

YOUTH REFERENCE GROUP ACTION PLAN 2015-2017 THE GLOBAL FORUM ON MSM & HIV



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2. INTRODUCTION

In every region of the world, gay men and other men who have sex with men (MSM¹) are disproportionately affected by HIV. Young MSM (hereafter referred to as YMSM) are particularly vulnerable, given that many must contemplate new identities and expressions of gender and sexuality in unsupportive environments. Rising incidence of HIV infection among YMSM in many regions of the world is alarming. Despite this, YMSM are frequently marginalized in research, policy, and programs that are often designed for general MSM, general youth (including heterosexuals), and the general population.

Historically, and in many instances today, community-based projects and larger global efforts directed at HIV and rights-based programming for YMSM have been conflated with those of all other gay men and other MSM, regardless of age. This has led to funding gaps, inappropriate programming, a lack of surveillance data, service access problems, and/or an altogether absence of youth-specific programming that targets the unique needs of YMSM. Furthermore, YMSM exist in every country and yet homophobia – and related stigma, denial, discrimination, violence, and criminalization – often prevent them from accessing critical HIV prevention and treatment information, friendly health services, information on their sexual rights and social support.

In almost all comparisons of health and rights indicators, YMSM fair poorer than their adult counterparts. Analysis of the data from the 2012 Gay Men’s Health and Rights Study (GMHR), commissioned by the Global Forum on MSM & HIV (MSMGF) shows that YMSM report significantly less stable housing, less access to medical care, less access to HIV prevention services, lower HIV treatment outcomes, higher prevalence of homophobia and violence, less community engagement, and less comfort with providers, when compared with MSM older than 30 years. These factors act asyndetically, creating elevated risk environments for YMSM that are further compounded by poorer access to low-barrier and culturally competent STI testing and treatment for YMSM, compared to adults.

The MSMGF is an expanding network of advocates and other experts in health, human rights, research and policy, working to ensure an effective response to HIV among gay men and other MSM. In recognition of the unique needs and concerns of YMSM, the MSMGF established the Youth Reference Group (YRG) in 2010. The YRG is one of several MSMGF Reference Groups, an informal network of MSM-serving partner coalitions and networks.

Over the next two years, the YRG will face significant challenges. Shrinking resources during dire global financial times threaten decades of work advancing the health and human rights of MSM around the world. Services and programs aimed at YMSM are particularly vulnerable, as one-size fits all MSM approaches are favored over comprehensive youth-tailored services in budgetary constraints. This document presents a three-year action plan of robust goals, strategies, and priority activities that will guide the YRG through these formidable challenges.

1 ‘Men who have sex with men’ and the corresponding acronym ‘MSM’ refer to all men who engage in sexual and/or romantic relations with other men or who practice same-sex sexual desire. The term is meant to be inclusive of multiple self-determined sexual identities and various identifications with any particular ‘community’ regardless of the large variety of settings/contexts in which male-to-male sex takes place. http://www.msmgf.org/files/msmgf/documents/MSMGF_FactSheet.pdf

3. MSMGF YOUTH REFERENCE GROUP

Mission

To empower YMSM to engage in a global response to HIV that advocates for equitable access to evidence-based prevention, care, treatment, and support services for all YMSM and includes them in the policy, research, and program decision-making processes.

Overall Goals

- Serve as a model for global communication, collaboration, intergenerational dialogue, advocacy, and joint action for a diverse audience of YMSM networks and youth advocates;
- Identify and articulate the specific HIV prevention, treatment, and care needs of YMSM as distinct from adult MSM and the general population;
- Elevate priority issues on YMSM health and human rights at key events, during policy-making opportunities, and within resource-allocation decision-making; and,
- Increase the quality and breadth of research, strategic interventions, policy development, and resource allocation on YMSM initiatives.

Membership

Calls for new members of the YRG are sent out periodically through global and regional listservs and social media platforms focused on MSM, LGBT communities, and/or youth communities.

The YRG aims to support a diverse team with expertise in issues impacting YMSM. The group currently consists of 17 youth leaders who meet the following criteria:

- Between the ages of 15-30;
- From geographical and socio-economically diverse regions;
- Culturally competent and experienced working with diverse expressions of gender and sexuality;
- Experts in the health and human rights issues facing YMSM;
- Able to communicate in English and have regular Internet access in order to effectively participate in MSMGF YRG discussions;

- Able to participate in monthly conference calls;
- Priority given to YMSM openly living with HIV;
- Priority given to YMSM who identify as sex workers; and,
- Priority given to YMSM who identify as transgender men.

