

Chapter 12

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This chapter gives information about sex and offers suggestions about how to make sex safer.

For more information about:

- how to prevent unwanted pregnancies, see the chapter on “Family Planning,” page 196.
- infections passed through sex and how to treat them, see the chapter on “Sexually Transmitted Infections,” page 260.
- rape and sexual violence, see “Rape,” page 326, and “Violence against Women,” page 312.

Sexual Health



Sex is part of life. For many women, it is a way to feel pleasure, express love or sexual desire for their partners, or to become pregnant with the children they hope for. Or, sex may simply be part of what it means to be a woman.

Sex can be an important and positive part of life, but it can also lead to health problems, such as pregnancies that are unwanted or that threaten a woman's life, dangerous infections, or physical and emotional harm from forced sex.

Most of these problems could be prevented. But in many communities, harmful beliefs about what it means to be a woman can make it hard for a woman to have good sexual health. For a woman to have good sexual health, she needs to be able to:

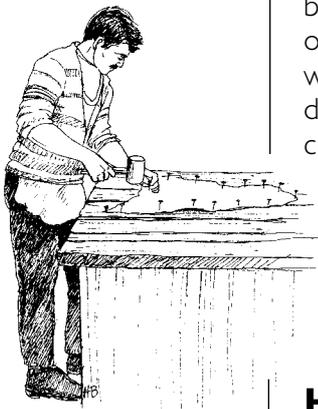
- express her sexuality in a way that gives her pleasure.
- choose her sexual partner.
- negotiate when and how to have sex.
- choose if and when she becomes pregnant.
- prevent STIs, especially HIV infection.
- be free from sexual violence, including forced sex.

This chapter gives information and suggestions about how to make sex safer and more pleasurable. It also suggests some ways women can work together to overcome harmful beliefs and improve their sexual health.

We have been ignorant for so long, and full of fear about our bodies.

— Oaxaca, Mexico

Sex and Gender Roles



Each person is born with either a girl's body or a boy's body. These physical differences determine a person's **sex**.

A person's **gender role** refers to the way a community defines what it is to be a woman or a man. Each community expects women and men to look, think, feel, and act in certain ways, simply because they are women or men. In most communities, for example, women are expected to prepare food, gather water and fuel, and care for their children and partner. Men, however, are often expected to work outside the home to provide for their families and parents in old age, and to defend their families from harm.

Unlike the physical differences between men and women, gender roles are created by the community. Some activities, like washing and ironing clothing, are considered 'women's work' in many communities. But others vary from place to place—depending on a community's traditions, laws, and religions. Gender roles can even vary within communities, based on how much education a person has, her social status, or her age. For example, in some communities women of a certain class are expected to do domestic work, while other women have more choice about the work they do.

In most communities, women and men are expected to dress differently, and to do different work. This is part of their gender role.



HOW GENDER ROLES ARE LEARNED

Gender roles are passed down from adults to children. From the time children are very young, parents and others treat girls and boys differently—sometimes without realizing they do so. Children watch their elders closely, noticing how they behave, how they treat each other, and what their roles are in the community.

As children grow up, they accept these roles because they want to please their parents and other respected adults, and because these people have more authority in the community. These roles also help children know who they are and what is expected of them.

As the world changes, gender roles also change. Many young people want to live differently from their parents or grandparents. It can be difficult to change, but as women and men struggle to redefine their gender roles, they can also improve their sexual health.

WHEN GENDER ROLES CAUSE HARM

Fulfilling the roles expected by the community can be satisfying and can give a woman a sense of belonging and success. But these roles can also limit a woman's choices, and sometimes make her feel less valued than a man. When this happens, everyone—the woman herself, her family, and her community—suffers.



In most communities, women are expected to be wives and mothers. Many women like this role because it can be very satisfying and it gives them *status* in the community. Other women would prefer to follow their own interests but their families and communities do not give them this choice. If she is expected to have many children, a woman may have less chance to learn new skills or go to school. Most of her time and energy will be spent taking care of others' needs. Or, if a woman is unable to have children, her community may value her less than other women.

Most communities value men's work more than women's work. For example, a woman may work all day—and then cook, clean, and care for her children at night. But because her husband's work is considered more important, she is careful about his rest—not her own. Her children will grow up thinking men's work is more important, and value women less.



