

Young Masculinities and Sexual Health in Southern Africa

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Chapter 13

How young Zimbabwean men's attitudes towards female PrEP use depend on gender norms

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Introduction

Gender inequalities remain a significant challenge to ending the HIV epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS, 2022a). In 2021 new infections among adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) accounted for approximately 63% of all new infections within the region of eastern and southern Africa (UNAIDS, 2022b). Different risk factors, including intimate partner violence, commercial sex and child marriage, as well as multiple concurrent sexual partners, increase the vulnerability of young women to contracting HIV (Braksmajer et al., 2016; Govender et al., 2018; Melesse et al., 2020). Underlying these risk factors are harmful public gender norms and patriarchal social structures, creating power inequities that render young women subject to men's control over their sexual health (UNAIDS, 2022a). Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), an antiretroviral medication predominantly administered as a daily oral pill, represents a promising innovation for female-initiated HIV prevention (Gomez et al., 2013). PrEP has proven to be safe and efficacious in preventing HIV (Irungu & Baeten, 2020). However, PrEP uptake and adherence among young women across countries in sub-Saharan Africa has been disappointing (Mayanja et al., 2022; Sila et al., 2020).

In Kenya, a study on adherence to oral PrEP among AGYW found that of 176 initially registered in the study only 16% had detectable levels of tenofovir-diphosphate (TFV-DP) concentrations in their blood four months after initiation (Tapsoba et al., 2022). Research on young women's PrEP use has increasingly focused on analysing the reasons for low adherence and uptake of oral PrEP within this group (Maseko et al., 2020; Velloza et al., 2020). While different factors such as stigmatisation by both healthcare providers and communities (Lanham et al., 2021; Skovdal et al., 2022a), as well as parental disapproval (Skovdal et al., 2023), pose a significant challenge for young women's PrEP uptake and utilisation, there is growing recognition of

how men and masculine gender norms may obstruct young women's PrEP use. A number of studies conducted with young women, for instance, have reported on their perceptions of men's disapproval of PrEP and alluded to how gender norms affect their engagement with PrEP (Braksmajer et al., 2016; Skovdal et al., 2022b). Despite men being perceived as the 'culprits,' only a few studies have set out to explore what young men who have sex with women (YMSW) think about young women's PrEP use. Mbewe and Govender (2020), in a study analysing male partners' influence on young women's PrEP use in South Africa, found that young men perceived female PrEP as signalling infidelity, and a general loss of men's control over their female partners. Another study, which focused on understanding men's perspective on PrEP, including their own PrEP use, was conducted by Berner-Rodoreda et al. (2023) in Eswatini. Analysing men's PrEP choice, they found that men in this context demonstrated the desire to exert control over women, including their female partner's PrEP use, whilst simultaneously fearing the reaction of women when disclosing their own PrEP use. Back in rural South Africa, Hannaford et al. (2020) also explored young men's perceptions of PrEP. They found that even though men acknowledged the risk of HIV to themselves and their female partners and were aware of the benefits of PrEP for sexual health, they were generally unsupportive of their female partner's PrEP use, something Hannaford et al. (2020) trace back to traditional gender norms. We seek to explore these gender dynamics further, albeit in a Zimbabwean context, and with a specific focus on *young* men between 18 and 29 years of age. We also go beyond past research foci on men's PrEP attitudes within relationships and explore their attitudes towards women's PrEP use more broadly.

Conceptually, and to anchor young men's different and gendered attitudes towards PrEP, we draw on the concept of hegemonic masculinity. This is not to say that there is a single, static and dominant form of masculinity 'out there', but to recognise that there are multiple masculinities (Connell, 2005) that in different ways, and to greater and lesser degrees, are shaped by a cultural and idealised notion of manhood and what it means to be 'a real man' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 836) argue that 'masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting.' They go on to argue that 'gender is always relational, and patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) of femininity' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848). As such, paying special attention to configurations of gender practice and the dyadic relationships that shape how young men and women relate to each other is essential for analysing young men's complex and fluid views on female PrEP use. This framing of hegemonic masculinity can thus help us identify and explain young Zimbabwean men's different attitudes towards female PrEP use.

