



Advocacy Photo Brochure

**On Lowering The Age Of Consent
That Allows Young People Access
To SRH Services In Nigeria**

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INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, adolescent girls and young women (AGYW), especially girls from poor households, living with HIV, living with disabilities, and/or affected by conflict or natural disasters have poor access to health care services that can improve the quality of their lives. Due to these factors including their age, they often face stigma and discrimination at the point of accessing services in particular, sexual and reproductive health information and services that involve shaming, disrespect and rejection. Creating an enabling environment to ensure that adolescents and young people have the ability to access the information, services and products they need to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health is necessary and important. Best practices around the world has demonstrated that one of the key elements of an enabling environment is the development and implementation of laws and policies that protect the rights of adolescents and young people including adolescent girls and young women in all their diversities. In Nigeria, one of the policy barriers to HIV//SRHR information and services remains minimum age requirements and request for parental consent for information and services. Addressing this policy barrier is critical because national statistics show that 65% of females and 42% of males below the ages of 18 are currently

sexually active (2013 NDHS) and 86.7% of adolescent males and 67% of adolescent females know about contraceptives. However contraceptive use among adolescents and young people (AYP) especially AGYW is low, as nearly one-third of sexually active women in Nigeria aged 15–24 have an unmet need for contraception. Additionally, Nigeria has one of the highest maternal mortality ratios at 576 deaths per 100,000 live births and adolescent girls and young women account for more than 30% due to complications from birth and unsafe abortions.

Youth advocates with support from the Partnership to Inspire, Transform and Connect the HIV Response-Adolescent Girls and Young Women (PITCH-AGYW) project implemented by Education as a Vaccine (EVA), Association of Positive Youths Living with HIV/AIDS in Nigeria (APYIN) and Association of Women Living with HIV/AIDS in Nigeria (ASWHAN) are spearheading this advocacy campaign aimed at addressing barriers that inhibit adolescent girls and young women's access to comprehensive HIV/SRHR services. Young women between the ages of 20–24 are at high risk of HIV infections compared to their peers. By making age of consent regime flexible through a differentiated age of consent regime based on evolving capacity and varying needs for SRH, including HCT and access

to services as some African countries have done, we reduce the vulnerabilities of adolescent girls and young women to HIV and other STIs as well as early and unintended pregnancies, and sexual violence. The Guidelines for Young Person's Participation in Research and Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Services in Nigeria, the recommendation to lower the age of consent for HIV testing and service for adolescents and young people by National Council on AIDS, the highest technical and policy advisory body on HIV in the country have provided the way forward. In recognition

of the need to address the barrier of age requirements and consent for testing, the Technical Working Group on HIV Testing Services under the leadership of the National AIDS & other STIs Control Programme (NASCP) have also recommended the age of consent for HIV Testing Services should be lowered to at least 14 years old to ensure that more adolescents and young people, especially adolescent girls and young women can know their status and age will no longer serve as barrier to accessing lifesaving HIV/SRHR information and services.

WHY WE NEED A LOWERED AGE OF CONSENT



According to NDHS 2013, approximately 20% of women were sexually active by age 15, and the median age for first sex was 17.7 years for women, and 20.6 years for men in Nigeria. Adolescents and young people (AYP) need access to information and services that will help make informed decisions to delay their sexual debut when they are not ready. And if they are already sexually active, how to protect themselves and not engage in high risk sexual behaviours. One of the important challenges faced by adolescents and young people in Nigeria who make over 30% of the population is poor sexual and reproductive health and rights. Adolescent health-friendly policies that address age and gender related barriers are needed to ensure that AYP in Nigeria are healthy and can contribute to the national development.



