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For sexual and reproductive health and rights

Change begins at home, in communities and at work

Gender equality as a catalyst for lasting impact

Power to You(th) Ghana

Deeply rooted gender inequalities, harmful cultural norms, poverty and limited access to justice and support services contribute to fuelling sexual and gender-based violence and unintended pregnancies in Ghana (USAID, 2021).

It is particularly a concern in northern Ghana, where many women and girls experience various forms of violence, including domestic violence, rape and female genital mutilation.

A model of success

The Model Gender Household (MGH) initiative has been rolled out by the Power to You(th) programme in northern Ghana as part of a response to these issues. The initiative is challenging unequal gender norms and power relations and encouraging people to become critically aware of prevailing gender norms and roles.

The programme introduced an intervention to amplify younger people›s voices in family decision-making, transforming spaces where their participation had previously been limited.

Power to You(th) supports adolescent girls and young women, especially those from remote or marginalised communities, to speak up on the issues affecting them, make informed choices and take control of their futures. The programme promotes gender equality by helping young people to understand their rights and challenge harmful traditions and barriers that limit their opportunities.

Issues like child marriage, female genital mutilation, sexual and gender-based violence, and unintended pregnancy continue to affect millions of young people around the world. Power to You(th) works to prevent these practices by addressing the gender expectations behind them and enabling girls and young women to be meaningfully included in making the decisions that shape their lives.

POWER TO YOUTH
CHANGE STARTS WITH YOU(TH)

Households are supported to challenge traditional gender roles and responsibilities. Household members are encouraged to make decisions together and share resources. Together, they run the family business or make financial decisions, and they assist each other in cooking, sweeping, cleaning and all other forms of unpaid care work. The approach holds true to the maxim that change begins at home.

Embracing new roles

Four families in each MGH community receive knowledge, tools and ongoing support to help them live more equitably. After an initial orientation and setting of objectives, the families went back to living their normal lives, but with an expectation that some things would be done very differently, with redefined rules and roles.

The families – made up of a mother, a father and children of both genders – volunteered to model change and transformation in their households to challenge negative gender norms and practices within their homes, communities and wider society.

Model gender household families were encouraged to embrace gender-neutral roles and decision-making in the home, as well as promoting different, equal opportunities for their children.

About Rutgers' gender-transformative approach

Gender-transformative approaches aim to address root causes of gender inequality and power imbalances by challenging harmful, rigid and unequal social norms. They work to replace these with more inclusive and respectful ones, leading to better SRHR outcomes and helping to prevent violence and discrimination.

Rutgers' GTA key strategies include promoting and protecting human rights, encouraging people to critically reflect on traditional gender roles and expectations, highlighting the negative impacts of harmful norms on SRHR and the benefits of change, supporting the empowerment of women and girls, including those often excluded or disadvantaged, and involving boys and men in efforts to improve SRHR and promote equality for all members of society.

> "Upon the training and knowledge received from the Power to You(th) project, I have come to realise involving women and children in decision-making is really helpful as they make meaningful contributions to issues concerning the household. Initially, decisions concerning the family was made by only the head of the family."
>
> Tindana Sayibu, an MGH father in Nakpayili in Nanumba South District

Lamnatu Adam, executive director of Power to You(th) consortium partner Songtaba, explains: "In the early stages, strategies sounded strange and a bit crazy for some families, especially in the gender role redistribution: men supporting their spouses and sharing roles equally between boys and girls. But they showed a very high commitment to the change process."

> "My home no longer looks like a cat and dog relationship, but rather a positive partnership as everyone plays a role in chores. I am also able to move to nearby communities to use the experiences I gained as an MGH to mediate and resolve issues at people homes; that way, they are also able to practice the MGH structure. It has transformed our relationship from one of conflict to one of partnership. That brought joint decision-making processes in my household and farming together."
>
> Mr. Seidu, an MGH father in Kpasera community, under the Central Gonja District of the Savannah Region

Lamnatu Adam adds: "The initial sensitisation given to the families and follow-up support in the transitioning process helped a lot. The meetings taught members they each had equal rights and were entitled to opportunities for empowerment.

Both men and women together can take control and improve their lives. Neither the man nor woman exerts power over the other. They can make decisions together."

Change for generations to come

Mathilda Yineboma, of Norsaac, is the national coordinator for Power to You(th) in Ghana. "We felt it was a good approach that would break some stereotypes and bring together community participation in the change process," she explains.