The qualitative study

With heightened attention to the role of prevailing masculine gender norms, we explore YMSW's attitudes towards female PrEP use. The qualitative data analysed within this chapter forms part of the situation analysis (Skovdal & Cornish, 2015) of a larger intervention study designed to assess and improve PrEP and HIV prevention uptake among young people in the Manicaland province of Zimbabwe (Thomas et al., 2019). Ethical approval was obtained from the Medical Research Council of Zimbabwe (REF: MRCZ/A/2243), the Imperial College London Research Ethics Committee (REF: 17IC4160) and the institutional review board of the Biomedical Research and Training Institute in Zimbabwe (REF: AP140/2017).

Study setting and participants

In Manicaland Province, gender inequalities affect women both socially and economically. There is a gender gap in the labour force participation rate – the proportion of people working or actively seeking work: 48.9% of men compared to 32.2% of women (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2024). The disenfranchised position of women in society in Zimbabwe is further reinforced by a high burden of unpaid care and domestic work (World Bank, 2023). Manicaland is the province with the lowest prevalence of HIV in Zimbabwe, with 9.6% of adults aged 15–49 being infected with HIV in 2020 (Ministry of Health and Child Care, 2021). From an HIV prevention cascade perspective, recent data show that 11.4% of the population living in Manicaland demonstrates self-reported knowledge of PrEP, of whom 57.4% would be willing to take PrEP as a prevention method. Of those with knowledge and who have expressed willingness to take up PrEP, only 13.8% (n = 216) are reported to have ever taken PrEP (Ministry of Health and Child Care, 2021).

We draw on in-depth interviews (IDI) (n = 11) and one focus group discussion (FGD) (n = 1–7 participants) conducted in 2019 with a total of 18 young men (aged 18–29 years). Among the men who participated in IDIs, two were married and eight self-reported as single. We were unable to ascertain the relationship status of one IDI participant and the men participating in the FGD. The men were recruited from a rural roadside business centre and an urban high-density suburb in Mutare, covering different socio-economic and spatial environments. Young men in the study were purposefully sampled from a baseline study. The following criteria for eligibility were applied: sexually active, 18–29 years of age, HIV-negative, and had given consent to be contacted and agreed to participate in the qualitative study. The men sampled were contacted via telephone, when they were informed about the study and asked about their willingness to participate. None of the men invited declined to participate, and arrangements were made to set up appointments to meet them for face-to-face IDIs and the FGD.

Producing and making sense of the data

A topic guide was designed to assess prevailing gender norms and their influence on attitudes toward PrEP among YMSW in different settings in Manicaland, Zimbabwe. Topics guiding the interviewer through the IDIs and FGD covered a wide range of questions concerning sexual health, including different types of prevention methods (voluntary medical male circumcision, PrEP and other prevention methods), and HIV risk awareness as well as questions on the socio-cultural environment shaping YMSW's views on gender norms. Apart from the questions on PrEP included in the topic guide, the researchers also asked the participants about their views on PrEP use for women in general. The interviews were conducted in Shona and held in different settings, primarily at respondents' places of residence. Some interviews were held in respondents' cars to secure the respondents' privacy. The FGD was conducted in the boardroom of a local community-based organisation. The duration of the IDI was 47 minutes on average. The FGD lasted 122 minutes. Data were produced by the second author, DM, a Shona-speaking trained field researcher. He also took notes to describe the local environment and observations on the participants' conduct during the interviews and the FGD. Interviews and the FGD were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated into English. Data were subsequently transferred to Nvivo 12 for coding and thematic network analysis. After familiarising ourselves with the data, we coded and thematised the data following the process outlined by Attride-Stirling (2001). To understand the underlying gender dynamic in this cultural setting and the potential influence on young men's perceptions of PrEP, we drew on Connell & Messerschmidt's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity. Specifically, we used the theory to understand and explain differences in young men's gendered attitudes towards PrEP. The thematic network analysis identified multiple basic and organising themes, suggesting that hegemonic and idealised notions of masculinity might influence young men's attitudes and levels of acceptance of PrEP.