Terminology

Different organizations or regions may report different definitions of young people. The MSMGF, in its analysis of the data from the GMHR survey, defines young men as 30 years and younger. The YRG also applies the accepted terminology from the MSMGF for men who have sex with men, though acknowledges and respects other terms and identities (such as 'gay' or 'queer') through which young men identify and affiliate in relation to their gender identity, sexuality, and sexual practice in diverse cultures and societies.

Action Planning Process

On July 23, 2012 at the International AIDS Conference in Washington, DC, the YRG convened to help identify unique issues to YMSM in each global region. YRG members delivered presentations on the health and human rights issues facing YMSM in each region. Regional overviews were presented on:

- Latin America
- Asia
- Middle East and North Africa
- Western Europe and North America
- the Caribbean, and
- West and East Africa

Countries represented in these regional health overviews included:

- | | | |
|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|
| • Armenia | • Kenya | • Rwanda |
| • Brunei | • Lebanon | • Singapore |
| • Burma/Myanmar | • Nigeria | • South Korea |
| • Guyana | • Paraguay | • Tanzania |
| • Ireland | • Peru | • Uganda |
| • Jamaica | • Philippines | • United States |

These presentations elicited several common themes across all regions. The group decided that these overarching themes could be better explored in three working groups on:

1. Advocacy
2. Research
3. Programming and Services

In the fall of 2013, YRG members in each of the three working groups discussed their group's goals and identified priorities for action plan initiatives. These discussions are outlined in the following three-year action plan.

4. MSMGF YRG PRIORITIES AND STRATEGIES 2015-2017

4.1 ADVOCACY

Goal: Reinvigorated YMSM-led advocacy focused on HIV research, policy, programs and resources that can more sensitively address the needs of YMSM and which reflects their growing incidence globally.

Background and Rationale

YMSM are particularly vulnerable to homophobia and other forms of stigma and discrimination. This discrimination is visible in the form of blackmail and violence, a lack of protective laws, unsupportive and punitive law enforcement, barriers to accessing the justice system, and/or barriers to exercising fully their sexual and reproductive rights as a whole. YMSM are at particular risk due to young people's dependency on families and communities who may not understand or accept their sexuality, putting them at risk of losing housing and/or financial support.

Young people, however, are best equipped to define their own needs and should be supported in developing responses to those needs. The greater involvement of YMSM in the decision-making processes that impact them requires deliberate efforts to ensure YMSM leaders and organizations are aware of opportunities to impact policy at regional and global levels. It requires investing resources (such as mentorship and training opportunities) in new leadership within the global MSM and HIV response.

Strategic Focus

The YRG can have the greatest impact by:

- Creating an interactive online platform to elevate the voices of YMSM from around the world to advocate for their health and human rights;
- Building alliances with other HIV-focused organizations, networks and coalitions that serve young gay men and other YMSM;
- Identifying key advocacy opportunities during the course of the action plan and developing strategies to draw attention to YMSM issues at these events;
- Cultivating capacity in YMSM by building social capital and developing strong advocacy skills.

Priority Activities

- 4.1.1 Write letters of support and concern** to local and national governments demanding an effective and accountable response to HIV among YMSM.
- 4.1.2 Profile local/regional initiatives** on the MSMGF website and newsletter that model effective YMSM engagement strategy.
- 4.1.3 Sign partnership agreements** with other global youth coalitions, to form alliances to advocate stronger for youth-related health and human rights issues.
- 4.1.4 Maintain a blog and write opinion editorials** that shine light on the barriers to health for all YMSM.

4.2 RESEARCH

Goal: Increased knowledge on YMSM and HIV through the creation and promotion of research and information exchanges that specifically address YMSM's unique needs.

Background and Rationale

The 21st century has brought remarkable developments in the amount of information, communications, and data about the health and rights of gay men and other MSM. YMSM, many of whom have grown up in a new age of increasingly accessible information, are demanding more evidence behind what interventions and approaches work to meet their unique needs. Yet despite high incidence and prevalence among YMSM in regions across the world, data and research on YMSM are extremely limited.

For instance, there are critical questions unanswered and un-contextualized for YMSM on the structural and upstream drivers of the HIV epidemic. Self-perception and internalized homophobia, identity formation challenges, family and intimate relationship development, living in sero-discordant relationships, mental health concerns, economic impact of the cost of lifetime treatment and care, intersections with sex work, the implications of pre-exposure prophylaxis on condom use rates and risk perception, depression, and substance abuse are examples of these structural factors impacting YMSM that remain poorly understood.

Furthermore, like many fields of HIV research, significant geographical disparities exist in which an overwhelming quantity of research is among men in high-income settings of the global north. Research about the sexual health and rights of YMSM in low- and middle-income countries is further constrained by limited resources, research capacity, and dissemination of findings.

