

Exchange with the national PrEP demonstration project. MITU, Mwanza, Tanzania

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What is the issue?

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) offers a promising female-controlled HIV prevention option for women. This is of particular importance in East and Southern Africa where adolescent girls and young women are at disproportionate risk of HIV infection. In Tanzania, adolescent girls and young women aged 15–24 years are more than twice as likely to be infected with HIV than adolescent boys and young men of the same age (2.1% vs. 0.6%)¹. In September 2015, the World Health Organization announced that tenofovir-based oral PrEP should be offered to those at substantial risk of HIV infection. But, as trials in East and Southern Africa have shown, sustained adherence can be extremely difficult for young women who face many different challenges in daily life, including economic insecurity, stigma, and gender-based violence (GBV), often from intimate partners.

The study

The EMPOWER study – conducted in Johannesburg, South Africa and Mwanza, Tanzania – aimed to assess the feasibility, acceptability and safety of offering oral PrEP as part of a combination HIV prevention package addressing stigma and GBV in adolescent girls and young women. The impact of empowerment clubs, incorporating a four-session empowerment curriculum, on retention in care and adherence to PrEP was also assessed.

In Tanzania, the study population was adolescent girls and young women working in bars, restaurants and other food and alcohol outlets in Mwanza city. Among women who were screened for eligibility to take part in the study, prevalence of HIV was high – 9.5%.

Women who were HIV negative, not pregnant and interested in taking oral PrEP were enrolled into the study. Study participants were offered oral PrEP at enrolment and followed up for six months. At each clinic visit, the young women received HIV testing and counselling with integrated screening for stigma and GBV (using a tool developed by the study team), along with comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care.

Summary

The EMPOWER study offered oral pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to young women, in combination with a supportive programme to address stigma and gender-based violence. In addition, half of the participants were invited to participate in empowerment clubs.

The end of the study coincided with a national demonstration project rolling out PrEP in Tanzania through community outreach. Researchers from the Mwanza Intervention Trials Unit, who led the study at the Tanzanian site, are engaging with implementers of the national demonstration project at national and regional level, and have joined the national technical working group which is working towards scaling up delivery of PrEP to key populations across Tanzania.

Women enrolled into the study were randomly allocated to either:

- standard adherence/care package; or
- standard adherence/care package plus empowerment clubs.

The empowerment clubs incorporated a four-session gender empowerment curriculum, designed to be participatory and reflective, and covering:

1. gender roles and social norms
2. sexual and reproductive health
3. power and control
4. empowerment



Empowerment club in Mwanza, Tanzania

What did the study find?

In Mwanza, among women taking part in the EMPOWER study:

- there were high rates of GBV reported, and high rates of sexually transmitted infections were detected on screening at enrolment, which are both risk factors for HIV,
- all accepted the offer of oral PrEP, suggesting both an awareness of their HIV risk and a desire for HIV prevention options that can be controlled by women,
- many found participation in HIV prevention support services to be challenging because of other priorities, such as work and family commitments.

How did STRIVE achieve impact?

MITU is a member of the Technical Working Group on PrEP coordinated by the National AIDS Control Programme in Tanzania. In November 2018, MITU researchers presented the EMPOWER study findings and recommendations to representatives from ICAP Global Health Action in Dar es Salaam, which is working with the Tanzanian government to roll out PrEP through a national demonstration project launched in July 2018, soon after the EMPOWER study drew to a close. Adolescent girls and young women are a key focus for the demonstration project.

As a result of ICAP's interest in the EMPOWER study and subsequent introductions, the MITU team invited the Mwanza regional coordinator of the demonstration project to attend the EMPOWER dissemination event for study participants. This provided an opportunity for the EMPOWER participants to learn more, and to ask questions about the national demonstration project and how they can continue to have access to PrEP.

More information:

<http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/projects/empower>

Acknowledgements

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Suggested citation

Harvey, S., Holmes, A., Kapiga S. STRIVE Impact Case Study: Exchange with the national PrEP demonstration project; Mwanza Intervention Trials Unit, Tanzania; London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, UK; 2019.

Next steps

At the national level, the technical working group on PrEP will draw on learning from EMPOWER for national planning around PrEP scale-up. In Mwanza, further exchange is planned between the National Demonstration Project and the MITU team to discuss some of the approaches used in the EMPOWER study, which may have national level impact through ongoing engagement with the technical working group.

STRIVE RESOURCES ON THE EMPOWER STUDY

- Evidence brief: The EMPOWER study: an evaluation of a combination HIV intervention that includes oral PrEP for adolescent girls and young women in South Africa and Tanzania (findings from Tanzania)
<http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/evidence-brief-empower-study-evaluation-combination-hiv-intervention-includes-oral-prep>
- Evidence brief: The EMPOWER study: An evaluation of a combination HIV prevention intervention including oral PrEP for adolescent girls and young women in South Africa and Tanzania
<http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/evidence-brief-empower-study-evaluation-combination-hiv-prevention-intervention-including>
- Learning Lab: Results from the EMPOWER randomised trial
<http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/results-empower-randomised-trial>
- Learning Lab: Integrating violence screening and support for young women accessing PrEP in South Africa and Tanzania : Experiences from the EMPOWER study
<http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/integrating-violence-screening-for-young-women-accessing-prep>
- Learning Lab: The tale of two epidemics
<http://strive.lshtm.ac.uk/resources/tale-two-epidemics-sinead-delany-moretlwe>

REFERENCES

1. Tanzania HIV Impact Survey 2016-2017. Summary Sheet: preliminary findings. December 2017. Available from: https://phia.icap.columbia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Tanzania_SummarySheet_A4.English.v19.pdf

STRIVE research consortium

A DFID-funded research programme consortium, STRIVE is led by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, with six key research partners in Tanzania, South Africa, India and the USA. STRIVE provides new insights and evidence into how different structural factors – including gender inequality and violence, poor livelihood options, stigma, and problematic alcohol use – influence HIV vulnerability and undermine the effectiveness of the HIV response.

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