

South African adolescent girls' and young women's communication with and support from parents and teachers: implications for sexual and reproductive health decisions

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HERStory





The HERStory Study

- Mixed-methods impact evaluation of South African combination HIV prevention intervention for adolescent girls and young women (AGYW)
- Implemented 2016-2019 in 10 South African districts purposively selected to include some of most vulnerable AGYW in the country, with highest HIV incidence
- Comprehensive package of programmes aimed to contribute to SA government's target of reducing HIV incidence among AGYW aged 10 - 24 by 50% over 2 years
 - Specific objectives:
 - ✓ Decrease HIV incidence
 - ✓ Decrease teenage pregnancy
 - ✓ Increase retention in school
 - ✓ Decrease gender based violence
 - ✓ Increase economic opportunities

BIOMEDICAL

Intervention components with clinical and medical methods



- + HIV testing
- + TB, STI and GBV screening
- + Linkage and referral to health and other services

BEHAVIOURAL

Intervention components that promote healthy behaviours



- + Build self-efficacy and resilience
- + Caregiving and peer support
- + Education and counselling
- + Home visits to encourage school attendance
- + Homework support
- + Parenting education
- + Sexual and reproductive health education

STRUCTURAL

Intervention components that create an enabling environment



- + Birth registrations
- + Career guidance and opportunities
- + Community activism
- + Economic strengthening
- + Promote access to social grants
- + Promote an environment for ongoing learning
- + Promote a supportive social environment
- + Reduce gender-based violence
- + Social cohesion




HERStory Qualitative Component

- Explored social environment, lived experiences, and impact of intervention on AGYW aged 15-24, in 5/10 intervention districts
 - In-depth interviews (IDIs), serial interviews (SIDIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs) with:
 - 175 AGYW who had been part of the intervention
 - 47 AGYW who had not participated in any intervention components
 - 7 parents/caregivers

Sample Group	Total	City of Cape Town, Western Cape	Uthungulu, KwaZulu-Natal	Gert Sibande, Mpumalanga	Bojanala, North West	Nelson Mandela Bay, Eastern Cape
AGYW Intervention recipients (IR)	57 IDIs 19 FGDs	5 IDIs 5 FGDs	17 IDIs 3 FGDs	10 IDIs 5 FGDs	16 IDIs 2 FGDs	9 IDIs 4 FGDs
AGYW Non-intervention (Non-IR)	6 IDIs 5 FGDs	1 FGD	2 IDIs 2 FGDs	0	4 IDIs 1 FGD	1 FGD
Parents of AGYW	7 IDIs	1 IDI	2 IDIs	0	1 IDI	3 IDIs



AGYW Relationships and Communication with **Parents / Caregivers**

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- AGYW feel unable to speak to parents/caregivers about relationships, concerns & worries, and general SRH issues

We don't speak about sex... my mother is... going to shout at me "family planning, family planning, for what, what do you want to do"? (KZN, IR, 19-24)


It's very awkward talking about sex with parents ...they jump to conclusions, **it's like you are telling them something and they are hearing something else...** (NW, IR, 15-18)

I don't speak to my Mum... she will end up shouting at me saying that I have boyfriends and now I'm into this love business. (KZN, IR, 15-18)

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- AGYW described barriers seeking emotional support or advice from their mothers

I can't go to my mother when I have a problem, I can't!
(KZN, Non-IR, 15-18)

My mother... will never listen to me and the problem that I have. (NW, IR, 15-18)

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- AGYW feel that parents are old-fashioned & out-dated
 - Lack of parental support for contraceptive use

Our parents... grew up in a different era (WC, IR, 15-18)

Yhoooo it is really difficult, **our parents still live in the past.** (WC, IR, 15-18)

Back in their time they did not do any of the things that our generation is doing... **they think when you are 15 years you still a child, so you can not go and prevent** (WC, IR, 15-18)

Most parents are old so they are afraid to talk to their children... and tell them about sex. (KZN, IR, 19-24)


The attitude that the parents have... **“How can you be on injection?”** ... they are trying to protect us... but they have to be taught that now things are done like so and so... (MPU, IR, 19-24)

- AGYW fear violence if they disclose being sexually active

I have never spoken to my mother about these issues... if I talk about going to prevent (use contraceptives), she would think that I'm planning to have sex... **if I want to check for HIV she'd think that I've had sex... she ends up hitting me and yelling at me.** (KZN, IR, 15-18)


My mother... doesn't understand sex issues... she doesn't even talk about it... she just shouts. (KZN, IR, 15-18)

I could not share anything with my mother... she might hit me. (WC, IR, 15-18)

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- Barriers in communication with parents contribute to lack of access to information about sex and SRH issues

Some girls are unable to get information about sex, **that's why at the end their lives they are messed up...** (KZN, IR, 19-24)

Parents are scared to speak to their children... unable to tell us that when you sleep with a boyfriend you will fall pregnant... my mother, she has never told me anything, I heard it here at school... **I also made my mistakes and had a baby at a very young age... parents are at least supposed to tell us that if you sleep with a boy without contraceptives and condom you will fall pregnant.** (EC, IR, 15-18)


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- As a result of fearing judgement or recrimination from parents, AGYW:
 - seek SRH advice and support from friends
 - or choose to make own decisions about SRH matters without consulting or seeking advice from anyone

**I cannot speak to my mother... I just get scared of her...
I prefer... just take my own decisions. (KZN, IR, 15-18)**

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- “Rebellion” against parents/caregivers advice, resulting in higher risks