LOWERED AGE OF CONSENT MEANS:

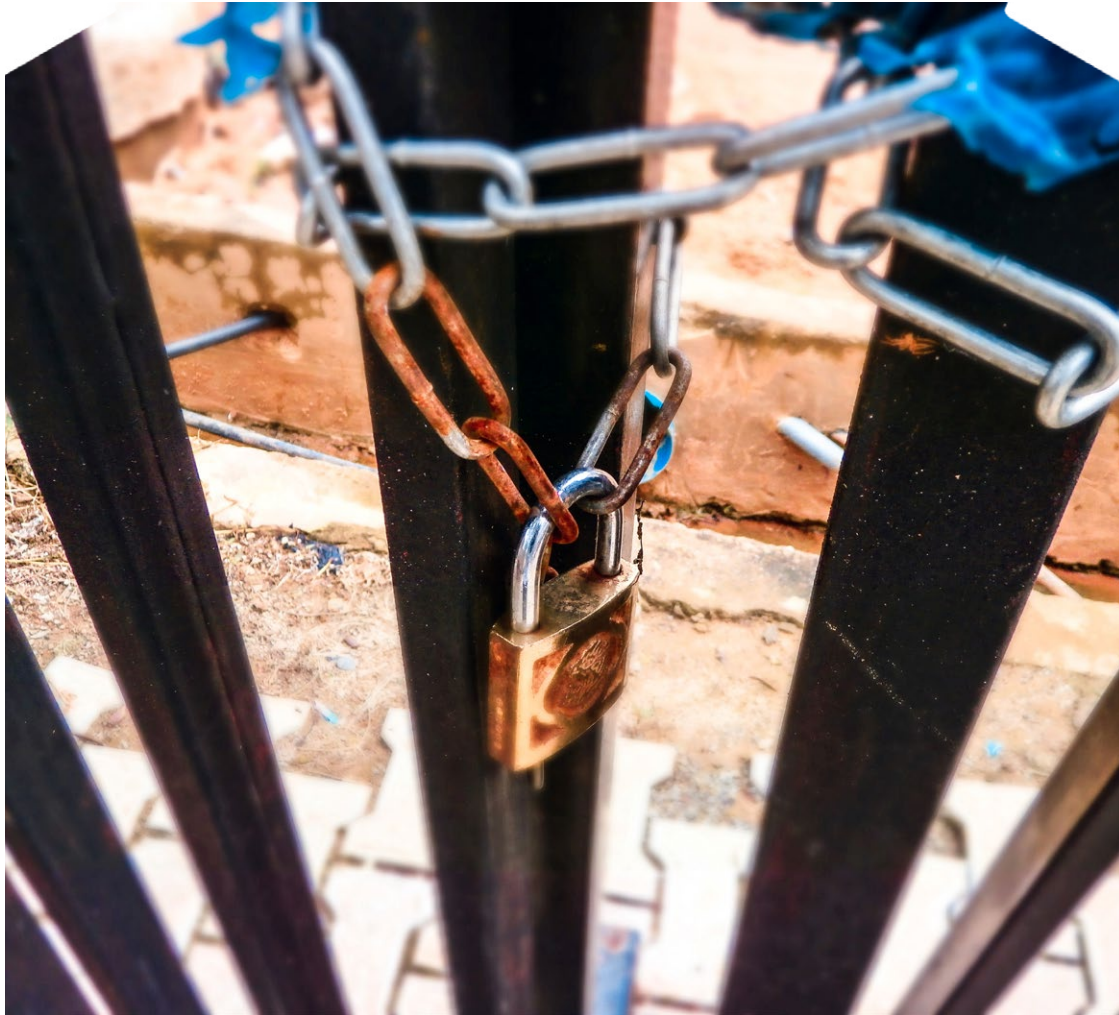


No adolescent girl or young woman should be refused HIV/SRHR information or services.

Age should not be reason for:

- Poor access to health care services that can improve the quality of their lives.
- Stigma and discrimination at the point of accessing services that involve judgmental attitudes, shaming, disrespect and rejection.
- Poor youth-friendliness in healthcare facilities and healthcare workers.
- Financial constraint that often results in delays in seeking healthcare.

WHY WE NEED A LOWERED AGE OF CONSENT



A society that denies AYP access to HIV testing, treatment and care makes them more vulnerable to high risk sexual behaviours and worsens the state of their health and well-being.

