacles. Their stories, shared in community halls and youth centers, reveal a generation determined to take control of their health-yet too often held back by outdated policies and unfriendly systems. This position paper centers on two urgent advocacy issues: the age of consent for HIV testing and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, and the need for genuinely youth-friendly healthcare. For Chipo, a 17-year-old from Lusaka, self-care is more than a buzzword-it is a daily practice.

“Self-care means doing activities that promote my health,” she explains. “I need to take my medication on time, check my HIV status, and make informed choices about contraception.”

But for Chipo and many of her peers, these simple acts are often complicated by laws and attitudes that deny them autonomy. As one participant in our focus group put it:

“If an adolescent wants to come for an HIV test, there is an erratic supply of these testing kits. So you find that this adolescent who is interested in having an HIV test done will not be able to access it at that particular time because of the reagents which are not available.”

The barriers begin with the age of consent. In Zambia, young people under 16 are often required to obtain parental consent before accessing HIV testing or SRH services. This policy, though well-intentioned, has the unintended effect of deterring adolescents from seeking care, especially those who fear stigma or lack supportive family environments. As another youth shared,

“Sometimes, even if you want to know your status or get family planning, you are told you need to come with your parent. But how can you talk about these things with your parents? It’s not easy.”

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent funding cuts have only intensified these challenges. According to the You(th) Care project data, adolescents aged 10–25 in Zambia now face even greater barriers to accessing services. Our focus groups and key informant interviews revealed that many young people have turned to social media for information-sometimes finding support, but often encountering misinformation or judgment. The workforce dedicated to youth health has also shrunk, further limiting access to quality care. Yet, amidst these challenges, Zambia’s youth remain resilient and resourceful. They are clear about what quality healthcare means to them: services that are accessible, confidential, non-judgmental, and responsive to their needs as young people. As one participant described,

“Quality healthcare is about how you are received, how you are attended to, up to the time you go home. If you are welcomed, not judged, and given the right information, you feel encouraged to come back.”

This position paper amplifies the voices of Zambian youth and calls for urgent action on two fronts: lowering the age of consent for HIV and SRH services, and transforming healthcare spaces into truly youth-friendly environments. By centering the lived experiences and aspirations of young people, we aim to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers, health providers, and community leaders. The time to act is now-because every day of delay is a day when a young person’s right to health is denied.





2. KEY ISSUES

2.1 AGE OF CONSENT FOR HIV TESTING AND SRH SERVICES

Background Information

Despite Zambia's progress in expanding access to HIV and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, the legal age of consent remains a significant barrier for adolescents. According to the *Zambian National Health Strategic Plan 2022–2026*, adolescents under 16 require parental consent to access HIV testing and most SRH services. This policy, while intended to protect minors, often prevents young people from seeking timely and confidential care—especially those who fear stigma or lack supportive family environments. Zambia's FP2030 Commitments also recognize that **“removing legal and policy barriers is essential for increasing access to family planning and SRHR for adolescents and youth.”**

Suggested Resolutions



Policy Reform: Amend national laws and guidelines to lower the age of consent for HIV testing and SRH services to at least 12 years, in line with WHO and SADC recommendations.



Confidentiality Guarantees: Ensure that all adolescents can access HIV and SRH services confidentially, without mandatory parental involvement, especially in cases where disclosure could cause harm.



Community Engagement: Launch targeted campaigns to educate parents, guardians, and community leaders about the importance of adolescent autonomy in health decision-making, as recommended in Zambia's FP2030 Commitments.

Development of an advocacy brief analyzing documents on the age of consent and the limiting factors

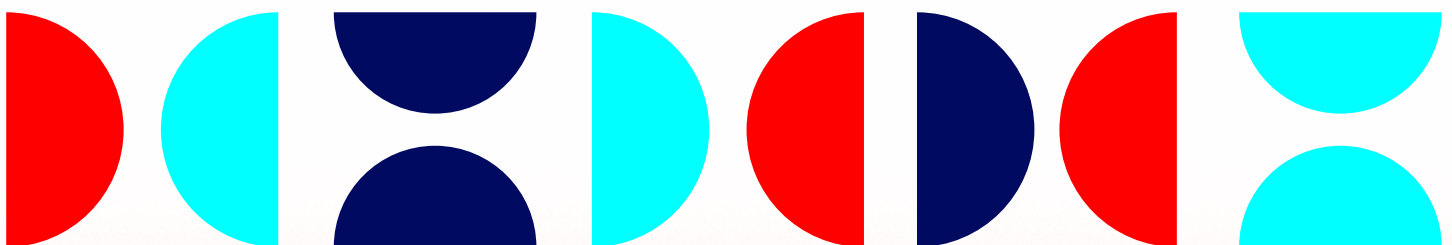
Supporting Evidence

Focus group participants consistently highlighted the negative impact of the current age of consent laws

“Sometimes, even if you want to know your status or get family planning, you are told you need to come with your parent. But how can you talk about these things with your parents? It's not easy.”