Women are often considered more emotional than men, and they are freer to express these emotions with others. Men, however, are often taught that showing emotions like fear, sadness, or tenderness is 'unmanly', so they hide these feelings. Or they express their feelings in angry or violent ways that are more acceptable for men. When men are unable to show their feelings, children may feel more distant from their fathers, and men are less able to get support from others for their problems.

Women are often discouraged from speaking—or forbidden to attend or speak—at community meetings. This means the community only hears about what men think—for example, how they view a problem and their solutions for it. Since women have much knowledge and experience, the whole community suffers when they cannot discuss problems and offer suggestions for change.



Women and men who have sexual relations with people of the same sex (homosexuals) are sometimes made to feel like outcasts in their own communities. Even if they are respected in other ways, they may be forced to live and love in secrecy and shame. In some communities, fear or lack of understanding of people in same sex relationships has even led to physical violence against them. Any time a person is made to feel afraid or ashamed about who he or she is, it harms the person's mental and sexual health.

How Gender Roles Affect Sexual Health

► *Our bodies are not causes for shame. Our bodies allow us to touch and care for others, and to feel sexual pleasure. Our bodies are something to discover, love, and value.*



HARMFUL BELIEFS ABOUT WOMEN'S SEXUALITY

What it means to be a woman or a man in a particular community includes beliefs about men's and women's sexuality—that is, about sexual behavior, and how people feel about their own bodies.

A few harmful beliefs about women's sexuality that are common in many communities are described below. These beliefs and other harmful effects of gender roles—the lack of opportunity and choice for women, and the lack of value they feel—can prevent women from having control over their sexual lives. This puts them at great risk for sexual health problems.

Harmful belief: Women's bodies are shameful

Mothers and fathers begin to teach their children about their bodies as soon as they are born. Parents do not do this directly. But a baby learns it by the way the parents hold her, and the tone of their voices.

As a little girl grows, she becomes curious about her body. She wants to know what the different parts are called and why her *genitals* are different from a boy's. But she is often scolded for being curious, and is told that 'nice girls' do not ask such things. If she touches her genitals, she is taught that it is dirty or shameful—and that she should keep her sexual parts hidden.



Her parents' reactions teach a little girl that her body is shameful. As a result, she will find it difficult to ask questions about changes in her body as she enters *puberty*, and about her *monthly bleeding*, or about sex. She may be too embarrassed to talk to a health worker, because she does not know what parts of her body are called or what questions to ask. When she starts having sex, she is less likely to understand how her body feels sexual pleasure, or to know how to protect herself from unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections.

Harmful belief: A woman cannot be happy without a man

Some women do not wish to marry or have sexual relationships with men. Other women prefer to have sexual relationships with other women. Although they often face discrimination, many of these women live full, happy lives.

The idea that a woman can only be happy if she is with a man is often used as an excuse to control women's lives, and has even been used to justify rape. It implies that a woman's ability to have sex is the most important thing about her and her only way to be fulfilled. This belief is frustrating for many women, and can keep them from developing in other ways.

Harmful belief: Women's bodies belong to men

In many communities, a woman is treated like the property of her father or husband. As a child, she belongs to her father, and he can arrange to have her marry or do whatever work he chooses. Her future husband wants his property to be 'pure' and unspoiled by other men, so he expects her to be a *virgin*. After marriage, he feels he has the right to use her body for his pleasure whenever he wants. He may have sex with other women, but she is to be his alone.

These beliefs can cause great harm. A girl learns that other people make the important decisions about her life—it does not matter what she wants or what skills she could contribute to the community. Because virginity is valued so highly, she may marry at a young age. Or she may try to remain 'virgin' by using unsafe sexual practices. For example, she may have sex in the anus (so that her *hymen* will not be torn), which puts her at great risk for HIV infection. When she starts having sex, she may not be able to use *family planning methods* with her partner or protect herself from sexually transmitted infections.

But men do not own women's bodies! A woman's body is hers, and she should be able to decide how, when, and with whom to share it.

Harmful belief: Women have less sexual desire

A woman is often taught that it is part of her duty as a wife to meet her husband's sexual demands. But if she is a 'good' woman, she will endure sex, not want it.

Again, these beliefs harm a woman's sexual health. First, a woman who believes she should not think about sex will be unprepared to have sex safely. She is less likely to learn about family planning or about how to get and use condoms. Even if she has the information, it will be hard for her to discuss these things with her partner beforehand. If she can discuss sex, her partner may think she is sexually experienced, and therefore 'bad'.