WHY WE NEED IMPROVED ACCESS TO YOUTH - FRIENDLY SERVICES



Some years ago, my friend who was HIV positive died because she could not enrol for treatment as a result of stigma and discrimination by health care providers and the public. It was a painful experience to realise that people's actions such as stigma and discrimination could lead to the death of a young promising lady. We need to bend the curve by reviewing our laws and policies to support a lowered age of consent that allows AYP access to HIV and other SRH services. We need to establish youth friendly centres where AYP are provided with youth-friendly care without stigma and discrimination. Let there be free entry and free exit for young people too! No young person should be allowed to die of AIDs epidemic again! (Deborah Illiya, 22)

WHY WE NEED A LOWERED AGE OF CONSENT



The more denial and challenges adolescents and young people encounter in accessing HIV and other SRH services due to discriminatory laws and policies, the more intense pressure they are subjected to. These often lead them into exploring other alternatives which are harmful to their health.

CARE AND SUPPORT FOR AYP LIVING WITH HIV



Adolescents and young people (AYP) are exposed to high risk behaviours. In particular, AYP living with HIV often lack adequate care and support. They feel unworthy and unlovable. They need an improved policy environment that guarantees them access to HIV treatment, care and support, and SRH information and services.

WHY WE NEED A LOWERED AGE OF CONSENT



AYP NEED ACCESS TO AGE-APPROPRIATE INFORMATION AND SERVICES

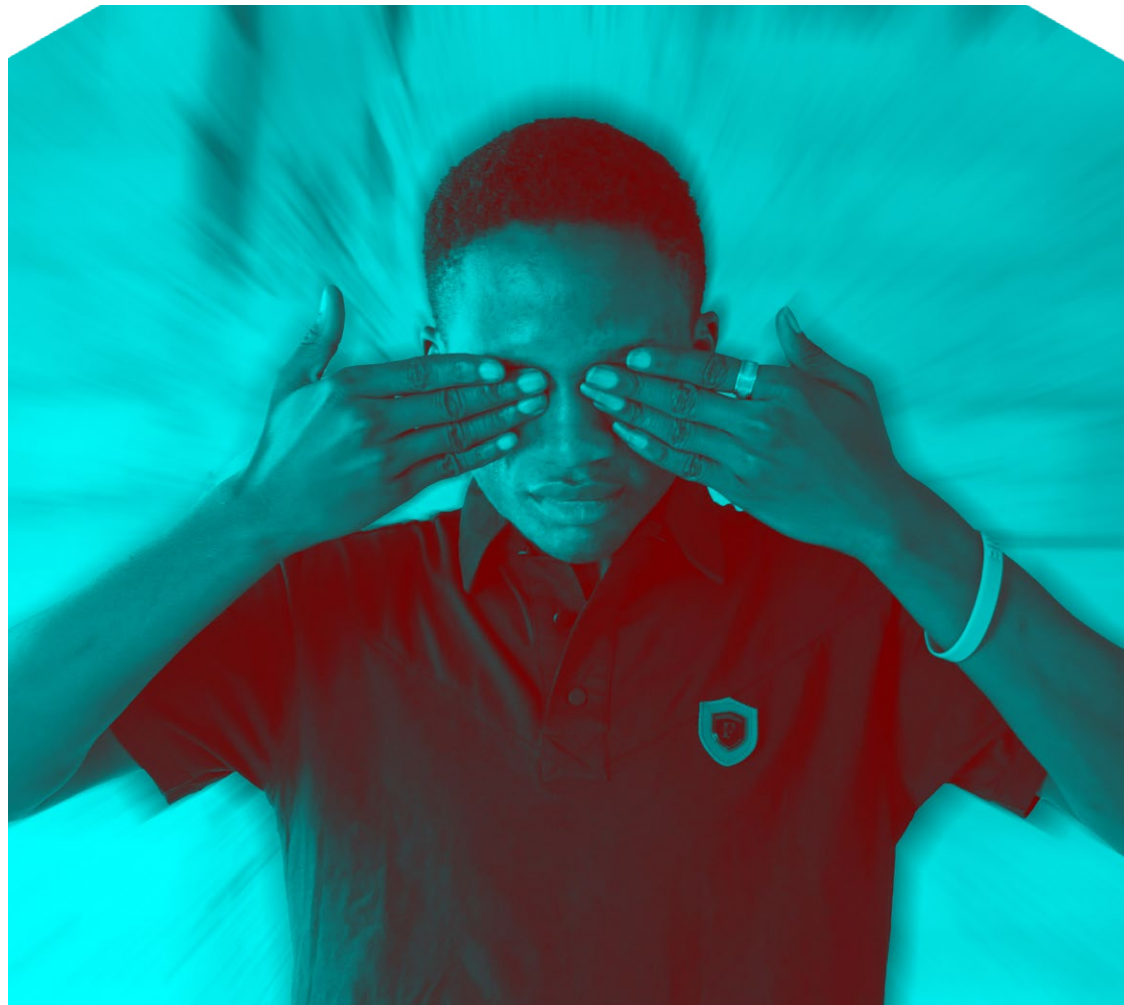


In an enabling environment where adolescents and young people can access confidential, non-judgmental and quality HIV and SRH services, they will flourish and live healthy and positive lives.

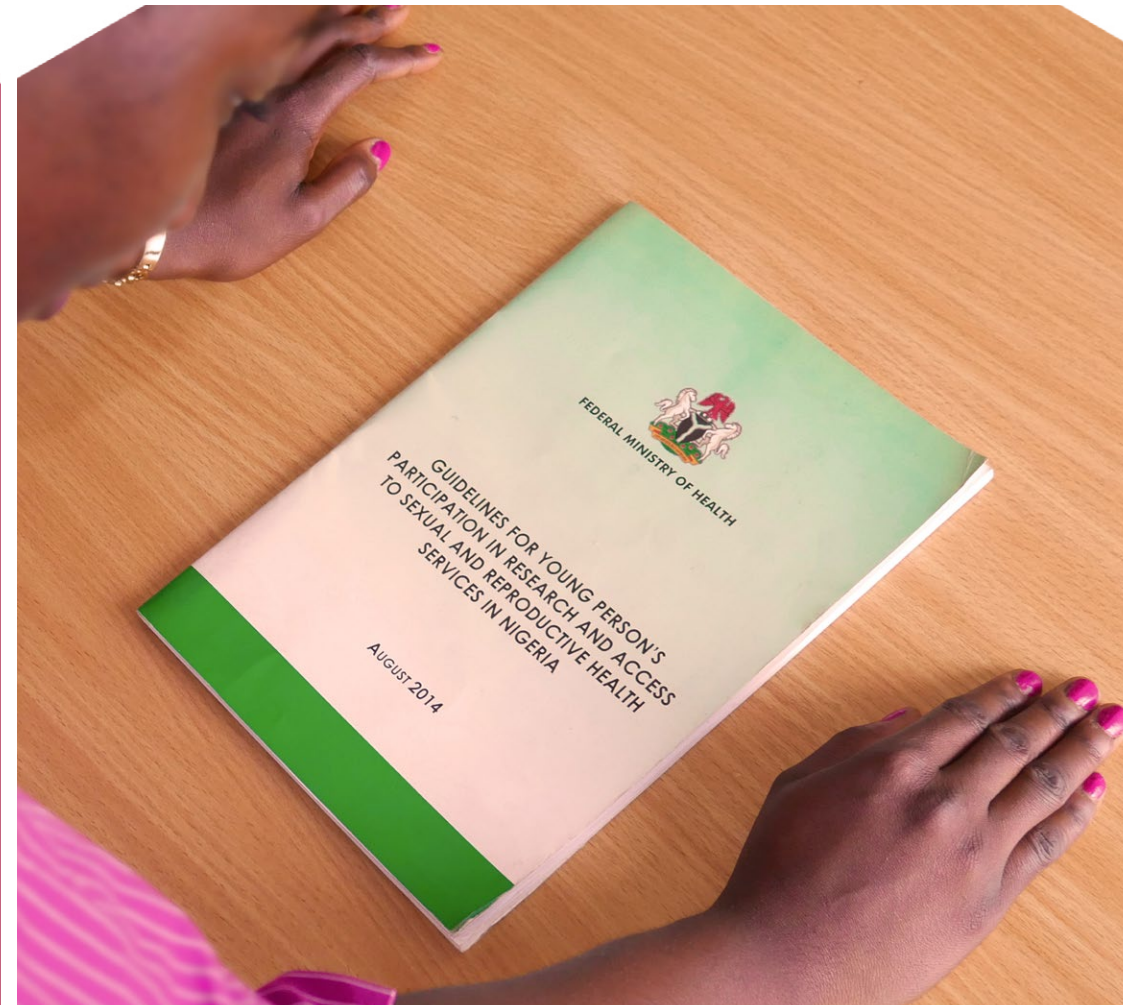
“At what age can we go into a health facility to get information on sexual and reproductive health that has to do with family planning and contraceptive? 18 years is not working; let’s make 14 the acceptable age!” Faith Joseph, 21.

