

# Challenges Adolescent Girls Face

*A Report of Consultative Forums  
Held with Girls 13-16 years in  
Kiambu*



## BACKGROUND

Every year, on June 16<sup>th</sup> and June 26<sup>th</sup>, the Day of the African Child and World Drugs Day are commemorated world over. In 2022, the theme of the two events were “**Eliminating Harmful Practices Affecting Children: Progress on Policy & Practice since 2013**” and “**Addressing Drug Challenges in Health and Humanitarian Crises**” respectively.

Whereas the Day of the African Child sought to appraise progress made, and reflect on lost and missed policy-related opportunities to effectively eliminate harmful practices affecting Kenyan Children<sup>1</sup>; the World Drug Day called on

different actors to enhance access to controlled medicines, evidence-based care, treatment and services; and support to prevent negative coping behaviours<sup>2</sup>.

These events are critical, and underscore the need to involve and amplify the voices of young people in recognizing and taking action to address harmful practices that impede their wellbeing; and ability to thrive and reach their full potential.

In lieu of these events, Students Campaign Against Drugs (SCAD) organized consultations with adolescents drawn from different schools in Kiambu and Nairobi Counties, to understand their perspectives on drug use, as well as other challenges they face in health and humanitarian crises.

### Objectives

1. Enhance the participation of the girl child during the commemoration of the Day of the African Child and World Drug Day
2. Identify key challenges, including drug use, that are encountered by the girl child
3. Discuss in groups and through arts, how these challenges affect the girl child especially during the post-covid pandemic period
4. Highlight recommendations on necessary measures to address these challenges
5. Provide a platform to access debrief on pressing issues

### Participants

The consultation attracted a diverse group of adolescent girls 13-16 years, drawn from low income areas in Kiambu and Nairobi counties. The girls are from a mix of single and two parent families; orphaned, and living with relatives. Some are first born in their families, with the burden of setting the best example for their younger siblings.



## KEY CHALLENGES GIRLS FACE TODAY: DISCUSSIONS

### Opening and Welcome Activities

In preparation of the consultations, SCAD introduced girls to the International Day of the African Child, and the International Day Against Drug Abuse, highlighting the importance of these events to their wellbeing. They thereafter participated in dance, aerobics and artistic expression of their experiences.

### Discussions

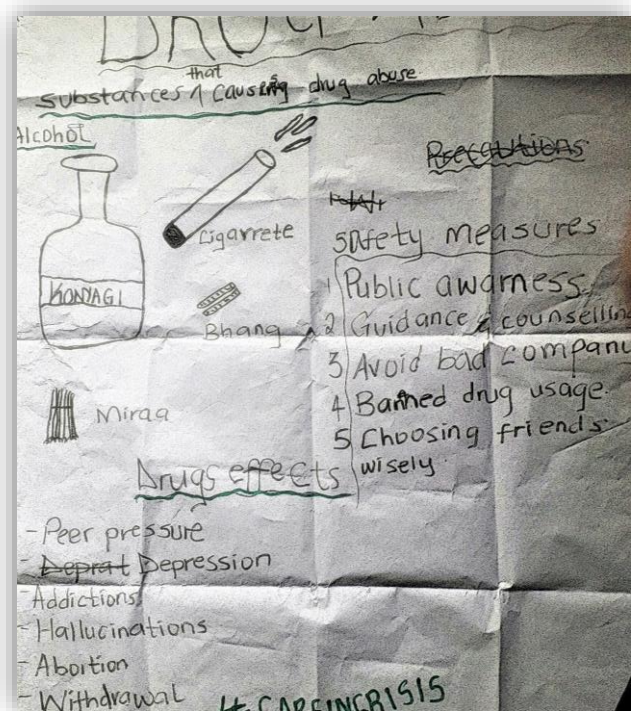
#### Drug use and related effects

In our opening discussions, participants argued that drug use is one of the challenges faced by the girl child especially during school breaks. While alcohol and bhang were most used, bhang was most preferred by adolescent girls; it is easily accessible, is not harmful, popular in the media; and parents and other relatives use it. Global estimates show a 5.8 % prevalence in bhang use among adolescents 15-16<sup>3</sup>. Nationally, the prevalence among secondary school students is 1.8%<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, the national study found students whose parents used alcohol were 3 times more likely to experiment with alcohol, compared to students whose parents don't use alcohol<sup>5</sup>. Ease of access and low perception of harm also are also studied drivers of drug use among young people.

