



# Mental health challenges faced by adolescent girls and young women in five South African provinces: perceptions, experiences, and the impact of a combination HIV prevention intervention

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**HERStory**

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## **HERStory:** An impact evaluation of South African combination HIV prevention intervention for adolescent girls and young women (AGYW)

### Qualitative Study Component

- We explored AGYW narratives of depression, stress, suicide ideation and emotional support, and how participation in a combination HIV prevention programme impacted on these
- Data collection conducted between August 2018 and March 2019 in 5/10 intervention districts:
  1. City of Cape Town, Western Cape (English/isiXhosa)
  2. Uthungulu, KwaZulu-Natal (isiZulu)
  3. Gert Sibande, Mpumalanga (siSwati)
  4. Bojanala, North West (seTswana)
  5. Nelson Mandela Bay, Eastern Cape (isiXhosa)
- Included in the analysis for this paper are data from in-depth interviews (IDIs), serial interviews (SIDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with:
  - 230 AGYW (182 intervention participants, 48 non-intervention)
  - 14 intervention facilitators, 10 teachers, and 12 programme implementers



## Background

- Adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in South Africa are at increased risk of mental health challenges than their male counterparts, as well as being at risk for HIV infection and unintended pregnancies
- Mental health challenges in adolescents are associated with increased sexual risk behaviours, unintended pregnancy, as well as impeded HIV testing and care-seeking
- Greater insight into the interaction between mental health factors, the ability to access psycho-social support, HIV and unintended pregnancy amongst AGYW in South Africa is needed
- Although mental health was not an initial focus of the study, it subsequently emerged as a salient theme in the data, warranting closer examination



## Findings (1)

- Narratives around depression, stress and suicide emerged without specific mention or questioning – often in response to questions relating to sources of emotional support
- AGYW described various factors which they understood to impact negatively on their mental health, including
  - Lack of ability to disclose HIV status or pregnancy
  - Parenting responsibilities, material/financial stress
  - Low self-esteem
  - Lack of access to emotional support
  - Interpersonal/relationship challenges, experiences of violence/abuse
- Suicide emerged as a salient theme in discussions with AGYW, who described suicide ideation as a common tendency amongst peers, and shared feelings that they would consider suicide if they were to discover they were pregnant or HIV positive



## Findings (2)

- According to a range of respondents, including AGYW, their teachers, and club facilitators, participating in the intervention had a positive impact on the mental health and well-being of AGYW
- AGYW who had participated in the intervention reported positive impacts on their mental health, increased self-esteem, as well as improved ability to communicate feelings and access emotional support
- Intervention clubs provided AGYW with a “sisterhood” of peers with which they could share their worries and receive support, resulting in overall improvements in the ability and willingness of AGYW to access emotional support
- Respondents voiced the desire for better psycho-social support mechanisms, including counselling services and social workers, as well as a need for more information and education on mental health



## Conclusions – “Take home message”

- AGYW in South Africa face a range of mental health challenges and lack of sufficient psycho-social support, which combined, lead to negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes
- Efforts to address unintended pregnancy and HIV infection amongst AGYW need to incorporate mental health components
- Understanding the context and “lived experiences” of mental health is crucial in order to design and implement effective mental health programmes, and to provide appropriate psycho-social support to young women, and in turn, address sexual and reproductive health challenges

# Study team and acknowledgements

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## Collaborating partners' affiliations

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