

# Factors Affecting Adolescents' Access To Sexual And Reproductive Health Services In Wedza District, Zimbabwe

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## **Abstract:**

*Adolescents' access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services is a critical aspect of their well-being and development, particularly in low-resource settings. Despite international agreements and national laws, access to SRH services by adolescents remains low worldwide, affecting millions. This study investigates the factors affecting adolescents' access to SRH services in Wedza District, Zimbabwe, with a focus on identifying barriers and eliciting suggestions for improvement. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods. The study reveals that adolescents in Wedza District face significant barriers in accessing SRH services, including lack of information, availability, affordability, acceptability, and quality of services. Socio-cultural and economic factors, such as traditional norms, stigma, and poverty, also influence adolescents' access to SRH services. The study highlights the need for adolescent-friendly health services that are sensitive to the needs and developmental attributes of adolescents. The study recommended that the government of Zimbabwe should develop and implement policies that promote adolescents' access to SRH services, including ensuring availability and affordability of services, the Ministry of Health and Child Care should provide training for healthcare providers on adolescent-friendly health services and ensure that services are accessible, acceptable, and effective for adolescents, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should integrate comprehensive sexuality education into school curricula to empower adolescents with knowledge and skills on SRH, Parents and Guardians should engage in open and supportive discussions with adolescents about SRH and provide guidance and support and adolescents should take responsibility for their own SRH by seeking information, services, and support when needed.*

**Key Words:** *Adolescents, Sexual and reproductive health services, Access barriers, Mixed-methods approach, Adolescent-friendly health services and Comprehensive sexuality education*

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## **I. Introduction**

Sexual and reproductive health (SRH) is a critical aspect of adolescents' overall well-being, encompassing their ability to lead safe and fulfilling lives (WHO, 2021). Adolescence, a pivotal phase of transition from childhood to adulthood, is marked by rapid physical, psychological, and social changes (WHO, 2018). During this period, adolescents have distinct health needs and rights that warrant attention and respect. However, many adolescents face significant barriers in accessing SRH services, particularly in low-resource settings where financial constraints, lack of support, and guidance can lead to risky behaviours with severe consequences (Kasedde et al., 2013). The lack of access to SRH services can have far-reaching consequences, including unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and HIV/AIDS (WHO, 2021). This study investigated the factors influencing adolescents' access to SRH services in Wedza District, Zimbabwe, with a focus on adolescents aged 15-19 years. If we understand the factors that affect adolescents' access to SRH services, this study will indeed, contribute to the development of effective interventions that can improve the SRH outcomes of adolescents in Zimbabwe. Adolescents' SRH is a critical issue that requires attention from policymakers, healthcare providers, and communities. The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasizes the importance of providing adolescents with access to SRH information, education, and services that are tailored to their needs (WHO, 2021). In Zimbabwe, the government has implemented policies and programs to promote SRH among adolescents, but there is still a need to understand the factors that affect adolescents' access to SRH services.

## **Background to the Study**

The importance of SRH cannot be overstated, as it is intricately linked to the physical and emotional health of individuals (WHO, 2021). At the international level, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994 underscored the need to address the SRH needs of young people (Kamau, 2006). The ICPD Programme of Action emphasized the importance of providing adolescents with access to SRH information, education, and services that are tailored to their needs. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also highlight the importance of SRH, particularly Goal 3, which aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. At the regional level, the African Union's Maputo Plan of Action (2007-2015) emphasizes the need to promote and protect the SRH rights of women and girls, including adolescents. The plan calls for increased access to SRH services, including family planning, maternal health, and HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. In addition, the African Union's Agenda 2063 emphasizes the importance of investing in the health and well-being of young people, including their SRH. At the national level, Zimbabwe has made significant progress in developing policies and programs to promote SRH among adolescents. The Zimbabwe National Adolescent and Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy (2016-2020) aim to improve the SRH outcomes of adolescents and young people by increasing access to SRH information, education, and services. The strategy also emphasizes the importance of involving adolescents and young people in the design and implementation of SRH programs. Despite progress made since the ICPD, adolescents continue to face significant challenges in accessing SRH services, including lack of knowledge, stigma, and limited availability of services (Muchabaiwa and Mbonigaba, 2019). In Zimbabwe, SRH issues among teenagers are a pressing concern, with high rates of adolescent fertility, HIV prevalence, and unmet need for contraception (ZIMSTAT & ICF International, 2016). The Zimbabwe Demographic and Health Survey (ZDHS) from 2015 found that 4% of women aged 15 to 24 had HIV infection, and 14% of women aged 15 to 49 had experienced sexual assault at some time in their life (ZIMSTAT and ICF International, 2016). Moreover, adolescents in Zimbabwe face significant barriers in accessing SRH services, including lack of information, availability, affordability, acceptability, or quality of services or methods; fear of side effects or health risks; opposition from partners, parents, or providers; social norms or expectations; or legal restrictions. The consequences of inadequate SRH outcomes are far-reaching, affecting not only the adolescents themselves but also their families, communities, and the broader economy (Tshabalala et al., 2015). Improving adolescents' SRH can enhance their human capital development and contribute to the economic growth and social development of Zimbabwe. Therefore, it is essential to understand the factors affecting adolescents' access to SRH services in Wedza District, Zimbabwe, and to identify opportunities for improving the quality and availability of these services. This study aims to contribute to the development of effective interventions that can improve the SRH outcomes of adolescents in Zimbabwe.

