

“Prostitutes are the ones who like using PrEP”: A qualitative analysis exploring barriers and facilitators to PrEP uptake among DREAMS recipients in Zambia

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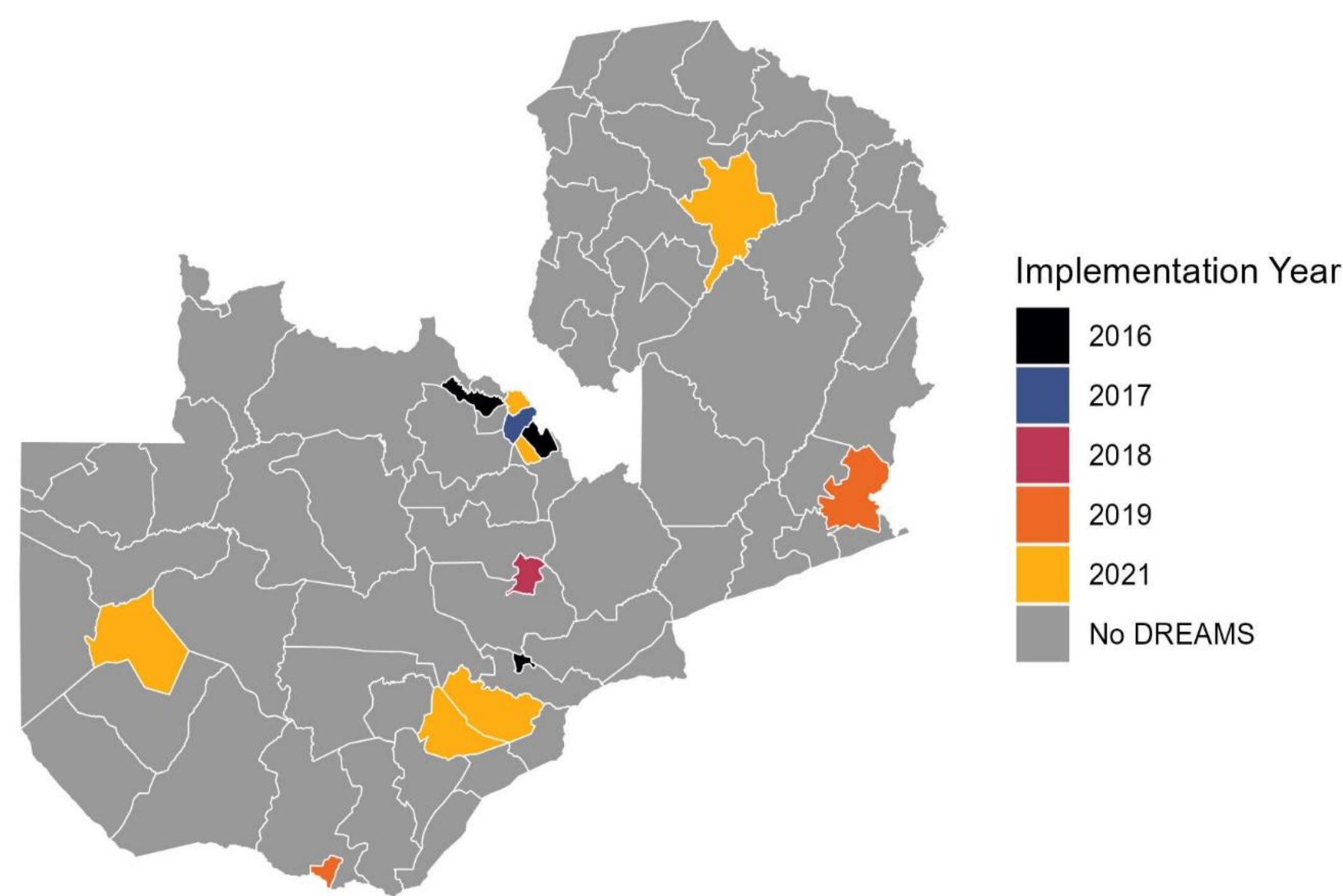
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Background

In sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) face a heightened risk of contracting HIV. To combat this issue in Zambia, the Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe (DREAMS) program provides a comprehensive approach to HIV prevention, including social and economic empowerment, youth-friendly sexual and reproductive healthcare, and access to biomedical prevention including pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). To encourage greater use of PrEP among AGYW, it is essential to identify the barriers and facilitators of PrEP usage within the DREAMS program.

Figure 1. DREAMS Geographic Distribution by Year of Implementation



Methods

We evaluated the DREAMS program in three districts of Zambia between April 2023 and July 2023. We collected data using interviews and focus group discussions:

- AGYW beneficiaries (n=55)
- Program implementers (n=51)

Using thematic analysis, we identified factors that influenced beneficiaries' PrEP use as described by DREAMS beneficiaries and implementers. Data were analyzed by a team of Zambia and U.S.-based researchers using *Atlas-ti* (v23).

Results

DREAMS beneficiaries described the benefits and facilitators of PrEP use. We identified three themes:

Theme 1: Improved knowledge of PrEP and its benefits

Many beneficiaries described having learned a lot about PrEP through DREAMS. At the time, at least, PrEP was not a well-known biomedical prevention intervention, as this participant describes:

“PrEP helps out a lot because you don’t know whether your boyfriend is sick or not so we are given PrEP knowing our status and knowing your boyfriend so you need PrEP to protect yourself because you don’t know whether he is sick or not. So, that is what they teach us at DREAMS.”

Theme 2: PrEP as security and empowerment

Beneficiaries expressed a sense of distrust toward their partners, driven by uncertainties about their partner’s HIV status or other relationships, which emerged as facilitators for PrEP use.

“..and tell them about DREAMS and that they provide condoms and PrEP in case their partner has many sexual partners, condoms, and PrEP help to protect against HIV infection. You can tell your friend to get help if they don’t trust their man.”

Theme 3: PrEP and stigma

- Beneficiaries expressed barriers to PrEP use, including concerns about potential consequences and PrEP stigma, some of which are grounded in misconceptions. Some AGYW mistakenly believed that PrEP was the same as antiretroviral drugs and could lead to illness.
- Beneficiaries also expressed concerns about potential stigma, fearing that using PrEP could lead to promiscuity and negative labeling as they associated PrEP use with sex workers.
- Implementers also described misconceptions about PrEP as a key barrier to its use, along with the need for parental consent for AGYW under age 16.

“...other relationships are destroyed because of PrEP because others say that prostitutes are the ones who like using PrEP and I am not a prostitute and if you as a female you start using PrEP then you are a prostitute...”

“...for PrEP, the challenge is also about the myth to say PrEP can make you sick, or they're just lying they make you sick with HIV and others say PrEP is it's the same to ARVs, it's for people who are sick”

Conclusions

- Inclusion of PrEP services within the DREAMS as a biomedical intervention has been well-received by AGYW in Zambia, underscoring its significance in empowering them to manage their health effectively.
- However, despite its benefits, certain beneficiaries still face challenges in accessing PrEP due to stigmatization.
- Implementing targeted interventions to address PrEP-related stigma is crucial to ensuring equal access to PrEP services for all.