Strategic Focus

The YRG can have the greatest impact by:

- Contributing new strategic information, specifically interpretation, opinion, and analysis of data and findings collected through surveys, implementation science, evaluation, and policy reports;
- Identifying and disseminating in an easily-accessible format the most important research findings and resources impacting YMSM;
- Forming partnerships with local and regional networks to facilitate community-based research and promote active dialogue and knowledge exchange;
- Promoting ethical research practices, such as ensuring confidentiality and anonymity (where applicable), to which YMSM are particularly sensitive.

Priority Activities

- 4.2.1 Build a dedicated youth conference stream** at the MSMGF Pre-Conference to the International AIDS Conference.
- 4.2.2 Interface with the MSMGF Research Group** to ensure research efforts (such as the GMHR survey) and collect appropriate, age-disaggregated data that will answer the unmet research needs of YMSM. Qualitative data complementary to the GMHR quantitative data (such as focus groups, online questionnaires, and individual interviews) may provide better insight into the lived experiences of YMSM.
- 4.2.3 Share research findings** that benefit YMSM through the online and social networks of the MSMGF.

4.3 PROGRAMS & SERVICES

Goal: Improved evidence-based programs and services that are responsive to the unique needs of YMSM.

Background and Rationale

Like all young people, YMSM need culturally competent, pragmatic, and inclusive prevention messages and programs which address behavioral, cultural and institutional barriers to sexual health information and services. This is an exciting time for new biomedical technologies such as improved rapid diagnostics for HIV and other STIs, and for antiretroviral based interventions such as microbicides for rectal use and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). New approaches also include 'treatment as prevention' strategies and employing community viral load monitoring. However, these exciting new developments in prevention and treatment will only be beneficial to YMSM if safety and sensitivity concerns do not inhibit access.

Analysis from the 2012 GMRH survey indicates that homophobia and economic dependence inhibit YMSM from discussing their HIV risk factors with health providers, educators or family members. Less than 10% of YMSM reported easy access to MSM-focused sexual education or HIV education materials designed for MSM. Of all YMSM living with HIV who met the WHO's guidelines for recommended treatment, only 56% reported taking therapy. Among these young men on therapy, only 38% of YMSM living with HIV reported being virally suppressed (compared to 73% among older MSM) and more than 40% of YMSM did not know their viral load or could not access viral load testing.

Comprehensive sexuality education delivery remains a concern for YMSM in many regions of the world. Curricula are often not designed with youth or MSM in mind and can focus too heavily on HIV, pregnancy and heterosexual relationships, while ignoring growing concerns such as other STIs and ano-rectal health. Peer-based interventions and community-based strategies delivered with a harm reduction approach are proven to reduce the frequency of unprotected anal intercourse and improve consistent use of condoms with new partners.

Strategic Focus

The YRG can have the greatest impact by:

- Promoting sensitive and responsive prevention and treatment services that are age-adapted;
- Helping build a network of service providers that promote the need for educational programming that is scientifically accurate, free of shaming, and designed specifically with and for YMSM;
- Identifying and evaluating programs and services that have driven positive health outcomes specifically for YMSM and that develop broad guidelines for providers and programmers in diverse settings to replicate and tailor to local contexts.

Priority Activities

- 4.3.1 Maintain a list of effective and YMSM-sensitive curricula** from across the world that can be easily shared with community partners.
- 4.3.2 Organize a workshop in a priority country** that brings together a broad cross-section of stakeholders including YMSM, service providers, program designers and decision-makers. The workshop should identify the most urgent barriers to YMSM's access to services and should strategize how to reduce them.

CONCLUSION

As an advocacy organization working for the health and human rights of gay men and other MSM, the MSMGF strives to be sensitive, respectful and responsive to the issues faced by different MSM populations. Accordingly, the MSMGF recognizes the importance of supporting and involving YMSM groups and networks in its work. The YRG has been established on that very principle and must play a key role in the collective response of the MSMGF to the unique challenges faced by YMSM across the world. In an effort to build a greater and more inclusive youth movement in the global HIV response, the YRG also maintains a safe space for others to join the cause. This action plan offers a framework for the YRG towards achieving its mission and goals.



The Global Forum on MSM & HIV (MSMGF) is a coalition of advocates working to ensure an effective response to HIV among MSM. Our coalition includes a wide range of people, including HIV-positive and HIV-negative gay men directly affected by the HIV epidemic, and other experts in health, human rights, research, and policy work. What we share is our willingness to step forward and act to address the lack of HIV responses targeted to MSM, end AIDS, and promote health and rights for all. We also share a particular concern for the health and rights of gay men/MSM who: are living with HIV; are young; are from low and middle income countries; are poor; are migrant; belong to racial/ethnic minority or indigenous communities; engage in sex work; use drugs; and/or identify as transgender.

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