Once she is in a sexual relationship, she is likely to let her partner control the kind of relationship they have. This includes when and how they have sex, whether they try to prevent pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections, and whether he has sex with other women. This puts her at great risk for getting infected.

But sexual desire is a natural part of life, and a woman can feel as much sexual desire and pleasure as a man.



Some girls are married as children to make sure they will be virgins. This can cause serious health problems for a girl and her babies (see page 59).

How far should I let him go? I like him, but I'm afraid of what he'll think.



Improving Your Sexual Health



STIs, 261
HIV and AIDS, 283

Improving sexual health means:

- **learning about our bodies and what gives us pleasure.** See below for more information about sexual pleasure.
- **reducing the risk of unwanted pregnancy and infections passed through sex.** This means women must have access to information about family planning methods and ways to prevent infections, including HIV. Women also need control over when to use these methods. For information about family planning and choosing a method that works best for you, see the chapter on “Family Planning.” For information about making sex safer, see page 189.
- **changing harmful gender roles, including harmful beliefs about women’s sexuality.** This kind of change takes time, because it means women and men must develop different ways of relating to each other.

Mutual respect is shown in many areas of life.



► *Both men and women are capable of feeling—and controlling—their desires.*



lack of desire

► *What brings pleasure to one person should not be harmful to another.*

FEELING MORE PLEASURE FROM SEX

It is natural for women and men to want to share sexual pleasure with their partners. When each partner knows the kind of sexual talk and touch that the other likes, they can both enjoy sex more.

If a woman does not feel pleasure with sex, there may be many reasons. Her partner may not realize that her body responds differently to sexual touch from the way a man’s body does. Or she may have been taught that women should enjoy sex less than men, or that she should not tell her partner what she likes. Understanding that women are capable of enjoying sex just as much as men, and that it is okay to do so, may help her like sex more.



How a woman's body responds to sexual pleasure

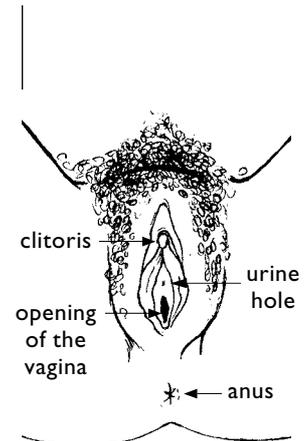
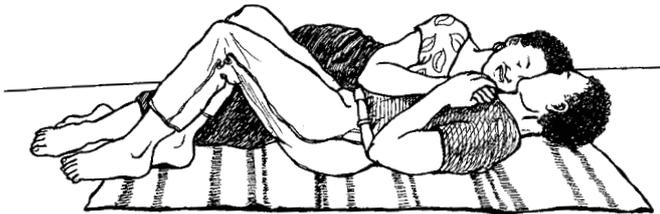
Sex often begins with kissing, touching, talking, or looking in a way that makes a person feel excited. Different women respond differently to sexual thoughts and touch. A woman may begin to breathe harder, and her heart may begin to beat faster. Her nipples and skin can become very sensitive.

The *clitoris* gets hard and may swell, and the lips and walls of the vagina become wet and sensitive to touch. If sexual touch and thought continue, sexual tension can build up until she reaches a peak of pleasure and has an orgasm (comes).

When a man reaches his peak of sexual excitement, his penis releases a mixture of sperm and other fluid called semen. If this happens inside or near a woman's vagina, his sperm can swim into her womb or tubes, and fertilize an egg, making her pregnant.

It often takes longer for a woman to reach orgasm than a man. But when orgasm happens, the energy and tension in her body releases, and she feels relaxed and full of pleasure.

It is possible for almost all women to have orgasms, but many women never have them or have them only once in a while. If she wants, a woman may be able to learn how to have an orgasm, either by touching herself (see the next page), or by letting her partner know what feels good.



For many women, touching the clitoris is the best or only way to have an orgasm.

► A woman can have sex with a partner of the opposite sex, the same sex, or with herself.