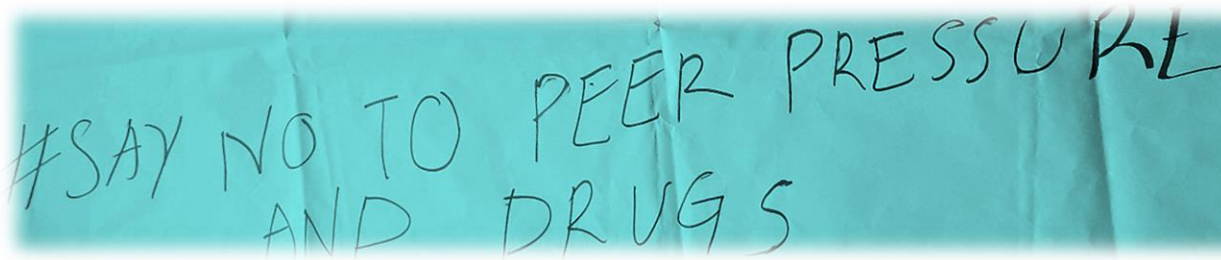
Further, participants discussed the nuances on bhang use

among girls; “after smoking, I just chew gum. No one knows I am high, but with alcohol, I stagger, smell and have bloodshot eyes”. Simply, bhang is more attractive because signs of use are subtle, unlike alcohol or other drugs.

From these discussions, the girls evidently understood, and know the different ways drug use affects their lives. Participants highlighted inability to concentrate and excel in school; dropping out of school; truancy; risky sexual activity and pregnancy; difficulty forming and maintaining relationships; and altercations with parents as some consistent and prevalent outcomes of drug use in adolescent girls. This is consistent with the national survey on drug use among secondary school students undertaken by NACADA<sup>4</sup>. In these consultations, dependency was also an issue of concern, with girls believing some of their peers are already dependent on bhang and alcohol, and may need further support.



## **Peer influence: cross cutting**



Adolescence is a period of incredible changes in human development. During this period, peer relationships are invariably key, and inform many decisions an adolescent makes. At this point, they desire to belong and connect with peer groups, and the ensuing social influence can lead to risk taking and conformity with risky behaviour<sup>6,7,8</sup>. Participants elaborated that some girls initiate drug use due to “pressure from their boyfriends”, making that choice so as to preserve the romantic relationship, rather than “lose their boyfriend to other girls”; while others do so out of the influence of other peers.

Simultaneously, participants highlighted young girls’ struggle with the construct of virginity, and the social expectation to be sexually active by a certain age (16 and 18 years). While many are convinced to remain sexually inactive, they are distraught this choice may lead to stigmatization.

## **Sexual practices, early pregnancy and related issues: cross cutting**

National estimates show that 12% of Kenyans living with HIV are youth 15-24 years<sup>9</sup>; and 399,131 pregnancies among 10-19 year olds in 2019<sup>10</sup>. Participants discussed how young girls are more scared of HIV than pregnancy due to social and other ramifications; perceived as sexually promiscuous and stigmatization by community members and parents; time lost in carrying pregnancy; discontinuation of education; exclusion from peer activities; having to earn a living to support their new child among others<sup>11</sup>. At the centre of sexual practices are peer-to-peer relationships; “**mubabaz**” a colloquial term for financial and material sexual relationships between male adults and young girls, and defilement.

Participants contend that it is not uncommon for teenage mothers to begin using alcohol, or develop mental health problems like depression, due to community response to their situation. HIV infection, or the fear thereof, were also linked to stigmatization, anxiety and depression.

we are also aware from past consultations, that drug use among adolescents with HIV is a key issue of concern, and perhaps could be explored in other forums.

Our discussions did not explore contraceptive use as a pregnancy prevention and HIV risk reduction measure despite the need as revealed by ongoing arguments. Future discussions and indeed, other agencies should pick up on this thematic area.

