What are the HIV Risk Characteristics of Out-of-school Adolescent Girls and Young Women in Malawi?: Findings from DREAMS implementation science research

Project SOAR, in collaboration with the Center for Reproductive Health at the University of Malawi College of Medicine, is conducting implementation science research to build needed evidence to inform community-based, girl-centered HIV prevention programming in Malawi. DREAMS partners are implementing a core package of interventions to address HIV risk among adolescent girls and young women’s (AGYW)—a population in which AIDS is the leading cause of death in the region—through community-based mechanisms in the highest HIV burden areas. Critical to this process is knowing more about AGYW’s HIV risk profiles.

This brief summarizes key findings from a survey conducted between July and September 2017 with 1,672 AGYW. Study participants were aged 15–24, not in school, and enrolled in DREAMS programming in Machinga and Zomba districts. The AGYW were recruited early on in the implementation of the DREAMS Go! Girls Club Program. Once clubs were formed and a participant roster existed, participants were sampled from the roster to take the survey. Subsequent data collection will assess the interventions’ effectiveness in reducing HIV vulnerability among AGYW.

KEY FINDINGS

- Half of AGYW lacked comprehensive knowledge of HIV and AIDS while about two-thirds lacked comprehensive knowledge of condoms and prevention of mother-to-child transmission.
- The vast majority of AGYW reported having had sex but less than one in five sexually active AGYW reported condom use at last sex. Nearly half of AGYW saw themselves at high risk of being exposed to HIV.
- Almost all AGYW knew their HIV status and more than 80 percent had tested for HIV in the past year. Nearly four out of five AGYW knew their partner’s HIV status.
- Of the few AGYW who reported being HIV positive, all were on treatment. A large proportion of AGYW reported experiencing sexually transmitted infection (STI) symptoms, and only about half of those AGYW sought treatment.
- Nearly one in five AGYW had experienced either physical or sexual violence from her partner in the last year while nearly two in five AGYW anticipated abuse from their male partner if they tested positive for HIV and disclosed to their partner.

Research Partners: College of Medicine at the University of Malawi

Location: Machinga and Zomba Districts

Study Duration: 2015–2018

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RESULTS

Who are the survey respondents?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>(15–19 years)</th>
<th>(20–24 years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completed some secondary school</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civil status</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ever been married**</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>88</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental loss</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At least 1 parent**</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food security</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gone without eating at least a whole day and night in the past month</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<th>Mobility</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lived in their community for 4 or more years</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel outside their community at least once a month</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel outside of their community once a year*</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01

What do AGYW know about HIV and AIDS?

- **Comprehensive knowledge of HIV and AIDS**
  - Adolescent girls (15–19 years) (n=530): 46%
  - Young women (20–24 years) (n=1,137): 49%

- **Comprehensive knowledge about condoms**
  - Adolescent girls (15–19 years) (n=530): 29%
  - Young women (20–24 years) (n=1,137): 28%

- **Awareness of prevention of mother-to-child transmission interventions**
  - Adolescent girls (15–19 years) (n=530): 29%
  - Young women (20–24 years) (n=1,137): 36%

*Knowing that consistent use of condoms and having just 1 uninfected faithful partner can reduce the likelihood of getting the AIDS virus; knowing that a healthy looking person can have the AIDS virus; and rejecting the 2 most common local misconceptions about HIV transmission and prevention.

***p < 0.001

What are AGYW’s sexual behaviors?

- **Ever had sex***
  - Adolescent girls (15–19 years) (n=530): 87%
  - Young women (20–24 years) (n=1,137): 99%

- **# of sexual partners in last year**
  - Adolescent girls (15–19 years) (n=459)
    - 0: 21
    - 1: 69
    - 2+: 10
  - Young women (20–24 years) (n=1,125)
    - 0: 24
    - 1: 71
    - 2+: 5

- **Currently have a main sexual partner**
  - Adolescent girls (15–19 years) (n=530): 72%
  - Young women (20–24 years) (n=1,137): 77%

- **Engaged in transactional sex with a casual partner**
  - Adolescent girls (15–19 years) (n=459): 3%
  - Young women (20–24 years) (n=1,125): 4%

***p < 0.001
Have AGYW recently tested for HIV and know their status, and do they think they are at risk of getting HIV?

- Adolescent girls (15–19 years) (n=530)
  - Tested for HIV in the past year and know their status: 82%
  - Think they have been exposed to HIV: 49%

- Young women (20–24 years) (n=1,137)
  - Tested for HIV in the past year and know their status: 86%
  - Think they have been exposed to HIV: 44%

What are the main reasons AGYW had their last HIV test?

- Part of routine health care (e.g., antenatal care): 59% (15–19 years), 56% (20–24 years)
- Wanted to know status: 26% (15–19 years), 28% (20–24 years)
- Referred for testing: 5% (15–19 years), 5% (20–24 years)
- Partner factors (e.g., doubts about faithfulness, support): 4% (15–19 years), 6% (20–24 years)
- Other (e.g., family support): 5% (15–19 years), 5% (20–24 years)

What is the HIV status, STI experience, and service use among AGYW?

- HIV+ status (self-reported)*
  - Use of HIV treatment and care services: 65% (n=3) (15–19 years), 100% (n=25) (20–24 years)

- STI symptom in the last 6 months*
  - Use of STI services: 27% (15–19 years), 33% (20–24 years)

What do AGYW tell us about their male partners?

- Type of partner*
  - 15–19 years: 65% husband, 25% boyfriend, 8% boy/man from area
  - 20–24 years: 83% husband, 11% boyfriend, 4% boy/man from area

- Age difference between partner and AGYW (mean ± SD)
  - 15–19 years: 3.5 ± 2.4
  - 20–24 years: 4.2 ± 3.1

- Age range of partner
  - 15–19 years: 13–36 years
  - 20–24 years: 17–43 years

- Partner circumcised
  - 15–19 years: 95%
  - 20–24 years: 94%

- Lives in the same household as AGYW***
  - 15–19 years: 56%
  - 20–24 years: 75%

- Lives in the same community as AGYW*
  - 15–19 years: 76%
  - 20–24 years: 80%

- Has a high-risk job*
  - 15–19 years: 60%
  - 20–24 years: 60%

*p < 0.05, ***p < 0.001
*Defined as job categories associated with a greater risk of HIV acquisition and high HIV prevalence (e.g., truckers, laborers).
What do AGYW tell us about their current relationship’s characteristics?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>15–19 years</th>
<th>20–24 years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In partnership for a year or more***</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to have a/another child with current partner</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported condom use at last sex*</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Told her partner her HIV status</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced partner violence in last year</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Anticipate partner abuse or end of relationship if test HIV+ | *p<0.05, ***p<0.001

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Strengthen comprehensive HIV and AIDS education for out-of-school AGYW that includes building skills to effectively negotiate condom use with their partners.
- Invest in strategies to keep or re-enroll girls in school, and/or provide opportunities for training and economic advancement to reduce both risk of HIV and early marriage.
- Sustain the high HIV testing rates and linkage to HIV treatment among AGYW while strengthening linkages to STI screening and care services.
- Emphasize HIV risk avoidance within the context of stable relationships. Most AGYW are sexually active and in relatively long-term relationships, with high fertility desire, and low condom use.
- Assess both partner and relationship characteristics to comprehensively understand AGYW’s HIV risk.
- Invest in strategies to prevent partner violence against AGYW and mitigate its impacts.