There are many ways to become sexually excited:

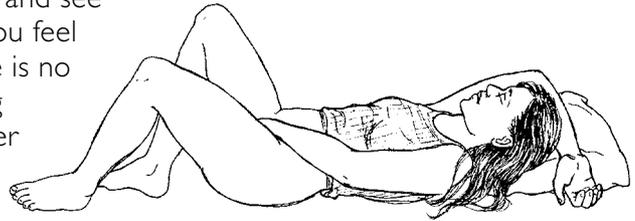
- **touching:** along with other sensitive parts of the body (for example, the ears, the back of the neck or the feet), you can stroke and rub your own or your partner's genitals. A woman's nipples and clitoris, and the tip of a man's penis are often the most sensitive places.
- **oral sex:** one partner (or both) puts his or her mouth on the other's genitals and licks or sucks.
- **sex in the vagina:** a man puts his penis inside a woman's vagina. There are many positions for doing this. It is how a woman gets pregnant, and is what most people think of when they think of 'sex'.
- **sex in the anus:** a man puts his penis inside his partner's anus. This can be painful and must be done very slowly and carefully (and with lubricant) so the anus does not tear. If you have sex in the vagina after having sex in the anus, it is important to put on a new condom or wash the man's penis first so the woman does not get an infection in the vagina or bladder.

► *Touching oneself can be a good way for a woman to learn what kinds of sexual touch feel best.*

Touching oneself for pleasure

A woman can learn to touch herself in a way that gives sexual pleasure. Touching oneself does not use up sexual desire, and can be a good way for a woman to learn about her body and what kinds of sexual touch feel best. Many communities have beliefs that touching oneself is wrong, so sometimes it makes people feel ashamed. But it does not cause harm as long as a woman feels comfortable with it. Any object that is put in the vagina should be as clean as possible.

Choose a time and place when you will not be interrupted. It may help to think about a lover or a situation that made you feel very sexual. Try touching your breasts or genitals in different ways and see what makes you feel excited. There is no right or wrong way—whatever makes you feel good.



Lack of desire

Many things can affect how much sexual desire a woman or man feels. For example, when life seems exciting—such as when starting a new relationship or a new job—a woman or man may feel more sexual desire. The amount of desire a woman feels may change throughout her monthly cycle, or at certain times during her life. It is common for a woman to feel less desire when she:

- feels tired from hard work, not enough food, illness, or a new baby.
- is very worried about something.
- has a partner she does not like.
- fears that others will see or hear her having sex.
- is afraid of becoming pregnant or getting an infection.

When a woman lacks desire, her body makes less of its natural wetness, and she may need to use lubrication, like saliva, so that sex is not painful. When a man lacks desire, it is more difficult for his penis to get hard. He may feel ashamed, and this may make it more difficult for him to get hard the next time.

If you or your partner do not feel like having sex, try to forgive each other and to talk about it. Allow time for sex when you both want it, and try to do things that you both will find exciting.

► *If a woman has been raped or forced to have sex, she may need time—or to talk with someone she trusts or a trained mental health worker—before she wants to have sex again.*

If sex is painful

Sex should not be painful. Pain during sex is usually a sign that something is wrong. A woman may feel pain with sex when:

- her partner enters her too soon, before she is relaxed or wet enough.
- she feels guilt or shame, or does not want to have sex.
- she has an infection or growth in her vagina or lower belly (see page 356).
- she has had genital cutting (see page 463).



IMPORTANT *Pain during sex can be a sign of serious infection, especially if it comes soon after childbirth, miscarriage, or abortion, or if the woman also has a discharge from her vagina. See a health worker right away.*

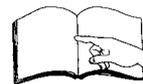
MAKING SEX SAFER**Why practice ‘safer sex’?**

There are often risks involved with sex, but there are ways to make it safer. We say “safer” sex as a way of reminding people that **less** risk is not the same as **no** risk. But, **safer sex can save your life.**

Like all infections that people get, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are caused by germs. Some infections are caused by germs passed through the air, food, or water. STIs are passed through sexual contact. Some STIs cause sores or discharge on the genitals, but you usually cannot tell if a person has an STI just by looking. Many men and women can have STIs without knowing it themselves.

The germs that cause some STIs (like genital warts or herpes) are on the skin of the genitals and are passed by skin-to-skin contact. The germs that cause other STIs, (like gonorrhea, chlamydia, hepatitis, syphilis, and HIV) live in the body fluids of an infected person. These are passed when blood, semen, or the wetness of the vagina of an infected person comes in contact with the skin of the vagina, anus, tip of the penis, or mouth of another person. All of these infections can cause serious health problems. HIV, without ongoing treatment, is fatal.

So, to practice safer sex means having as little contact as possible with the skin of your partner’s genitals, and with his or her body fluids unless you are absolutely certain that he or she is not infected with any STI.

