How to reduce HIV risk among adolescent girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa? Implementation science around the DREAMS Initiative

Population Council

Recommended Citation

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Despite significant investment over the past decade to reduce HIV risk among adolescent girls and young women (AGYW), efforts to date have been relatively unsuccessful. Sex and age disparities in high-HIV burden sub-Saharan African countries remain almost unchanged and AIDS is now the leading cause of death among AGYW in the region. What is urgently needed is a shift in programming to better meet AGYW’s needs, including addressing the structural issues predisposing AGYW to becoming infected with HIV.

The U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), Girl Effect, Johnson & Johnson, Gilead Sciences, and ViiV Healthcare are together supporting the Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored and Safe (DREAMS) Partnership in 10 sub-Saharan countries. DREAMS is delivering, through the public and private sector, a comprehensive package of evidence-based strategies that go beyond the health sector, addressing the structural drivers that fuel AGYW’s HIV risk, including poverty, gender inequality, sexual violence, social isolation, and limited schooling.

The Population Council, with funding from BMGF and the U.S. Agency for International Development through Project SOAR, is leading the implementation science portfolio of this timely and innovative partnership, producing evidence to strengthen DREAMS activities and other community-based programing. The Council’s research focuses on how best to reach the most vulnerable AGYW and their male partners and engage them in activities and services, and how to roll out pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV prevention among AGYW.

By examining these critical HIV prevention issues, the Council’s research will provide actionable evidence that implementers, policy makers, and others can use to improve how programs and services are delivered to vulnerable AGYW and their male partners.

**OUR RESEARCH**

The Population Council’s implementation science portfolio examines different aspects of the DREAMS Partnership across diverse settings. The studies in our portfolio consist of formative research and program evaluation around the following themes:
Identifying, linking, and retaining vulnerable AGYW in programs

DREAMS needs to know how best to find the most vulnerable AGYW, and link them to interventions that can reduce their risk of infection, such as HIV counseling and testing, conditional cash transfers for schooling, and social asset building. Our research in Kenya, Malawi, and Zambia will provide critical data for understanding:

1. How effective is community-based, girl-centered programming at:
   - Reaching the most vulnerable AGYW?
   - Connecting them to and sustaining their use of services?
   - Reducing HIV-related risk factors?
2. What are the costs associated with comprehensive programming for HIV risk reduction?

Reaching male partners of AGYW and linking them to services

AGYW are vulnerable to HIV, in part due to the nature of their sexual partnerships and the characteristics of their male partners. Power differentials between AGYW and their partners may make it more difficult to negotiate condom use. Male partners often have more extensive sexual networks than AGYW. Comparatively, men have lower rates of using HIV services, including HIV testing and counseling and voluntary medical male circumcision, which may increase AGYW’s HIV risk. Answering the following research questions in Malawi, South Africa, Swaziland, and Uganda will help DREAMS target AGYW’s high-risk male partners and engage them in HIV services:

1. What are the profiles of male partners of AGYW in different “hot spots”?
2. How do male partners perceive the sexual dynamics between themselves and AGYW, and their HIV risk?
3. What programs successfully link male partners of AGYW with clinical HIV services? Are the “right” men being reached?

Introducing PrEP among AGYW

PrEP is a powerful HIV prevention tool that has been shown to substantially reduce the risk of HIV infection for both men and women. Although information about the efficacy of PrEP is clearer for males than females, PrEP—in the context of a comprehensive HIV prevention program—may provide an important opportunity for AGYW to take control of their sexual health and reduce their HIV risk. Our studies in Tanzania and Uganda will contribute to a stronger evidence base by learning:

1. What are key considerations in introducing PrEP to AGYW (e.g., AGYW desires, health provider readiness, appropriateness for different subgroups of AGYW)?
2. What are the lessons from projects rolling out PrEP in “real world” settings?
3. What PrEP promotion strategies enhance adherence among AGYW?

Looking ahead

Our research findings will be used to guide the implementation of DREAMS, a bold partnership that has the potential to be a game changer for AGYW. The findings also have broader implications for global policy makers, program implementers, and donors by identifying strategies to better equip AGYW in preventing HIV infection.