Findings

The young men participating in our study expressed conflictual attitudes towards female PrEP use. These attitudes appeared to be highly dependent on the nature and type of relationship the women were in. As we will now demonstrate, men were often supportive of PrEP use among women engaging in casual relationships, as these were women with whom they might have sex, and they saw PrEP as an opportunity to protect themselves and their wives from HIV infection. However, the men participating in our study were much less supportive of PrEP use among women to whom they were either married or with whom they were in a long-term relationship. They considered PrEP as a threat to their ability to control women's sexuality.

Men support PrEP use amongst young women engaging in casual relationships because it might benefit themselves

Women as vectors of HIV

Men's reflection on different prevention methods and the potential risk of infection with HIV revealed participants' perception of young women who engaged in casual relationships as 'sexual agents' and vectors of HIV. The image young men had of women became particularly evident to us in the FGD where multiple men articulated a shared and collective representation of young unmarried women as highly sexual and having multiple sexual partners. As the image of highly sexually active young women clashed with prevailing gender norms in the cultural setting, we observed that the young men tended to devalue young women engaging in casual relationships by generating harmful stereotypes, for instance by portraying them as having more sexual partners than young men and being more likely to cheat. This is exemplified by Samson in an interview:

Haaaa, there is no difference [between young men and women] because these days you will find that if I fell in love with a girl we may break up. You will see that the girl finds another lover. In her relationship with the new lover, they might break up. At times, I am boy, I may have three girl-friends while a girl may have four boyfriends. So, there is no difference because both will be cheating.

(Samson, 25, IDI)

Samson's account could indicate changing gender norms, with the image of young women as sexually active agents akin to young men challenging gender norms and men's self-understandings. Despite young men expressing sympathy and support for young women when the conversations were about women engaged in sex work, they often blamed women for immoral motives. According to some participants, young women predominantly engaged with men sexually if they could gain something from it.

Young women will be expecting marriage. Some of the young women may have multiple partners. She may have more than five partners. That's what I have observed.

(William, 29, IDI)

The conflict young men experienced between the sexuality of young women engaging in casual relationships and hegemonic and idealised notions of masculinity was also exhibited when participants were interviewed about the risk of young men contracting HIV. Within the interviews and the FGD, we observed that young men often spoke about women as potential vectors of HIV with

little or no introspection into their role in transmitting the virus. This was also reflected in multiple answers in the interviews where men indirectly framed themselves to be at an increased risk of having sex with young women:

Eeeeh, eeh as I see it that I am a boy I might be in the risk. There are instances when you had unprotected sex with a girl without wearing anything. You will see... that I am at danger of contracting the disease.

(Edward, 26, IDI)

The portrayal of young men as primarily victims of HIV implicitly creates an image of HIV as a predominantly 'female' disease inflicted upon young men by young women who refuse to use condoms. This is exemplified by Amos:

Another challenge is that if you want to sleep with a girl using a condom, she asks you if she is a prostitute and even if you would want to explain that it helps in preventing HIV, they might just see it as not important.

(Amos, age unknown, FGD)

The portrayal of young women as vectors of HIV was also a recurring theme when young men reflected on the role of other HIV prevention methods, such as condom use and voluntary male medical circumcision. For the young men in our study, condom use was the preferred choice of prevention, as it represented a physical barrier to HIV prevention, and provided the young men with a sense of control. Paradoxically, some young men acknowledged that women are unable to negotiate safer sex due to men's exertion of power and are subsequently more likely to contract HIV.

I am saying so because women cannot negotiate for safer safe. Women are shy to tell men, that they must use a condom. So, women end up being at risk since they are shy to negotiate about using prevention methods with men. They just agree to what men say.