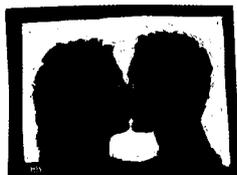


STIs, 261
HIV and AIDS, 283



Protect yourself from HIV and other sexually transmitted infections: put on a latex condom before your partner’s genitals touch yours.

Some kinds of sex are safer than others



Kissing is safe



Touching is safe



*Oral sex is less safe—
but safer with a condom*



*Vaginal sex is risky—
but safer with a condom*



*Anal sex is very risky—
but safer with a condom*

Safer sex methods

Every woman needs to decide how much risk she is willing to accept, and what steps she can take to make sex safer. The following are different ways that women can reduce their risk:

Very safe:

- **Avoid having sex at all.** If you do not have sex, you will not be exposed to STIs. Some women may find this the best option, especially when they are young. However for most women, this choice is not possible or desirable.
- **Have sex with only one partner**, who you know for sure has sex with only you, **and** when you know for sure that neither of you was infected by a previous partner. This can only be known by testing for STIs.
- **Have sex by touching genitals with your hands** (mutual masturbation).
- **Use condoms during oral sex.** A barrier of latex or plastic helps prevent infection with herpes and gonorrhea in the throat. It also protects against the very small risk of infection with HIV through tiny cuts in the mouth.

Safe:

- **Always use latex condoms**—for either men or women—when having vaginal or anal sex.
- **Have sex in ways that avoid getting your partner's body fluids in your vagina or anus.** Sex using your mouth is much less likely to spread HIV. If you get semen in your mouth, spit it out (or at least swallow it) right away.

Other ways to lower risk:

- **Have the man withdraw his penis before he comes (ejaculates).** You can still get HIV if he has it, and you can still get pregnant, but it is not so likely since less semen gets inside your body.
- **Using a diaphragm may lower your risk.** For more information about the diaphragm, see page 205.
- **Avoid dry sex.** When the vagina (or anus) is dry, it tears more easily, and increases the chances of infection. Use saliva (spit), spermicide, or lubricant to make the vagina slippery. Do not use oil, lotion, or petroleum gel if you are using condoms—these can make the condom break.
- **Get treated for any STIs you may have.** Having one STI makes it easier to become infected with HIV or other STIs.

Every woman should protect herself from AIDS

The following story could happen in any community.

Fátima's story: Every woman should protect herself

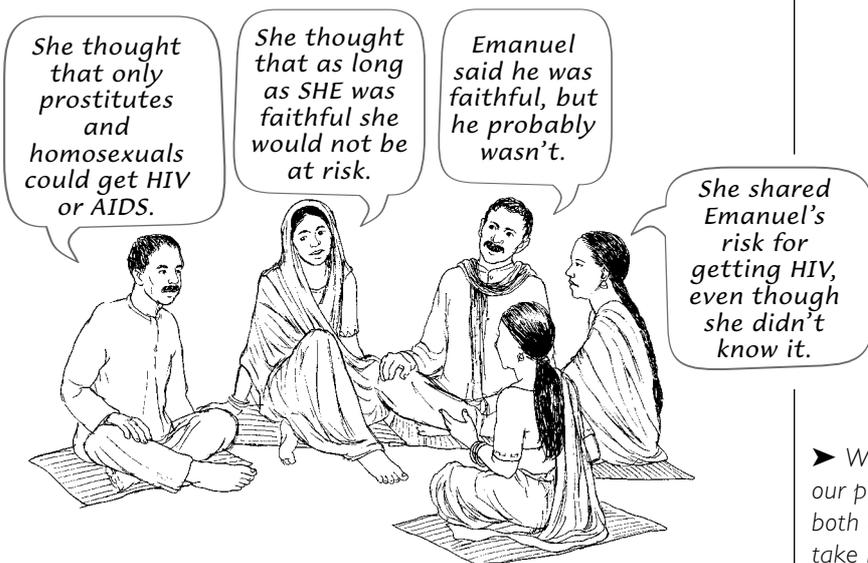
Fátima lives in a rural town in Brazil—and she is dying of AIDS. When she was 17, she married a man named Wilson. He was killed a few years later in an accident at the cooperative where he worked. Fátima had to leave her baby with Wilson's parents and go to the city to find work. When she had extra money, she sent it back home. The work was hard, and she was very lonely.