When we start going out with boys, our parents keep reprimanding us so **we tend to do the very opposite of what we are told not to do**. We are curious to find out what is it that our parents do not want us to do. (WC, IR, 15-18)


They also want to prevent us from getting into relationships... that is why **we rebel and “overdo” these things...** (WC, IR, 15-18)

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- AGYW expressed the desire to be able to communicate more openly with, and have more support from, parents/caregivers

Parents need to be taught... **not to beat their children but to talk to them**... when you decide to tell your parent, they will think that you... are sleeping around (MPU, IR, 19-24)

Our parents do need awareness... they just keep quiet and they don't teach us... programmes need to bring our parents together... so that our parents will know and talk to us. (EC, IR, 15-18)


A person should sit with her mother and explain how things happen in our generation... *"mom now this is how things are, it's not like in your days, **you will say I love boys but when I prevent but am protecting myself**"*(WC, IR, 15-18)

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- Mothers / parents / caregivers also feel unable to discuss sex and relationships with their daughters / children

In these things (matters to do with relationships and sex), she is the one who speaks first **and I would pretend as if I don't hear her.** (EC, parent)

I wouldn't be able to talk with her, **I don't have courage** (EC, parent)

I have never ever discussed contraception with my girls... All I say to them is to behave themselves (KZN, parent)

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- Parents feel that:
 - talking about contraceptives would be encouragement of sexual behaviour
 - children are too young to be having sex, so there is no need to discuss contraception with them

I can't (speak with her about things like pregnancy)... **if I talk about pregnancy it seems I am sending her to be a street girl...** I am afraid (EC, parent)

We haven't discussed anything about preventing pregnancy... I think she is too young to be sexually active. (WC, parent)

We are scared to talk to our children... we don't know where to start – when you look at their age... you realize that they are still young. (KZN, parent)



AGYW Relationships and Communication with **Teachers**



- Majority of AGYW described a lack of trust in teachers

Teachers... at the staff room... they talk about you...
we don't trust our teachers (WC, NI, 15-18)

Girls are secretive because the teachers here judge...
you go to share some things, deep things, but...
teachers gossip to other teachers (WC, IR, 15-18)

Teachers don't have respect for us... We trust and we have deep secrets and things... that teacher will go to another teacher and gossip about us... now the whole school looks at you. (WC, IR, 15-18)

We're scared that teachers are going to judge us, they'll talk about us in the staff room... whatever you're going to talk to her about won't stay with her for long... they'll go around telling other teachers. (NW, IR, 15-18)

Teachers have that weakness (gossiping)... that's why **we are now afraid to tell them our problems** (MPU, IR, 19-24)


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- When parents are absent, teachers could play role of supportive adult/caregiver

Teachers are supposed to be our parents at school, but **we can't share things with them... (instead) we keep it to ourselves, then some of us commit suicide.** (WC, IR, 15-18)

Our parents are staying very far, we take teachers as our parents... if I tell them my problem in confidence and they tell somebody else... it is no longer a secret. (MPU, IR, 19-24)

- Desire for improved support from teachers

If a learner is diagnosed (HIV) positive, I wish that teachers don't talk about it... We wish they could keep things private... not expose our problems (WC, IR, 15-18)

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- Unable to confide or seek support/advice from parents or teachers, AGYW describe a sense of emotional isolation – negatively impacts mental health and well-being


You cannot trust any one... (MPU, Non-IR, 19-24)

When I have a problem I don't tell anyone... (KZN, IR, 15-18)

Sometimes you want to talk to older people but they won't really give you the chance... they don't really take your feelings into consideration... (NW, IR, 15-18)




AGYW Perspectives on
Intervention Impact on
**Relationships and
Communication with Parents
and Teachers**

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- AGYW who were part of the intervention felt that their ability to communicate effectively with parents had improved.

I use to hide my things... I was not open to my mother... I was afraid of how she would respond... (after attending the intervention) **I ended up opening to my mother...** even if she was angry.
(EC, IR, 15-18)

It is only last week that I had the courage to talk to my mother... these programmes have helped me have confidence to speak with her. (WC, IR, 15-18)

I learned... how to deal with my mother... when I would talk to her about some things she would keep quiet... I would tell her not to keep quiet and because **if she is not going to advise me on these things then who will?**
(EC, IR, 15-18)

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- Participating in intervention enabled AGYW to initiate informed conversations / discussions with parents about SRH issues
 - Having been provided with accurate information by the intervention, AGYW felt better prepared and more empowered in discussions with parents

Being part of the programme made it easier to share with my mother... When I first started my periods, I had already learnt about it so I know what was going on, **so it was easier to tell my mom about it... then me and my mother started talking about boyfriends and girl stuff.** (WC, IR, 15-18)

- Resulting in ability to use contraceptives

My mom did not want me to prevent (use contraceptives), after I joined RISE and explained to her... **now she lets me.** (WC, IR, 15-18)



Conclusions

- Substantial barriers in communication exist between AGYW and their parents / caregivers – particularly relating to SRH issues
- Fearing violent reactions, AGYW choose not to disclose
- Teachers are in a position to provide SRH information & emotional support to AGYW to enable them to make safer and better informed decisions, but AGYW feel unable/unwilling to confide in / seek their support
- Lack of effective communication and emotional support from parents and teachers negatively impacts AGYW mental health and increases risk taking
- AGYW desire improved communication with, and increased emotional support from teachers & parents/caregivers
- AGYW who participated in intervention described positive impact on addressing communication barriers between AGYW and parents / caregivers

Study team and acknowledgements

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THANK YOU

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