(William, 29, IDI)

PrEP perceived to keep young women engaging in casual relationships 'disease free'

Many men in our study clearly aspired to traditional gender norms where young women do not engage in pre-marital and extra-marital sex. When reflecting on unmarried young women's sexual behaviour, young men appeared to create a dichotomy associating sexually abstinent unmarried women with purity (i.e., being disease free), while perceiving young women who engage in casual relationships as a threat to men's sexual health. The double standards of our young male participants became clear when they discussed the co-benefits of female PrEP use on their own sexual health. Participants in the study often argued that it would be beneficial to them if young women engaging in casual relationships were on PrEP, as described by Peter:

Yaaa, it's a very good idea because it can be used by men and women preventing everyone. This will help all of us prevent the disease. Eh, I would accept her PrEP use because she will be able to prevent both of us from catching HIV.

(Peter, 23, IDI)

Apart from young men's perception of female PrEP use as beneficial to their sexual health, it also allowed men to relinquish responsibility for preventing HIV and pass the responsibility over to women. This generally resulted in wide approval among the participants for supporting PrEP use among young women with whom they might engage in a causal relationship.

So if a woman is on PrEP, it will be well for us both since she has taken preventive measures already.

(Solomon, 29, FDG)

Some young men demonstrated a broader consideration when they spoke about the motives to accept PrEP use among young women with whom they might engage in casual relationships. Shadred considered such young women to be knowledgeable, and expressed respect for their decision:

I think she will be a very clever woman. I view her as a clever woman who will be afraid...sometimes the women will be having sex with multiple partners, and this makes her to choose to make use of PrEP in order to avoid HIV.

(Shadred, 24, IDI)

This section has shown that some young men struggle to accept young women's sexual agency and that they cast them as carriers and vectors of HIV. They would prefer young women to stay pure and disease free, which traditionally has meant discouraging AGYW from engaging in pre-marital or extra-marital sex. However, as young men are keen to have sex with multiple girls, not least to cement their masculinities, this creates a paradox (cf. Skovdal, 2025) and a conflict, where PrEP seems to offer a solution. Young men in our study appear to support PrEP use amongst the young women with whom they have casual relationships as it keeps them pure and disease free whilst also safeguarding the sexual health of the young men themselves.

PrEP perceived as interfering with men's patriarchal control of women to whom they are married or with whom they are in long-term relationships

In contrast to the supportive attitudes young men held towards PrEP use among young women with whom they may have casual relationships, most of the men in our study did not accept PrEP as a prevention method among women to whom they were married or with whom they were in a long-term relationship. The relationship status of young women was thus an important

factor in determining young men's acceptability of PrEP. To understand this, we first looked to explore men's perceived right to control women in their relationships.

Sexual control and power within marriage or long-term relationships

When men in our study reported on their perceived ideal of sexuality within a marriage or long-term relationship, their desire to sexually control women was clear, not least to demonstrate their masculinities through sexual virility. However, the young men often spoke about their control over women's sexuality in the context of the transactions that take place within a relationship. Many young men in our study, for instance, expressed a perception that women often enter into a relationship to sustain themselves economically. When a young man in our study was asked about the differences between the motives of young men and women for entering into a long-term relationship or marriage, John replied:

At times they may be different. Women would expect to gain something. Like money from the boyfriend. Women would be expecting something. Men will be expecting something from women. Men would be expecting to be loved or having sex with that person.

(John, 23, IDI)

Given the socially and economically disenfranchised position of many young women in this part of Zimbabwe, the young men in our study recognised the power they held to get women to obey them, as explained by Amos in the FGD:

I see as though us boys are the ones who give pressure to the girl for us to have sex. She might give an excuse. I might threaten her that I will leave her.

(Amos, age unknown, FGD)

Young men in our study thus see sex and sexuality as a masculine domain. As men are expected by society to portray sexual dominance over women, most young men in the study expressed the view that young men had the power to decide on when to have sex with their wives or long-term partners. As Solomon recounts: 'Men are the ones who decide when to have sex.' This power and control also extended to decisions related to different prevention methods. Some young men expected young women to be responsible for safeguarding the sexual health of both the man and the woman, as it was also women's responsibility to ensure contraception. Although this allocation of responsibility would suggest that decision-making on prevention is a female-controlled space, we also saw that most men in the study perceived it as their right to decide whether to make use of prevention or not.