"Change starts with self, then trickles down to other people. It's actually more influential coming through peers than from civil society organisations. The concept uses community members themselves to influence change and transform the norms that exist among them.

We were intentional about what age children should be part of model gender households. Once a child grows up with a certain orientation, it automatically spreads to the generations that come."

A girl from an MGH in the Nayilifong community, Mion District of Northern Region, said being involved in the initiative has helped her have more control over her future:

> **"My dad engaged me in a discussion to decide which vocational skill she would love to enroll on, which was not the case in the past with my other siblings."**
>
> A girl from an MGH in the Nayilifong community, Mion District of Northern Region

Power to You(th) regularly sent facilitators to MGH communities to observe the changes going on. The families had bi-monthly meetings to receive support, discuss opportunities and share their individual changes in the redistribution of gender roles.

Reduction in gender-based violence

The standout achievements of model gender households are a marked reduction in cases of sexual and gender-based violence and unintended pregnancies in some communities.

Mathilda says: "When men have beaten their wives and their daughters, they run out of the house, leave the community to find refuge somewhere. They go into bigger towns and end up getting pregnant. Where the home is peaceful, you don't find children running away from home."

Lamnatu Adam adds: "If you listen to families who are participating in the gender modelled houses project they tell you there used to be wife battering, the men used not to give attention to the wife and kids.

But we have seen relationships improving and a reduction of gender-based violence within homes and even communities. One person's behaviour has influenced other families into doing something better."

> "Before MGH initiative, intimate partner violence cases could be recorded up to ten cases in a year but has reduced to less than two or not at all in recent years in the community. As a result of the best practices we barely experience these cases."
>
> An MGH facilitator in the Kpasera community

Families talk openly about sex and money

Being part of a model gender household also brings a commitment to having sensitive, open discussions around sex, family planning and sexual and gender-based violence within the family unit. This encourages open conversations between mothers and fathers and their sons and daughters, in many cases for the first time.

At a learning and sharing forum in 2024, women within the MGH shared their experiences on how their partners have taken the responsibilities to support their daughters with reproductive health materials, such as menstrual products.
Abugbila Adam Azabre, Power to You(th) project coordinator for consortium partner PPAG (Planned Parenthood Association of Ghana), says: "Maybe in another world, it would not be very difficult for families to discuss these things. But where we work there is religious and cultural extremism.

Sometimes children don't even get to sit down to talk to their fathers unless there is a critical situation. Sometimes women are not allowed to communicate with their husbands. The changes we are seeing allow communication to take place in households."

Lamnatu Adam explains that in some households, more open lines of communication and shifting gender roles have enabled women to take greater control of the family purse strings, particularly through accessing village savings and loans groups: "Because of the model gender household approach, the wife has space to discuss this investment for the family. Some families can easily pick up loans from these groups to improve and cater for family bills. This is one critical area that probably wasn't intended but it actually liberates some families from financial pressures."

Lamnatu Adam, executive director of Power to You(th) consortium partner Songtaba.

An all-encompassing concept

The model gender household initiative was not without its challenges and some families experienced a backlash.

At first, men who helped their spouses fetch water, cook or support with childcare were ridiculed and experienced stigma. This was addressed through community sensitisation programmes and model gender household participants giving testimonies about the benefits to the wider community.

Mathilda believes model gender households are an all-encompassing concept. She says: "It brings out meaningful youth participation. We find GTA (gender-transformative approaches) in it, we find a bit of inclusion. The concept promotes intergenerational conversations that ordinarily wouldn't have happened. Economic empowerment is not an objective for the programme, but it comes as an unintended outcome."

Adam Lamnatu adds: "Families now have a standard practice that anyone can help out with cooking and cleaning, running a business or making financial decisions. Everyone in the family should have access to and control of resources, including education, which helps them to improve how they make decisions and direct their lives. There is interaction and space for the voices of boys and girls.

I see a whole lot of GTA within this initiative. The family breaks gender norms and roles.

The community is excited to replicate it in their homes due to the benefits expressed by the participants. This has triggered much more interest. Unplanned pregnancy cases are being addressed gradually and families are much more bonded and happy."

Shared benefits

Over the years of implementation, most participating households have experienced shared benefits. In general, there has been effective role redistribution among boys and girls in households and joint decision-making on the part of men, women and children. This has reduced the burden of care work and time poverty which mainly affects women and girls.