## **II. Theoretical Framework And Its Applicability To The Study**

The study's theoretical framework is based on the developmental theories, which categorize adolescence as a time of sexual and physical development as well as the formation of an adolescent's identity and way of thinking (Ward-Peterson et al., 2018). According to these theories, adolescents are more impulsive, careless, and non-conforming during this stage of transition, making it imperative to provide sexual education and services to empower them. The framework also draws on the health belief model, which posits that an individual's behaviour is influenced by their perceived susceptibility to a health problem, perceived severity of the problem, perceived benefits of taking action, and perceived barriers to taking action (Rosenstock et al., 1988). The developmental theories provide a foundation for understanding the physical, emotional, and social changes that adolescents undergo during this stage of development. According to Erikson's psychosocial theory, adolescence is a critical period of identity formation, during which individuals explore their identities and develop a sense of self (Erikson, 1963). This theory helps to explain why adolescents may engage in risk-taking behaviours, including unprotected sex, as they navigate their identities and experiment with different roles. The health belief model provides a framework for understanding the factors that influence adolescents' decisions to access SRH services. According to this model, adolescents are more likely to access SRH services if they perceive themselves to be susceptible to SRH problems, believe that SRH problems are severe, and perceive benefits to accessing SRH services (Rosenstock et al., 1988). This model helps to identify the barriers that prevent adolescents from accessing SRH services, including lack of knowledge, stigma, and limited availability of services. This theoretical framework is applicable to the study because it provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence adolescents' access to SRH services. The theoretical framework helps to identify the physical, emotional, and social changes that adolescents undergo during this stage of development, as well as the factors that influence their decisions to access SRH services and informs the development of interventions to improve SRH outcomes among adolescents. For example, interventions focus on increasing adolescents' knowledge about SRH issues, reducing stigma associated with SRH services, and improving the availability and accessibility of SRH services.

### **III. Related Literature Review**

The literature review highlights the importance of SRH services for adolescents, particularly in disadvantaged rural settings. Research has shown that adolescents have limited knowledge about SRH issues, which can lead to risky behaviours and poor health outcomes (Anokye-Mensah, 2019). In Zimbabwe, for example, the Zimbabwe Demographic and Health Survey (ZDHS) found that only 40% of women and 54% of men aged 15-24 had worn a condom during their most recent high-risk intercourse (ZIMSTAT & ICF International, 2016). Studies have also shown that adolescents often lack access to SRH services due to various barriers, including lack of information, availability, affordability, acceptability, or quality of services or methods; fear of side effects or health risks; opposition from partners, parents, or providers; social norms or expectations; or legal restrictions (Muchabaiwa & Mbonigaba, 2019). The literature review also highlights the importance of education in improving SRH outcomes among adolescents. Research has found that girls who attend school have lower risks of early sexual initiation, early marriage or cohabitation, and early motherhood (Denno et al., 2015). The literature review highlights the importance of SRH services for adolescents, particularly in disadvantaged rural settings. Further research is needed to identify effective interventions that can improve SRH outcomes among adolescents.

### **IV. Research Methodology**

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods to investigate the factors affecting adolescents' access to sexual and reproductive health services in Weda District, Zimbabwe (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). The study population consisted of adolescents aged 15-19 years, and a sample size of 100 respondents was selected using simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques (Etikan et al., 2016). A case study design was used to investigate the factors affecting adolescents' access to sexual and reproductive health services in Weda District. This design allowed for an in-depth examination of the research problem and provided rich, detailed insights into the specific context and experiences of adolescents in Weda District (Yin, 2018). Data collection methods included questionnaires, interviews, and document review. Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data from adolescents, while interviews were conducted with key informants, including healthcare providers, community leaders, and government officials (Patton, 2015). Document review was used to gather secondary data from existing literature and reports (Bowen, 2009). Data analysis was done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software package for quantitative data, and thematic analysis for qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the quantitative data, and thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes in the qualitative data.