## **Relationships with peers**

Participants admittedly struggle with creating strong bonds with peers, as they lack the tools to do so. To them, communication skills would strengthen their bonds with peers and adults. Beyond this, the loss of a romantic relationship easily contributed to drug use.

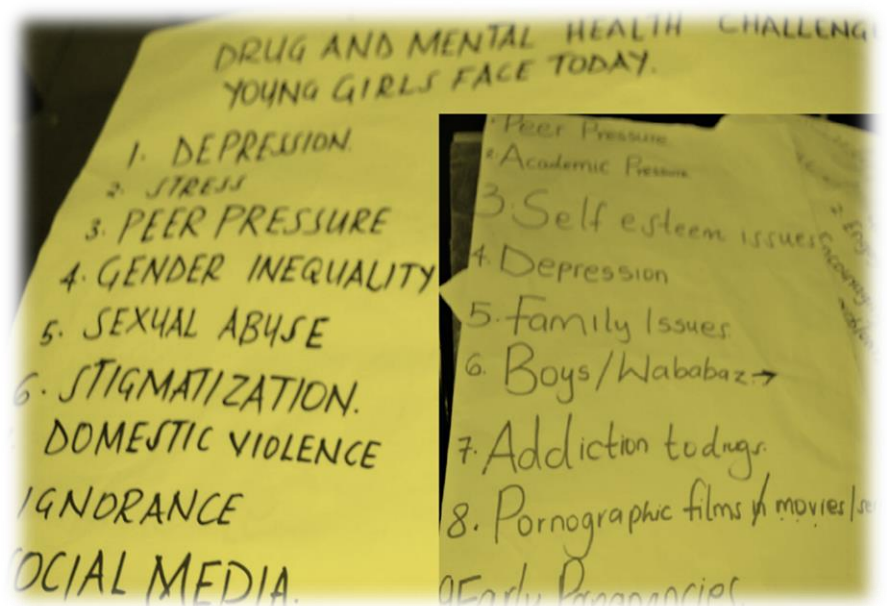
## **Emotional and mental health problems**

Participants discussed how they have difficulties coping with stressful events and experiences like bereavement, transitioning to secondary school and exposure to abuse. They would like to “have skills that enable them control their emotions, and deal with mental health difficulties”

Some participants recognized the duality of drug use and different mental health states; for example, a girl dealing with anxiety may use bhang to calm down, or alcohol and bhang use may lead to paranoia, depression and anxiety.

## **Family; parenting, drug use and separation/divorce**

Parental drug use contributes to drug use among adolescents<sup>5</sup>, while separation and or divorce is also likely to increase risk of youth drug use, social discomfort, learning difficulties, disruptive behaviour and mental health difficulties<sup>13</sup>. Participants underscored that some use drugs because parents use or have drugs at home. Others experience a multitude of difficulties due to parental separation. Absentee parents were a theme highlighted by a section of students as negative to their wellbeing, but not sufficiently explored.



Another outstanding theme was conflict with parents where girls express being stressed out because they feel “misunderstood, shouted at, ignored and castigated for little mistakes” or for “acting out” by parents. This is contrary to their desire for parental affection, recognition and engagement.

Economic hardships affect girls severely, leading to some girls using drugs or getting jobs to contribute to family upkeep, rather than focus on academics. The worry of not having enough, or parental use of resources to support drug use is also extremely stressful to them.

## **Abuse and defilement**

Child defilement cases are reportedly high in Kenya<sup>14</sup>. During the forum, participants underlined that some girls are defiled by close family members and other adults entrusted to protect them. Despite the ensuing pain, the victims often experience difficulty reporting such abuse. “Even when a girl reports these abuses, the perpetrator is a family member. Reporting only causes conflict, with some girls not believed and labelled liars. This leads to further abuse”, reported a teacher privy to such cases. Where

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these cases end up in court, suspects get a “slap in the wrist penalty”, while remaining in the community, and being a perpetual risk to girls.