When she learned that the government was building a highway near Belem, Fátima got a job cooking for the road construction workers so that she could stay at home. It was there that she met Emanuel. He was handsome, had cash in his pockets, and charmed her little girl when he came around after work. When the work crew had to move on, he promised to return.

Emanuel did come back, but he never stayed long. He got a new job driving trucks that kept him on the road most of the time. Fátima thought he probably had other women, but he always told her she was his only one. They had a baby boy, but he was small and sickly and died after a year. Soon Fátima began to feel sick, too. The nurse at the health post gave her different medicines, but nothing helped. Finally she went to the hospital in the city. They did some tests, and told her she had AIDS. When she asked how she could have AIDS, the doctor replied, "You shouldn't have slept with so many men." Fátima did not think she was at risk for HIV—she had only had sex with 2 men in her life! She thought that only prostitutes and homosexuals in the cities got HIV or AIDS.



Why did Fátima think she was not at risk for AIDS?



Fátima was at risk for getting AIDS, not because of her own sexual behavior, but because of her partner's.

► We share the risks our partners take—both the risks they take now and any risks they have taken in the past.

I don't want to put her at risk, but I'm not sure how to tell her what happened...

I think we should be using condoms, but I'm afraid of what he will think if I ask.



TALKING ABOUT SAFER SEX

If you think your partner might support your wish to have safer sex, try to talk together about the health risks of STIs. This is not always easy! Most women are taught that it is not 'proper' to talk about sex—especially with their partners or other men—so they lack practice. A man may talk with other men about sex, but is often uncomfortable talking with his partner. Here are some suggestions:

Focus on safety. When you talk about safer sex, your partner may say that you do not trust him. But the issue is safety, not trust. Since a person may have an STI without knowing it, or may get HIV from something other than sex, it is difficult for a person to be sure he or she is not infected. Safer sex is a good idea for every couple, even if both partners have sex only with each other.

Practice talking with a friend first. Ask a friend to pretend to be your partner and then practice what you want to say. Try to think of the different things he might say and practice for each possibility. Remember that he will probably feel nervous about talking too, so try to put him at ease.

Do not wait until you are about to have sex to talk about it. Choose a time when you are feeling good about each other. If you have stopped having sex because you have a new baby, or were being treated for an STI, try to talk before you have sex again. If you and your partner live far apart or must travel often, talk ahead of time about how to protect your sexual health.

Learn as much as you can about the risks of unsafe sex, and about how to have safer sex. If your partner does not know much about STIs, how they are spread, and the long-term health effects from them, he may not understand the real risks involved in unsafe sex. Information can help convince him of the need to practice safer sex.

Use other people as examples. Sometimes learning that others are practicing safer sex can help influence your partner to do so, too.

My brother told me he always uses condoms now.



Work with your community to educate women and men about condoms and how to use them. This will help make condoms more acceptable.

Try to respond to your partner's concerns. Using condoms is one of the easiest ways to prevent infections and unwanted pregnancy. But many people do not want to use them at first.

Here are responses to some common complaints about condoms:



“I tried them before and didn’t like them.”

- Sometimes condoms just take time to get used to. Try to agree that you will use them for a couple of weeks. Usually, both partners will realize that sex can be just as enjoyable when using condoms.

“I can’t feel anything with a condom on.”

- Use plenty of water-based lubricant. This helps sex feel better for both partners.
- Try putting a drop of lubricant inside the tip of the condom before putting it on.
- It’s true that sex feels a little different with a condom. But most people agree that it is better to have sex with a condom than not to have it at all! A condom can also help some men stay hard longer.

“We never used condoms before. Why should we start now?”

- Explain that now you know more about the risks of unprotected sex, it seems like a good idea for you to protect each other.
- As an excuse, you can say that you need to change your family planning method.

“I don’t like to stop what I’m doing to put one on.”

- Keep a supply of condoms within reach of the places you usually have sex so that you will not have to get up to find one.
- You can put the condom on as soon as the man’s penis is hard, then continue touching and playing with each other.
- If they are available and you can afford them, consider using the female condom, which you can put in ahead of time (see page 204).

“I can’t afford to buy condoms,” or condoms are not available.

- Many health centers and AIDS prevention organizations give condoms away for free or very cheap.
- It is better to use a new condom each time, but re-using a condom is better than no condom at all. If you must re-use condoms, wash them carefully with soap and water, dry and re-roll the condoms, and store them in a cool, dark place.
- Use other ways to reduce risk. For example, it is safer for both the woman and the man if the man withdraws his penis before he comes (ejaculates).
- If you cannot get condoms, try covering the penis with thin, flexible plastic wrap.