Access to information and services should be based on ability to understand the information and need for services.

CARE AND SUPPORT FOR AYP LIVING WITH HIV



WHY WE NEED A LOWERED AGE OF CONSENT



"In 2017, only 2% of males between 15 and 19 and 4% of females had tested for HIV in the last 12 months", UNICEF (2017) Statistical Update. Removing age as barriers ensures that more young people know their status and have the information they need to protect themselves from HIV, STI and unintended pregnancies. And this information and knowledge is needed by adolescents and young people to live positively. Lower the age of consent to 14!

"From my experience in Uganda, I found out that lowering the age of consent is advantageous because it helps in capturing a large number of AYP in HIV testing, and for those who are found positive, they can be linked to care. This should be our priority in order to achieve the 90:90:90 strategy to end AIDS by 2030" Dr Aboje, Former NASCP Coordinator

The above guidelines recognises the need for AYP to have access to HIV and SRH services and makes provision for differentiated age of consent. The Guidelines should not be kept in the shelf, but be implemented for the benefit of AYP!

WHY WE NEED A LOWERED AGE OF CONSENT



In the face of restrictive laws, policies and norms as we currently have on the age of consent for AYP to access SRH services;

There is discrimination!

There is shaming!

There is rejection!

We need to protect and include AYP!

Protect, do not shame!

JOIN US

- *Lawmakers; we need our laws to recognise a lowered age of consent for AYP to 14 that will enable AYP to access HIV testing, treatment and care.*
- *Policy makers; we need relevant policies and guidelines to acknowledge a lowered age of consent to 14 to ensure AYP have access to HIV testing, treatment and care.*
- *Healthcare providers as a matter of necessity need to ensure that their services are youth-friendly and ensure the implementation of **Guidelines for Young Person's Participation in Research and Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Services in Nigeria.***
- *Parents should understand that sometimes, their children aged 14 years and above may not be comfortable to discuss issues of their sexual and reproductive health with them. AYP can also make responsible and informed decisions in regard to their SRH. Therefore, parents should support a lowered age of consent that will allow such AYP access to health services.*
- *Schools should ensure that age appropriate Family Life and HIV Education is taught in school to enable AYP have access to accurate SRH information that will help them make informed consent in regards to their SRH.*
- *Religious and traditional leaders should engage members of their community to change norms and practices that promote stigma and discrimination.*
- *Informed young people should sensitise their peers and join in the advocacy campaigns at all levels that demonstrate the importance of a lowered age of consent.*

We need you too!

Become a champion!

Help to lower the age of consent to 14 to ensure AYP have access to HIV testing, treatment and care!