Schools provide refuge and shelter from these debilitating experiences. Conversely, school breaks cause fear and anxiety. Participants believe these practices lead to emotional and mental health problems like anxiety, anger, bitterness, depression, drug use, suicide ideation; as well as normalization.

Further to this, girls highlighted exposure to domestic violence as a pressing issue for girls across the country. Being subjected to physical, mental and emotional abuse, as well as corporal punishment for mistakes made are a worrying trend for many young girls.

## Other themes

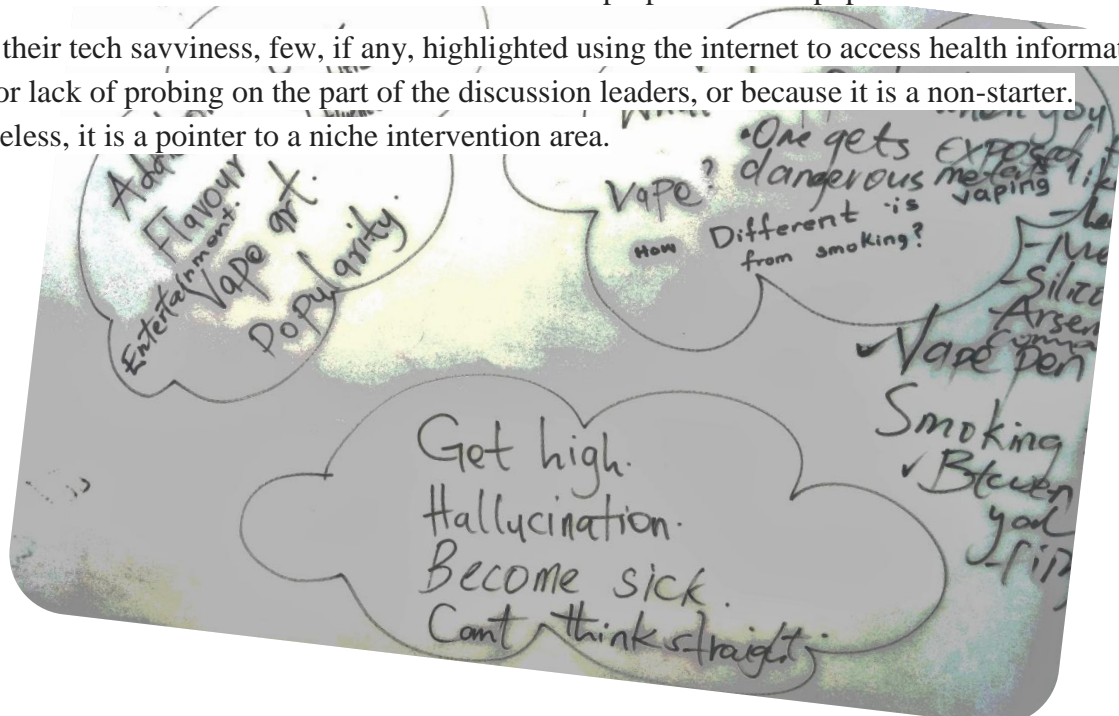
Bereavement; some participants have lost parents and other family members. They have had unpleasant experiences when having to live with relatives, who “mistreat and regard them as non-family members”. Lifestyle changes drastically occur, without any preparation or debrief. These cause stress and duress.

Abuse, neglect and maltreatment: a section of participants also reported general abuse, neglect and maltreatment from caregivers or other family members.

