“You use condoms? You are Young!” Describing Adolescents’ and Young Adults' Experiences of Stigma Surrounding Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare Delivery in Botswana.

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Background: Unmet sexual and reproductive health (SRH) needs lead to high rates of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), with these healthcare gaps disproportionately affecting the well-being of adolescents and young adults (AYAs). Stigma remains a significant challenge to providing equitable SRH to adolescents globally and undermines the implementation of youth-friendly services (YFS). This study aimed to describe the types of stigma experienced by AYAs accessing SRH services in Botswana, where adolescent girls remain disproportionately affected by new HIV infections.

Methods: AYAs aged 14-25 years across four regions in Botswana completed quantitative surveys and semi-structured interviews to describe their views on sexual health and experiences accessing SRH services within their communities.

Results: Forty-six AYAs were included in this study, of whom 32 (70%) were female. More than half of the participants reported being currently in a relationship (i.e., 29/46 (63%)), and 17/46 (37%) had at least one child. While most reported an HIV negative status, 7/46 (15%) were living with HIV, and 4/46 (9%) reported that they did not know their status. Only 25/45 (56%) of participants reported always feeling welcome in the clinic, with 43/46 (93%) expressing a desire for providers to be less judgmental. Qualitative results identified drivers and facilitators of stigma, intersectional stigma, and manifestations of stigma. Analysis yielded five themes: 1) cultural norms and stigma limit open discussion on SRH topics; 2) intersectional stigma related to adolescent sexual activity and sexual health needs; 3) anticipated stigma when accessing services; 4) experienced stigma from healthcare providers; 5) disapproving views of their peers’ sexual behaviors.

Conclusions: Findings support the need for expanding the availability of YFS and developing innovative strategies that address stigma related to AYAs’ sexual health in both community and health care settings. Future work to address stigma in both settings would benefit from a community-engaged approach to ensure the implementation of culturally appropriate interventions that promote sexual health for all. Provider training on stigma reduction in healthcare facilities will also be essential to improving AYAs' experiences when accessing care. Adolescent-engaged service design could further enhance the delivery of youth-friendly SRH care.