> "I can now prepare *Tuozaafi* (meal) for the whole family and I sometimes also sweep the compound."

A boy from a model gender household in Tombo community in the Chereponi District of the North East Region

In Sambu community in the Mion District some households have effected role sharing among male and female children after receiving education from Power to You(th).

> "I saw the status quo where girls do the cooking, washing, sweeping, among others, as a generally accepted culture and saw it as normal. But being a member of the MGH changed my belief which as a result led me to effect the change in my house by ensuring the house chores are done by both the boys and the girls. Something I initially thought of as a 'taboo' to change was changed by just a simple instruction. Now the boys are fetching water, sweeping, learning how to cook . This was so nice."

Barkisu, an MGH mother

Aliu Mohammed is part of a model gender household in Nayilifong in the Mion District of northern Ghana.

Once a violent husband with two broken marriages behind him, Aliu credits his involvement in the model gender household initiative and the new behaviours he learned for his positive change into a calmer, more caring husband.

Aliu now helps to bathe his children – something considered unconventional before – reducing his wives' workload and inspiring other men in the community to take on equally progressive roles.

He describes an event where his wife was out and he started to prepare a meal for his family. He recalls how a friend passing by his compound said: "So you want my wife to see you do this and take it up on me as an irresponsible man? No, seeing you do this, I can also do and, when asked, I will say I saw you do the same and that influenced me."

> I have now decided to let my daughters join the boys in taking care of my livestock, which was formally done by only the boys. I want the girls to also learn the skills of taking care of livestock. This will empower both the girls and boys economically.

An MGH father in Sangbana community in the Chereponi district

The MGH initiative reached out to 10 districts in Ghana and 40 communities, with 4 communities selected in each district. These communities are mostly rural and suburban communities.

The districts include Kpandai, Tamale, Mion, Nanumba South, Chereponi, Yunyoo, Sawla Tuna Kalba, Central Gonja, Builsa South and Kassena Nankana West districts.

Civil society organisations make policy and practice more gender inclusive

Ghanaian CSOs working within the Power to You(th) consortium have been inspired to rework their visions, missions and strategies using a GTA lens and encourage others to do the same.

Lamnatu Adam says: "As a programme, we realised if we are doing GTA, we must do it both in practice and in policy. We decided to examine our own policies and ask: are they GTA friendly? What is missing? That reflection brought a rethinking."

Some organisations now have a childcare centre to support women employees with young children. Others have created gender equality and social inclusion coordinator positions.

"We went beyond consortium members to look at people we work with, the media and other CSOs and how we influence their policies and thinking around GTA", Lamnatu adds.

Mathilda Yineboma explains: "Norsaac had a gender policy before but we had to review it based on the level of ambition after the first GTA training. You have 30 or more CSOs coming into the space and adopting the gender lens – that is going to be a bigger win for us as a country working on keeping our CSO space safe."

Cook-a-thons bring long-lasting change to communities

Power to You(th) held a cook-a-thon at a palace in the very traditional community of Sagnarigu, where CSOs put forward male chefs to demonstrate to communities that men can cook.

Mathilda says: "I was so amazed at where the cook-a-thon happened, for the consortium to have this activity there, to see executive directors cooking and washing bowls. That is a palace to which you don't even go to stand as a woman to talk to the chief. We went there some four or more years back and I was not allowed to talk because I was a female."

Further cooking competitions are now being held within Power to You(th) communities, with men and boys being given a limited budget and also doing shopping by themselves.

> Personally, the cook-a-thon competition which I led my organization to win was one of an experiential and learning process. I reflected deeply about the process and came to the conclusion that this very important household activity must be a shared responsibility because the time spent on cooking just one meal was far more than I anticipated.

Abdul Kasiru Shani, Head of Programmes and Policy at Songtaba

"One of them said cooking just one meal was hectic. He felt they have not been fair to women. That point of reflection is going to have a trickle-down effect to family level", Lamnatu says.

Mathilda concludes: "It's going to have a long-lasting, if not forever, effect in the region. It brought a lot of discussion and reactions, fun and education. We're hopeful it will bring a lot of changes in our communities." ■

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Power to You(th) is a five-year programme (2021–25) funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The programme is implemented in partnership with Rutgers, Sonke Gender Justice and Amref Health Africa, together with with technical partners KIT Royal Tropical Institute and Choice for Youth & Sexuality and country management teams in Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, Ethiopia, Senegal, Ghana and Indonesia.

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