A longitudinal interpretative phenomenological analysis of the experience of using injectable PrEP among young women in Zambia

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BACKGROUND

Adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in sub-Saharan Africa face a disproportionate risk of HIV. Cabotegravir (CAB-LA), an injectable long-acting pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV prevention, is highly efficacious but there is limited data from real-world settings. Consequently, little is known about the community-based user experience. As part of an observational study of the introduction of CAB-LA through the DREAMS program in Southern Zambia, we assessed AGYW's experiences with CAB-LA. Our findings aim to inform efforts to scale HIV prevention programming for AGYW.

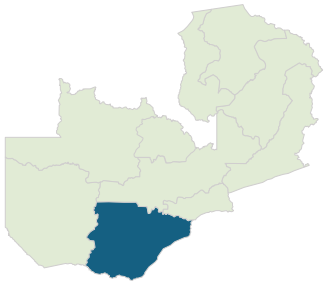
METHODS

Longitudinal qualitative study using **interpretive phenomenological analysis** to understand AGYW's experiences with initiating and continuing CAB-LA use over time

- AGYW aged 16-23 years old
- Purposively sampled within six weeks of starting CAB-LA
- AGYW were interviewed three times over nine months of continuous use (21 interviews total)

We began with within-participant analysis to explore each participant's experience over time including reading, open-coding, theme identification, and refinement; followed by across-participant analysis to identify and refine shared themes.

Analysis was conducted by a research team comprised of Zambian and U.S.-based researchers.



We are conducting a qualitative study of the **first** implementation of CAB-LA to AGYW within the DREAMS program in two centers in Southern Zambia (2024-2026)

Interviews with 7 AGYW were conducted longitudinally

Interpretive phenomenological analysis used

RESULTS: 6 Key Themes Capture the Experience of CAB-LA Use Over Time

Theme 1: Overcoming fears and worries to start using CAB-LA

Starting CAB-LA was more challenging than straightforward. Awareness before injection that CAB-LA might be especially painful caused fear among some participants. Still, they persevered and initiated CAB-LA, showing conviction and commitment to their decision.

My younger sister first got the injection...She told me that the injection was very painful...she was limping. ***So, I feared that I would also experience the same pain*** *and start limping.*
- Claire, age 23*

* All names are pseudonyms

Theme 2: Men continue to demonstrate they cannot be trusted

*Even when I get married, I will be coming to take the injection… Because these men are difficulty, maybe he is working abroad …****you never know what he is doing … You just get infected in your house***
- Mahery, age 21

From initiation all through their journey on CAB-LA, participants shared ongoing reasons and evidence that made them doubt their partners faithfulness, and therefore, underscored concerns about their health. Being on CAB-LA was understood as a means of maintaining control over HIV prevention independent of partner behavior.

Theme 3: Growing sense of relief

Prior to their initiation on CAB-LA, participants shared that they had persistent fears of vulnerability to HIV shaped by negative sexual experiences, perceptions of high community HIV rates, or close family living with HIV. CAB-LA provided a growing sense of safety and relief of worry about HIV risk; it also resulted in some participants deprioritizing condom use negotiation.

I was happy [to be on CAB-LA] because of emergencies. If you don't know [the HIV status of] the person you're sleeping with it's important to have PrEP. ***I was happy to know that on my side I am safe from getting HIV.***
-Yvonne, age 21

Theme 4: Selective disclosure for peace and safety

The injectable and long-acting nature of CAB-LA enabled discreet PrEP use. Participants were therefore able to better control with whom they shared their use and when. For almost every participant, their circle of disclosure widened over time as they grew more confident in their decision to use CAB-LA.

I can tell him, but I didn't tell him *… I think we might have an argument on that when I tell him, but I am just trying to prevent myself, when I tell him he thinks I am a prostitute.*
- Sophia, age 19

Theme 5: Journey from support to advocacy

Interviewer: How do you feel, knowing that you introduced someone to PrEP and they have continued?
Participant: ***I feel good, because they have also shared with their friends who understand and they started and they have continued as well****. The guys are brought here are now six, seven months on PrEP….*
-Claire, age 23

Over time, and following their own positive experience on CAB-LA, many participants transitioned from receiving peer support to becoming advocates, actively sharing information and encouraging PrEP uptake among friends, family, and community members.

Theme 6: Personal conviction and program support counter misinformation

Participants expressed strong personal conviction in the safety and efficacy of CAB-LA and were unwilling to be swayed by widespread community misinformation and rumors. Their conviction was supported by peer-mentors and other DREAMS providers who served as trusted sources of information sources.

I do not pay attention to the people who have negative things to say *about this injectable because everyone has their own life to live.*
- Zara, age 23

CONCLUSIONS

AGYW's experience with CAB-LA in Southern Zambia is marked by high social support, strong individual conviction, institutional credibility, feasible integration into daily life, and a growing sense of security within the context of unequal relationships. Programs that can foster peer and institutional support, encourage advocacy, and overcome misinformation will have better likelihood of success.

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