PrEP challenging gendered power dynamics

Most of the young men in our study showed interest in upholding this heteropatriarchal control of women, their sexuality and use of HIV prevention methods. PrEP, as a female-controlled HIV prevention method, was thus perceived to challenge young men's ideal of heteropatriarchal dominance and decision-making on prevention. Young men's understanding of their right to control and exert power over women was particularly evident when they discussed women's PrEP use in the context of marriage or long-term relationships. To the young men, PrEP implied that their female partner would have multiple sexual partners outside of their primary relationship. In other words, for the young men PrEP signalled promiscuity:

If she is the one who told me that she is on PrEP, I will question the motive behind using PrEP. I will suspect that she will be having sex with multiple partners.

(William, 29, IDI)

Young men who demonstrated knowledge of sexual health, and valued openness and communication within a relationship, also expressed a willingness to consider their partner's PrEP use. However, as explained by William, this support would be contingent on him suggesting and approving PrEP as an HIV prevention method within their relationship:

If she told me that she is on PrEP, I will suspect that she is being promiscuous. If I am the one who encourages her to make use of PrEP, I will be grateful for this. There will be no element of suspicion because I will be the one who had brought that idea. It's different from being told by her that she is on PrEP.

(William, 29, IDI)

Most men, however, considered it an offence if their female partner was on PrEP and, as already exemplified by Amos above, claimed they would discontinue the relationship if they discovered that their female partner was on PrEP:

Haaa, I will react negatively. I will be thinking that the girl is being promiscuous. I won't accept it. I will quit the relationship. You don't know the intention of the girl. The girl may end up infecting me with HIV. That's all.

(Misheck, 25, IDI)

The young men clearly expected the woman with whom they were in a relationship to be faithful, and PrEP both represented and enabled the opposite. They discredited women on PrEP by stigmatising them as promiscuous and as vectors

of HIV. Some young men also perceived female PrEP use to question the young men's integrity and commitment to faithfulness. Yet, paradoxically, and although some young men argued that by entering into a relationship they would commit to being faithful, many others, particularly in the FGD, which was also a forum for demonstrating their masculinities, implied that men, because of their uncontrollable sexuality, should be expected to be unfaithful. Despite their own accounts of unfaithfulness, they still perceived female PrEP use as an attack on their integrity and a demonstration of women's distrust towards men.

I would think that she is paranoid as she does not trust me or she is sleeping with a lot of men hence her need to take the pills.

(Taurai, 23, IDI)

The young men in our study thus perceived PrEP use among women with whom they were in a relationship either as a way for the women to have sexual partners outside the relationship or as a sign of distrust.

Discussion

Our study demonstrates that young Zimbabwean men's attitudes towards female PrEP use are complicated and appear to be contingent on whether PrEP is used by women with whom they are in a casual or long-term relationship. For women with whom they were in casual relationships, their attitudes were mixed; however, protecting themselves from infection trumped their loss of control over female sexuality and use of prevention methods, rendering them supportive of female PrEP use. This notion of self-preservation and subsequent support of PrEP use among women aligns with similar findings by Mbewe and Govender (2020), who have found that men in South Africa perceived PrEP use among certain risk groups such as female sex workers to be an acceptable form of HIV protection as it benefitted them. However, in the case of women to whom they are married, or with whom they were in a long-term relationship, the opposite was true due to stronger social expectations of faithfulness for these women. Most of the men did not accept the idea of PrEP use amongst women with whom they were in a committed relationship. This finding is consistent with the results of a study conducted by Hannaford et al. (2020) in South Africa, which showed that men were less supportive of PrEP use by women in relationships, citing concerns that it might allow extra-marital sexual activity. These findings demonstrate that gender norms, and in particular those that idealise a hegemonic notion of masculinity, to a large degree shape young men's attitudes towards female PrEP use, with their acceptability and support being conditional on the nature and type of relationship they have with the women. As such, hegemonic and idealised notions of masculinity did not result in a fixed and singular attitude, but different attitudes that were contingent on their dyadic relationship with the women. Their approval was most clear if or when female PrEP use benefitted the

young men and their construction of masculinity. Contrarily, their disapproval of female PrEP use was clear when it posed a threat to their masculinity and social status in the community. That said, and despite this pattern, there were signs of resistance suggesting more all-round support of young women's use of PrEP, such as when Shadred expressed his respect and support of women choosing to make use of PrEP to avoid HIV.

