

# Barriers, facilitators to PrEP uptake and continuation among adolescent girls and young women

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## BACKGROUND

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) was approved by the Malawi Ministry of Health in October 2020. In March 2021, PrEP was initiated in the Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe (DREAMS) clubs by the Expanding Malawi HIV/AIDS Prevention with Local Organizations Working for an Effective Epidemic Response (EMPOWER) project. PrEP uptake among adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) was low, yet the contributing factors were not well understood. We conducted a qualitative study to explore barriers and facilitators to PrEP uptake and continuation among AGYW to inform the development of improvement strategies.



A group of AGYW participating in a study focus group discussion

## DESCRIPTION

We conducted 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) in Zomba (n=6) and Machinga (n=6) districts in October 2021 involving (n=70) AGYW aged 15–24 newly initiated on PrEP, (n=36) screened eligible but declined PrEP, and reviewed PrEP trackers for non-continuing users. Follow-up FGDs in December 2021 targeted (n=60) continuing and (n=15) non-continuing AGYW. We transcribed FGDs, examined data, did a thematic analysis, and interpreted the themes into context.



AGYW participants sharing notes after a focus group discussion

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<https://www.fhi360.org/taxonomy/term/1244>

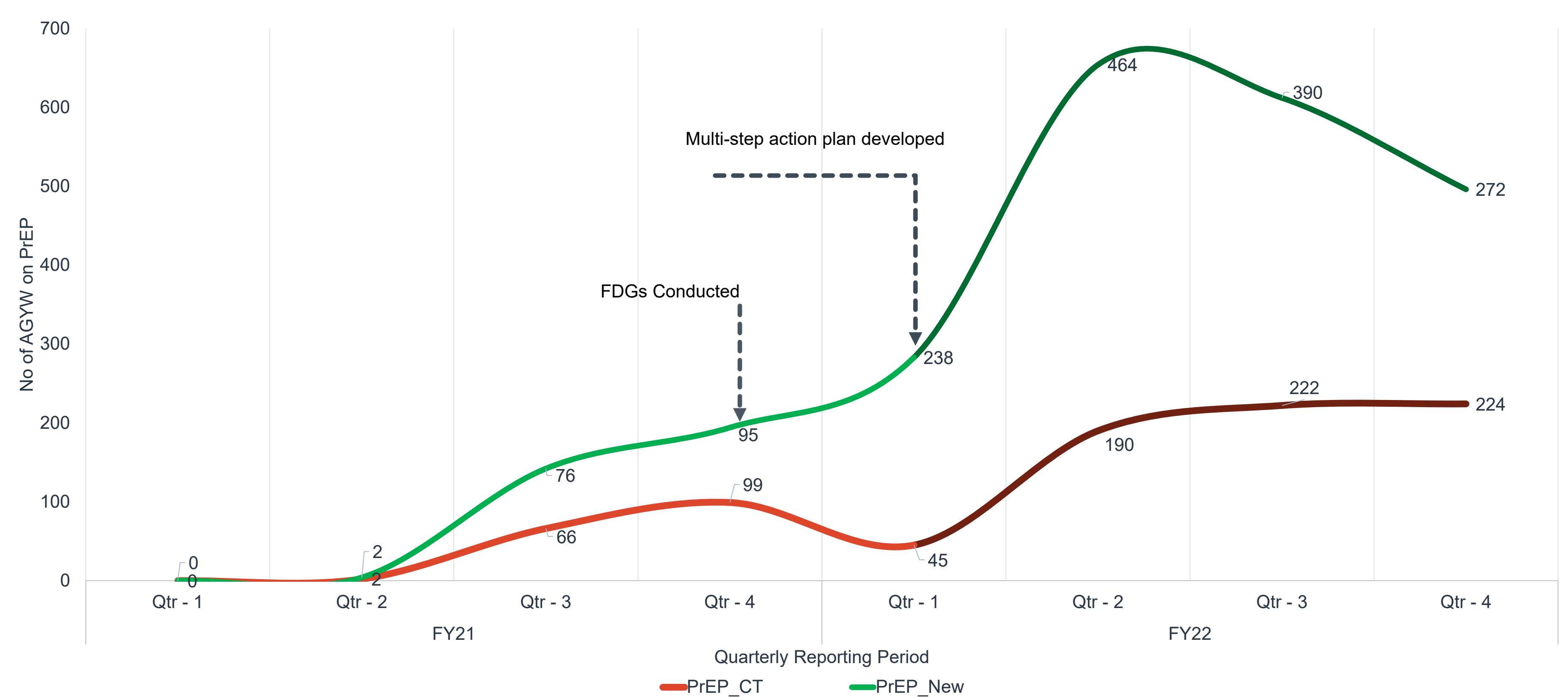
## LESSONS LEARNED

Barriers to PrEP uptake were low HIV risk perception, lack of comprehensive knowledge, and stigma. Long distances to PrEP sites was a barrier to continuation. The facilitators included high HIV risk perception, peer/community influence, service providers' attitudes, and integration of PrEP in sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services. In January 2022, we integrated PrEP into club sessions; conducted dialogue sessions targeting traditional/religious leaders, parents, and caregivers of AGYW to destigmatize PrEP; identified PrEP champions; and initiated community-based refills and a PrEP tracker to facilitate targeted counseling and mobilization. This resulted in a 263% and 748% increase in PrEP uptake and continuation, respectively, from January to September 2022 (Figure 1).



AGYW reading a flier about PrEP, distributed by Malawi EMPOWER, which enables them to make informed decisions. EMPOWER works toward increasing PrEP initiation and continuation to improve HIV prevention outcomes.

FIGURE 1. PrEP uptake and adherence among AGYW, quarterly trends FY21–FY22



## CONCLUSIONS

Understanding barriers and facilitators from AGYW perspectives, integrating HIV/SRH services, addressing community misconceptions and stigma,

and engaging peers and community influencers as change agents are key facilitators for and critical to improving PrEP uptake among AGYW.

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