



A SPOONFUL OF SHUGA: Life and love among young people in Botswana

Dineo, a university student, is in a relationship with Bra King, an older man who gives her cash and gifts but insists on 'no condom sex.' She and Q, a fellow student, are in love but she needs to support her family back home. Dineo hears about taking antiretroviral drugs to prevent getting infected with HIV. KayGee considers himself a 'player.' When he learns an ex-girlfriend is HIV-positive, he wonders if should get tested, but health clinics make him uncomfortable. If only he could test at home...

These characters on the popular Botswana radio drama, Shuga, may not be real, but the scenarios are. While Botswana has made tremendous progress in the national HIV response, there is more work to be done. In 2018, nearly one-fourth of the 8500 new HIV infections in Botswana occurred among young women aged 15-24. HIV prevalence is 8.9 per cent among young women and 4.9 per cent among young men. Less than half of young Botswana have comprehensive knowledge about HIV.¹

Based on the award-winning MTV Shuga series, Shuga Radio tackles tough issues facing young people, such as inter-generational sexual partners, condom use, peer pressure and transactional sex. Through stories that resonate with their own life, young people learn about HIV and having mutually respectful relationships.

As part of the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria's commitment to expand evidence-based social and behaviour change communications programming for adolescents and young people, and in partnership with the National AIDS & Health Promotion Agency, UNICEF has scaled-up Shuga Radio, reaching over 140,000 listeners across urban and rural Botswana. In 2019, over 40,000 listeners (54% adolescents and young people) followed the drama through a free, interactive feature on mobile phones and responded to questions relating to the show's messages. Talk shows following each episode bring young people together to discuss the themes. Young people are also involved in developing the storylines, ensuring the drama remains relevant.

More than a radio show

The Shuga team has taken the show from the airwaves into communities. Roadshows attract crowds of young people, generating excitement and interest with entertainment, panel discussions, and information booths. During the roadshows, young people also access on-site HIV testing and referrals to local HIV, sexual and reproductive health, and sexual and gender-based violence services.

¹ UNAIDS 2019



Fifty peer-led listening and discussion groups in schools and communities provide structured opportunities for young people to do a deep dive into Shuga episodes. Every week approximately 540 young people discuss the episode, demonstrating their knowledge, and practising skills while talking about how they would handle similar situations.

School rallies bring young people together for debates, role-plays, and quiz competitions, designed to improve understanding of HIV and risk behaviour. To date, rallies have engaged over 5000 learners. Shuga has also been transposed to comic books that were distributed throughout schools, extending the storylines and re-iterating key messages.

Working across multiple platforms has helped increase audience engagement and extend coverage. The radio show and related activities are advertised on social media. Rapid SMS texts to market the show and announce events have been sent to over one million mobile phone subscribers.

Telling young people what to do rarely works, but engaging them in the lives of others can be a powerful way to influence behaviour. Young people describe Shuga as realistic and applicable to their lives. Pre- and post-listening surveys showed a greater intent to negotiate safer sex, resist peer pressure, use condoms, and access HIV testing. Young people also indicated that accepting gifts does not mean agreeing to sex and relationships between adolescent girls and older men can be exploitative.



“Wow! I love that Shuga talks openly about real situations. Thank you for keeping us millennials informed!”

Shuga listener





Building on success

The mix of radio, community outreach and interpersonal communication has supported young people with information and skills to help them make good choices for healthier lives. Shuga's success also relies on collaboration with District Health Management Teams, Health Education Officers, community leaders and the private sector, leveraging resources and increasing local support for young people.

Lessons learnt and results from Season One have catalyzed scaled-up implementation. Season Two of Shuga Radio, currently broadcasting on national radio and an urban, youth-centric station, focuses

on creating demand for HIV self-testing, condom use, pre-exposure prophylaxis² and other HIV prevention strategies. With Global Fund's current contribution of 32,000 USD, in- and out-of-school peer education programmes reinforcing content and key messages from Shuga Radio are expanding through the principle recipient ACHAP to 10 districts.

Will Dineo start treatment to prevent HIV or break up with Bra King? Will KayGee use that HIV self-test kit he picked up from the clinic? Young Botswana are tuning in to Season 2 of Shuga to find out!

2 The use of antiretrovirals by an HIV-negative person to prevent HIV infection.

