

“Guys are different”: Young women’s views on heterosexual relationship dynamics and how they influence women’s potential PrEP uptake and disclosure in Durban, South Africa

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BACKGROUND

- Heterosexual relationship dynamics influence women’s decisions around HIV prevention methods, but little research has been conducted among educated, urban South African women.
- Oral pre-exposure-prophylaxis (PrEP) became publicly available in South Africa in 2019.
- We explored urban, educated young women’s views on how relationship dynamics with male partners might influence women’s use of PrEP, and how women might navigate those dynamics if they chose to use PrEP.
- Understanding and taking into account the realities of the lives of women is key to designing successful PrEP programs.



Durban, South Africa

METHODS

- Qualitative data were used from a study to develop a gender-focused PrEP information-motivation workshop to introduce young women to PrEP, in Durban, South Africa.
- Participants were aged 18-25, and recruited from urban clinic and community settings. Only one participant had ever used PrEP. Most had completed secondary education.
- Six focus group discussions and eight in-depth interviews were conducted with 46 women.
- Data were analyzed thematically by a team of South African and US researchers.

Women noted that men have a different culture than women, and these gender differences can put women at risk of HIV

“...A woman is usually more open-minded when it comes to relationships, most of the time. Women are able to think ahead. Whereas a man, when it comes to sex, their reasoning is shortened. So, a woman is able to clarify that, “Okay, if things are like this, it means that we will [do] things like this”. [22-25 years]

“Guys are different... I will talk about mine. I know he is understanding and he likes to know stuff. Some guys all that (they) have, is a Zulu ego, do you know what is a Zulu ego? It is always there, to say “where have you seen a Zulu man drinking pills, a man doesn’t not put on a condom (ijazi)”, they are stupid.” [18-21 years]

“... it is proven that boys are idiots, so I’m the one that will take whatever to prevent pregnancy. I’m the one who’s that’s busy with pills and condoms and he is just not doing anything...” [18-21 years]

Taking PrEP within a relationship can bring complexity, especially around issues of trust

“They [men] would take advantage because, “Since you are taking pills [PrEP], it means that you do not trust me. Okay, why are you taking pills? Is it either because you trust me or not?” For a man, normally, when someone feels insecure or maybe you do not trust him, he would just move around and find someone who will trust him, someone who will be able to reliable to him... He needs to go and find someone who will trust him and do everything with that person...” [18-21 years]

“And boys are promiscuous they bluff you and say you are my only girlfriend.” [22-25 years]

RESULTS

- Women described men as having a different culture and set of behaviors than women, which leads to women being at a greater risk for HIV.
- These differences bring complexity to women’s relationships and influence their choices around PrEP use and disclosure.
- Potential risks of using PrEP included potential for anger and loss of trust in relationships, breakup, physical violence, pregnancy or other sexually transmitted infections.
- Despite these concerns, woman expressed desire for mutuality in relationships and shared suggestions to manage choices around PrEP use and disclosure.

“... to prevent violence, I would just prefer to keep it private or just keep it to myself [PrEP use], just to keep peace.” [18-21 years]

“... What I think is that you can tell your boyfriend that there is a certain pill and if you can see that he doesn’t like the idea just drink it yourself and keep that to yourself.” [18-21 years]

“And when you try to hide it [PrEP] from him, a slap will follow.” [18-21 years]

Women discussed aspects of disclosing potential PrEP use to partners

“It depends on the type of the relationship you have. Because, in some relationships, there are men who have this thing of saying that, a man is the one who controls everything. And then, there are also other relationships, where they are able to sit down and discuss and negotiate. So, it differs on the type of the relationship that you have.” [18-21 years]

“Men should also take it and women should also take it too, so that there will be a mutual understanding, because my partner can get HIV from me and I can also get HIV from my partner. Which is why, both of us, we need to go to the clinic, in order to be informed about it.” [18-21 years]

“...our boyfriends discourage us to use PrEP but... we, as women, we need to teach ourselves to be independent and not be discouraged by your partner ...If it means that the relationship should come to an end between us, let it be, because when someone says you should not use PrEP, then it means ... that person is saying that you should not protect yourself knowing very well that he does not protect himself.” [24 years]

Disclosure can bring potential risks within relationships

Despite anticipated issues with potential PrEP use and disclosure, women expressed a desire for mutuality

CONCLUSION

- These results document the challenges that even urban, educated women experience in heterosexual relationships with respect to gender dynamics and HIV prevention.
- They add to the growing body of evidence that women’s use and adherence to PrEP in sub-Saharan Africa is shaped by male partners and women’s perceptions of their male partners’ reactions.
- For PrEP to be rolled out successfully, implementation programs need to provide women with concrete methods to improve self-agency and communication skills that address conflict. Women need these skills to navigate the complex power dynamics they experience in heterosexual relationships.