Whilst other studies have focused on young men's attitudes towards female PrEP use in sub-Saharan African settings (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2023; Camlin et al., 2020), this study is believed to be the first to explore *how* prevailing masculine gender norms might influence young men's attitudes towards female PrEP use by differentiating between two different relationships contexts: casual relationships and marriage or long-term relationships. While young men's disapproval of female PrEP use in long-term relationships concurs with the findings of previous studies (Hannaford et al., 2020), we found young men to have a more nuanced relationship to female PrEP use, one that ties their acceptability and support of female PrEP use to its ability to either challenge (e.g., within marriage or long-term relationships) or support (e.g., by enabling casual and safe sexual encounters) their sense of masculinity. While Berner-Rodoreda et al. (2023) in Eswatini and Camlin et al. (2020) in Kenya and Uganda have found that hegemonic masculinities play a diminishing role in shaping young men's attitudes towards female PrEP use, our findings indicate that patriarchy and male gender norms continue to significantly influence young Zimbabwean men's attitudes toward HIV prevention methods. While some of the young men in our study demonstrated progressive views and expressed support of gender equality, ideas about what it means to be 'a real man' and notions of what it means to be a 'good girl' still shaped the interviews and the FGD. For instance, while Berner-Rodoreda et al. (2023), in a study on young men's attitudes towards female PrEP use in Eswatini, found young men open to discussing PrEP with their female partner, most young men in our study reported that female PrEP use was out of the question in the context of marriage or long-term relationships. Young women in Zimbabwe appear to be fully aware of this attitude, which explains their disengagement with PrEP (Skovdal, 2025; Skovdal et al., 2022b).

The findings should be observed against a few limitations. It is crucial to note that the study reflected the hypothetical perspective of young men. Many of the men had not had previous experiences with PrEP, with some of them hearing of PrEP for the first time during the interviews and the FGD. The limited knowledge of PrEP among young men, as observed in other studies (Kabaghe et al., 2023; Shamu et al., 2021), underscores the need for greater efforts to educate young men about the repertoire of HIV prevention methods, including PrEP. While this might have influenced the young men's reflection on PrEP in the context of this study, men's knowledge of other prevention methods for HIV, and the information provided by the researchers, enabled the participants to assess PrEP critically in the context of their social environment.

Our findings highlight the impact of gender norms in shaping young men's attitudes towards female PrEP use. Although the construction of masculinities was not the primary focus of our study, young men's reflections on the role and importance of peer groups, community and intergenerational teachings in shaping their gendered attitudes and beliefs, as discussed in the interviews and FGD, suggest the need for future research to explore the social norms and gender orders that shape young men's attitudes towards PrEP.

Conclusion

We set out to explore the prevailing gender norms that might influence young men's attitudes towards PrEP. The findings show that young men's attitudes towards female PrEP use are contingent on the nature of the men's relationship to the women. Whereas young men in the study were supportive of female PrEP use among women engaging in casual relationships, when they were asked about PrEP use among young married women, or women with whom they were in a long-term relationship, they commonly perceived female PrEP use as unacceptable. This nuanced understanding of young men's attitudes towards female PrEP use must be considered to implement PrEP programmes effectively on a wider scale. It is essential that PrEP interventions targeting young men and women in Zimbabwe are complemented by educational initiatives that equip young men with the knowledge and understanding to approve and support PrEP use of women, particularly those with whom they are married or in long-term relationships. Our study also revealed that underlying young men's varied attitudes are strong and persistent hegemonic gender norms in parts of Zimbabwe. This underscores the need for intensified efforts at the political and societal levels to achieve gender equality in the country. One place to intervene is through comprehensive sex education, starting with school-going adolescents. In South Africa, George et al. (2024) have found comprehensive sex education to play a vital role in affecting adolescents' HIV-related behaviours, equipping young people with the knowledge and literacy to decide on prevention and sex in a well-informed and responsible manner.

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