At only 24 years, Gabrielle Guya, a young woman from Jimo, Nyakach Constituency, had already internalised the complexities of being an adolescent in the current generation. She has been working with KELIN’s DREAMS Innovation Challenge project from the onset. Having recently emerged from that very bracket, she readily shares her observations.

“This is a period of self-discovery where young girls start looking for love and, in the process, some end up getting more than they bargained for by contracting HIV,” she explains.

Kisumu County suffers a severe prevalence of HIV and AIDS making it the biggest challenge experienced by the AGYWs in the region. Other challenges Gabrielle and people in her age bracket face include drug abuse, peer pressure and lack of basic information on sexual and reproductive health. According to Gabrielle, access to such information by young girls is important as it can be used to prevent early pregnancies that interrupt their education and sometimes prematurely kill their dreams.

Prior to joining the DREAMS project, Gabrielle’s most primary source of information on sexual and reproductive health was from her peers, parents, siblings and the school. The information, as she remembers, was not trustworthy if it came from her under-researched peers; not timely and comprehensive when it came from the school; and was definitely not an open and safe space when it came from parents. Generally, the sum total of all her sources could be equated to, scanty. “DREAMS was a safe and reliable space for this discourse!” Gabrielle asserts.

In eastern and southern Africa, AIDS is the leading cause of death for adolescent girls, who account for 74% of all new infections. As many as 7,000 new infections a week are occurring among the most vulnerable girls and young women in these regions. To address the issue, KELIN implemented the DREAMS project that facilitated access to sexual and reproductive justice for orphaned and vulnerable adolescent girls in Kisumu and Homa Bay counties in Kenya.

Working closely with several stakeholders, KELIN built strategic partnerships to enhance the respect and protection of reproductive health rights. One of the avenues KELIN used to ensure that rights were protected was by training and educating healthcare professionals, law enforcement officers, and communities on the rights afforded and restricted by
the Kenyan Constitution with respect to sexual and reproductive health.

The DREAMS project, which was a joint effort by several stakeholders including KMET, created a safe space for Gabrielle to learn about HIV transmission and prevention; family planning; what the law says around issues of sexual and gender-based violence; what they needed to do to as AGWYs to keep themselves safe; and how to effectively understand their challenges and support each other.

Gabrielle appreciates the communication avenues used during the DREAMS project such as the meetings, the free SMS platform and the toll-free number (40210) which created a conducive environment for dialogue. The project allowed them to interact and have generational conversations. They were now able to get knowledge from their peers within a safe space with facilitators that held no judgment over them nor allowed for any limitations.

“DREAMS changed my life in very many ways. I use that knowledge to educate members of my community on the available structures within the community that they can use to get help in cases of unfortunate incidences like rape and land rights violation. The youth have been empowered and they know there are a variety of avenues that can be used to keep the girls safe,” Gabrielle says.

Gabrielle is mentoring 57 young girls in her community through The Friends of The Old (FOTO) organisation. She uses the mentorship programme during the holiday season to engage the girls and educate them on sexual and reproductive health and rights. As a result, all the 57 girls have been empowered with information. Additionally, she ensured that each of the girls has a post rape care (PRC) form and a P3 form that they keep to protect themselves and other girls from extortion or delayed justice when reporting cases of sexual violence.

“Through the information received from KELIN, I was able to help some orphans in my community whose land was being grabbed by their uncle. I forwarded the case to one of the lawyers at KELIN and the matter is now in court. Before the DREAMS project, I would have just listened and sympathised with them,” Gabrielle reflects.

Gabrielle is eager to continue sharing that information with her community members.

“As a young woman, the intergenerational dialogues have helped me see things from the eyes of the elders, chiefs and teachers in the society. It is comforting to have that kind of knowledge,” concludes Gabrielle, who is among the 379 girls directly reached through the DREAMS project. The mentored girls embody the aspirations of the project, as DREAMS girls: Determined; Resilient; Empowered; AIDS-free; Mentored; and Safe.

Long after the project has ended, the mentees will remain to be beacons of hope to other girls in their communities. As empowered girls, they can pursue their DREAMS without the socio-cultural limitations imposed on them.