Background: In 1990 Rwanda ratified the "Convention on the Rights of the Child, which promotes equitable access to reproductive health services, ensuring the rights of all youth to achieve maximum health gains. Despite Rwanda’s increased attention to adolescent rights, youth continue to face barriers to accessing reproductive health services. The Department of Community Health and Social Development undertook a qualitative study in one district in Rwanda, where communities receive health services through a Partners In Health-Ministry of Health collaboration.

Methods: Focus groups and surveys were conducted with 62 male and female youth ages 13-17, both in school and out of school. Transcripts were analyzed according to key themes, including knowledge of reproductive health and family planning, access to services, and sexuality.

Results: Participants indicated limited opportunities to learn about or discuss reproductive health. Youth often did not feel comfortable going to health centers for family planning services, as such behavior was heavily stigmatized, particularly among unmarried women and minors. Further, young women were vulnerable to pressures to engage in early sexual activity, and were often victim to sexual violence.

Discussion: To address gaps in access to services and breakdown stigma, policies must be redefined to support youth access to contraception regardless of age, parental consent, or marital status. Policy shifts must be grounded in interventions that create spaces where youth can access information, counseling, and services. Our findings emphasize the importance of understanding adolescent perspectives in order to engage youth in their reproductive rights and promote access to health services.