### **V. Findings Of The Study**

The study found that adolescents in Wedza District face several challenges in accessing sexual and reproductive health services. According to the descriptive statistics, 71% (n = 71) of the respondents reported that they had knowledge about reproductive health services offered in Wedza District, while 29% (n = 29) reported that they did not have knowledge about these services. The study also found that the majority of the respondents (74%, n = 74) reported that they had increased education and awareness about sexual and reproductive health services, while 26% (n = 26) reported that they did not have increased education and awareness. The chi-square test revealed a significant association between knowledge about reproductive health services and access to these services ( $\chi^2 = 5.23$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This suggests that adolescents who have knowledge about reproductive health services are more likely to access these services.

The study revealed that social stigma is a significant barrier to adolescents' access to sexual and reproductive health services, with 64% of respondents reporting feelings of stigmatization and further found that limited availability of sexual and reproductive health services is a major challenge, with 56% of respondents indicating that these services are not readily available in their area. Access to sexual and reproductive health services is associated with improved health outcomes, as evidenced by 85% of respondents reporting better health outcomes. The study showed that access to sexual and reproductive health services empowers adolescents to make informed decisions about their reproductive health, with 78% of respondents reporting informed decision-making. There is a significant association between access to sexual and reproductive health services and better health outcomes, highlighting the importance of accessible services. Knowledge about reproductive health services is a crucial factor in determining adolescents' access to these services, with a significant association found between knowledge and access. Community factors, such as social norms and cultural values, play a significant role in shaping adolescents' perceptions and behaviours towards sexual and reproductive health services, with 60% of respondents reporting their influence. The study emphasized the need for adolescent-friendly services that are accessible, available, and acceptable to adolescents, with 80% of respondents considering these services essential. Comprehensive sexuality education is crucial for promoting the health and well-being of adolescents, with 90% of respondents considering it essential for informed decision-making.

### **Analysis and Discussion of the Study**

The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature on the challenges faced by adolescents in accessing sexual and reproductive health services. According to the World Health Organization (2018), adolescents face several barriers in accessing sexual and reproductive health services, including lack of knowledge, social stigma, and limited availability of services. The study found that community factors, such as social norms and cultural values, play a significant role in shaping adolescents' perceptions and behaviours towards sexual and reproductive health services. This is consistent with the findings of Moyo et al (2019), who noted that community factors, such as social norms and cultural values, can influence adolescents' access to sexual and reproductive health services. The study also found that adolescents who have access to sexual and reproductive health services are more likely to have better health outcomes and make informed decisions about their reproductive health. This is consistent with the findings of Denno et al (2015), who noted that adolescents who have access to comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health services are more likely to have better health outcomes and make informed decisions about their reproductive health. The study's findings highlight the need for increased access to sexual and reproductive health services for adolescents in Wedza District, Zimbabwe.

The study's findings are consistent with the literature on the importance of comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health services for adolescents. According to the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) (2016), comprehensive sexuality education is essential for adolescents to make informed decisions about their reproductive health. The study's findings also highlight the importance of community involvement in promoting sexual and reproductive health services for adolescents. According to the World Health Organization (2018), community involvement is critical in promoting sexual and reproductive health services for adolescents. The study's findings also highlight the need for adolescent-friendly services that are accessible, available, and acceptable to adolescents. According to the World Health Organization (2018), adolescent-friendly services are essential for promoting the health and well-being of adolescents. The study suggests that stakeholders, including government, healthcare providers, and community leaders, should work together to increase access to sexual and reproductive health services for adolescents.

### **VI. Conclusion And Recommendations**

This study investigated the factors affecting adolescents' access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services in Wedza District, Zimbabwe. The findings revealed that adolescents in Wedza District face significant barriers in accessing SRH services, including lack of information, availability, affordability, acceptability, and quality of services. Socio-cultural and economic factors, such as traditional norms, stigma, and poverty, also influence adolescents' access to SRH services. The study highlights the need for adolescent-friendly health services that are sensitive to the needs and developmental attributes of adolescents. Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are made:

- The government of Zimbabwe should develop and implement policies that promote adolescents' access to SRH services, including ensuring availability and affordability of services.
- The Ministry of Health and Child Care should provide training for healthcare providers on adolescent-friendly health services and ensure that services are accessible, acceptable, and effective for adolescents.
- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should integrate comprehensive sexuality education into school curricula to empower adolescents with knowledge and skills on SRH.
- Parents and Guardians should engage in open and supportive discussions with adolescents about SRH and provide guidance and support.
- Adolescents should take responsibility for their own SRH by seeking information, services, and support when needed.
- Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) should collaborate with government ministries and stakeholders to provide SRH services and support to adolescents.
- Community Leaders should promote awareness and understanding of SRH issues and support adolescents' access to SRH services.
- Healthcare Providers should provide adolescent-friendly health services that are sensitive to the needs and developmental attributes of adolescents.
- Development Partners should provide funding and technical support to improve the quality and availability of SRH services for adolescents.
- Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT) should conduct regular surveys and assessments to monitor adolescents' SRH outcomes and identify areas for improvement.

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