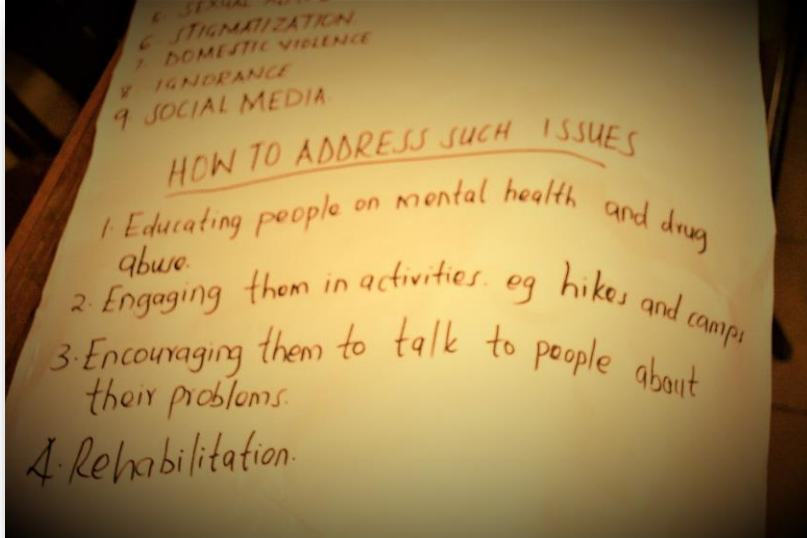
Today’s young person is more tech savvy and connected to the internet than. It is important to understand however, that many still lack access to phones and the internet. For this cohort, any access to the internet is via cyber cafes, borrowing phones from friends and family, and sometimes, at school.

In a previous discussion, girls revealed to spending 60-70% of their free time on their phones and computers. With this cohort, an illuminating argument, or admission really, was what they do online. Searching for and watching pornographic material is top of the list of uses, as is social media and other forms of entertainment. Educational and informational purposes is also popular.

Despite their tech savviness, few, if any, highlighted using the internet to access health information. Either for lack of probing on the part of the discussion leaders, or because it is a non-starter. Nevertheless, it is a pointer to a niche intervention area.



## RECOMMENDATIONS



Participants agreed that girls long for loving, strong bonds with parents, teachers and peers, which is consistent with scientific arguments for human development.

- They want to feel valued, protected and cared for at home and school.
- They long for understanding and support.
- Girls want the health knowledge and skills to navigate the difficult adolescent years, especially having the power and freedom over drug use, emotional and mental health problems, peer influence and reproductive health and practices. They

rightly believe that adequate information,

knowledge, skills and support make the difference between a healthy and unhealthy adolescent.

- They want access to counseling, at school or home, to address difficult issues they encounter.
- Participants believe that adequate information, knowledge, skills and support would make the difference between a healthy and unhealthy adolescent.

Beyond these wonderful recommendations from the girls, other far reaching initiatives are required to enable them protect themselves, reach their full potential and grow into healthy productive adults:

1. **Life Skills Education** should be made part of the regular school curriculum. Life skills enables children acquire and apply knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, maintain positive relationships with peers and teachers, and make positive decisions. They create safe and supportive environments where children feel they belong, increase prosocial behaviour; reduce conduct problems; improve attitudes towards schools, and make managing classrooms easier for teachers etc.
2. **Improving the capacity of the guidance and counseling** teams is an effective way to address the challenges girls experience. This includes:
  - Training on guidance and counseling and other adolescent problems
  - Engagement of psychology/counselling students as interns in schools
  - Enhancing capacity of teachers so that they can identify and address problem behaviours and adverse experiences
  - Informational material like pamphlets and flyers on adolescent related issues
3. Parenting skills and tips for caregivers through an array of platforms: parents play a key role in the healthy development of their children. Where a child feels appreciated, cared for and respected, they thrive both at home and school. Empowering parents with positive parenting

skills and tips through text messages, WhatsApp messages, Facebook and Zoom meetings, during school parents' forums among others would be great approaches.

4. Regular forums for students to express their experiences: it is important for students to express their experiences through arts and sports. This way, they are able to process and cope with the challenges explored.
5. Supporting schools to adopt and implement the National Guidelines on Substance Use Management in Basic Learning Institutions is a crucial step in supporting the holistic health and wellbeing of girls, and other learners in schools
6. Strengthening response to child defilement, abuse and maltreatment is critical to ensuring girls are protected from harmful practices. Coordinated efforts in awareness creation and protection measures between government, the general public, law enforcement, community gatekeepers, religious groups and civil society is key to modifying harmful norms that promulgate and amplify abuse and maltreatment of children.
7. Youth friendly mental health services; the devolution of health services provide exciting opportunities to scale and spread youth friendly mental health services in community settings. Recent enactment of the Mental Health Bill draws a framework for the provision of mental health promotion and prevention services at community level, under the county health pillars.



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