(Copper Rose Zambia FGD, 2025)

The UNFPA Zambia Annual Report 2023 notes that only 38% of adolescents aged 15–19 have ever tested for HIV, with lack of confidential access cited as a major barrier. This is particularly concerning given that adolescents and young people account for nearly one-third of new HIV infections in Zambia (NHSP 2022–2026).



2.1 AGE OF CONSENT FOR HIV TESTING AND SRH SERVICES

Background Information

Quality healthcare for young people involves more than just service availability; it requires a welcoming, non-judgmental, and supportive environment. The National Health Strategic Plan (NHSP) 2022–2026 and Zambia’s FP2030 Commitments both emphasize the need for youth-friendly health services as a cornerstone of achieving universal health coverage and reducing HIV and adolescent pregnancy rates. However, UNFPA Zambia’s 2023 report highlights that only 41% of health facilities in Zambia currently offer youth-friendly corners, and many lack trained staff or adequate privacy.



Suggested Resolutions



Expand and Resource Youth-Friendly Corners: Scale up the number of youth-friendly spaces in health facilities, ensuring they are adequately resourced and staffed by trained, empathetic providers (NHSP 2022–2026; FP2030 Commitments).



Service Integration: Integrate SRH, HIV, mental health, and nutrition services for young people, as recommended by the National Health Strategic Plan and UNFPA Zambia.



Capacity Building: Invest in continuous training for health workers on adolescent-friendly service provision, confidentiality, and non-discrimination.



Youth Participation: Involve young people in the design, monitoring, and evaluation of health services to ensure their needs and perspectives directly inform service delivery (FP2030 Commitments).



Development of an assessment paper that tracks the impact of pandemics and funding cuts on SRH services for adolescents and young people

Supporting Evidence

Young people in the focus groups emphasized that quality care means being treated with respect and having access to accurate information:

“Quality healthcare is about how you are received, how you are attended to, up to the time you go home. If you are welcomed, not judged, and given the right information, you feel encouraged to come back.”

(Copper Rose Zambia FGD, 2025)

Another participant explained:

“When we talk of self-care to SRHR, it’s about being able to access commodities like condoms or contraceptives at the facility, with no one judging you. Young people shouldn’t be told these things are only for adults.”

(Copper Rose Zambia FGD, 2025)

Post-COVID-19 funding cuts have exacerbated these challenges, with many youth-friendly spaces closing or becoming understaffed (UNFPA Zambia, 2023). This has forced many young people to rely on social media for information, which is not always reliable or safe. Lack of safe spaces and resource hubs has led young people to struggle with accessing scientifically accurate information or new HIV technologies noted one of our key informant



3. CONCLUSION

The evidence is clear: Zambia's young people are ready and willing to take charge of their health, but the current policy environment and health system barriers are holding them back. The age of consent for HIV testing and SRH services, and the lack of consistently youth-friendly healthcare, are not just bureaucratic hurdles—they are matters of life and death, dignity and opportunity. Every day these barriers persist, adolescents are denied their right to know their status, protect themselves, and make informed choices about their bodies and futures.

Our focus group discussions echo what national data and international partners have long recognized: young people want confidential, judgment-free access to HIV testing, contraception, and SRH information. They want to be welcomed in clinics, not turned away or shamed. As one participant put it, "If you are welcomed, not judged, and given the right information, you feel encouraged to come back." Yet, as the National Health Strategic Plan (2022–2026) and UNFPA Zambia's 2023 report show, less than half of health facilities offer youth-friendly services, and legal barriers continue to drive adolescents away from care.

The urgency is underscored by Zambia's FP2030 Commitments, which call for the removal of legal and policy barriers and the expansion of youth-friendly services as a national priority. With nearly one-third of new HIV infections occurring among young people, and adolescent pregnancy rates remaining stubbornly high, the cost of inaction is measured not just in statistics, but in futures lost.

Action must be taken now

- **Policy Makers and Legislative Committees:** Fast-track the amendment of laws and guidelines to lower the age of consent for HIV testing and SRH services to at least 12 years, in line with WHO and regional best practices. Enshrine confidentiality and non-discrimination in all adolescent health services.
- **Ministry of Health and Implementing Partners:** Urgently scale up and resource youth-friendly corners in all health facilities. Integrate SRH, HIV, mental health, and nutrition services for adolescents, and invest in ongoing training for health workers on adolescent-responsive, non-judgmental care.
- **Funders and Development Partners:** Prioritize and protect funding for adolescent health and youth-led initiatives, ensuring that gains made in SRH and HIV are not reversed by economic shocks or donor transitions. Support robust community engagement and youth participation in policy and service design.
- **Civil Society and Youth Networks:** Continue to amplify youth voices, monitor policy implementation, and hold duty bearers accountable for delivering on FP2030 and national commitments.

The time for incremental change has passed.

Zambia's youth are demanding a health system that respects their rights, meets their needs, and empowers them to thrive. Fulfilling these demands is not just a moral imperative—it is a strategic investment in the nation's future. We call on all stakeholders to act boldly and without delay. The health, rights, and potential of Zambia's next generation depend on it.