“It doesn’t feel as intimate.”

- Try to make using condoms sexy. Practice different ways of putting a condom on, then make it part of your play before sex.
- If you can trust your partner’s self control, and tests for HIV and other STIs are available, you can make a plan to stop using condoms in the future. Both of you should be tested, continue using condoms for 6 months, and then get tested again. In the meantime, discuss the importance of safety, honesty, being faithful, and always using condoms if either of you ever has sex with another person.

Working for Change

ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE SEXUAL HEALTH

Improving sexual health requires changing harmful gender roles and removing barriers to sexual health. This is a long-term process that can take generations, but change begins with us. In many communities, women have formed groups to reflect and talk about these issues. Here are 3 group activities to promote reflection and action to improve sexual health in your community.

Activity : A journey through time

As women, the way we feel about our sexuality depends on beliefs we were taught as girls, and on the experiences we have during our lives. In order to develop a pleasurable and healthy sexuality, it is important to understand our beliefs and feelings about what it means to be a woman. You can use this activity with a group of women to begin thinking about gender roles.

It is important to allow enough time for this activity, and to create a peaceful environment. Strong feelings can come out, so it is better if the women already know each other well, or if the group or the facilitator have experience working with personal subjects. It helps to start by setting some rules so that everyone feels safe (for example, that nobody will interrupt, or laugh, or tell others what was said).

Ask the women to form a circle and make themselves comfortable. Tell them they are going to take a trip back in time. The landscape is the history of their sexuality. Ask them to close their eyes, breathe deeply, and imagine themselves as little girls. Speaking calmly and slowly, ask questions like the ones below. (You can adapt them so they are appropriate for your group.) The women do not need to reply, just to remember. Wait several minutes before asking the next question.

- How did you first realize that being a girl was different from being a boy?
- How did you feel the first time you had your monthly bleeding? What had you been told about it?
- What was your first sexual experience like? What had you expected?
- Have you ever been worried that you had an STI? Did you go for help?
- Have you ever given birth? How did it affect your feelings about your sexuality? When you were pregnant, did you hope for a girl or a boy? Why?
- Returning to the present, what feelings do you have about your sexual life?

Ask the women to open their eyes. Now that they have remembered some steps in the history of their sexuality, invite them to share some of their reflections. Be prepared to offer emotional support if anyone needs it. Then ask the group to analyze:

- What makes a woman a woman? What makes a man a man?
- How did you learn what it means to be a woman or a man?
- What do you like about being a woman? What do you not like?
- If you could be born again as a male, would you do it? Why or why not?

If the comments have been very negative, before ending, encourage everyone to share at least one thing they like about being a woman. Being a woman can be hard, but the daily struggles we face also make us strong and supportive of others.

End by asking what they would like to change so things could be different for their daughters. What actions could they take?

Activity: Images of women in popular culture

If people understand how harmful ideas about sexuality and gender roles are learned, they can begin to think about how to change those ideas. This activity will help people think about how radio, movies, popular songs, and advertising communicate ideas about gender roles.



1. Listen to some popular songs on the radio (record them ahead of time if you can) or have members of the group sing or act out the songs. Listen carefully to the words of the songs. How are women and men being described? Are these songs passing on ideas about women's roles and sexuality? Decide together whether each 'gender' message is harmful or helpful to women.
2. Divide into small groups. Give each group an advertisement cut out of a magazine or newspaper, or copied from a billboard (pick advertisements that have women in them). Ask each group to identify what the advertisements say about women's roles and sexuality. Then, bring everyone together again to say what messages are being passed on in each advertisement. Then decide as a group whether the messages are harmful or helpful to women.
3. Discuss how messages about women are passed on by radio, songs, and advertisements. How do these ideas influence us, our husbands, our children?
4. Identify ideas about women's roles and sexuality **that are important and helpful** to pass on. How can these ideas be communicated in advertisements, songs, and movies? Ask small groups to draw an advertisement, or prepare a song or a skit that teaches helpful and healthy ideas about women. Have each group present their work to the others.

Activity: Identifying barriers to sexual health

It is important to identify the barriers to practicing safer sex. This activity helps show some of the reasons why women may have trouble protecting themselves.

1. Begin by telling a story, like "Fátima's story" (page 191). Talk about Fátima and Emanuel as if they lived in your community.
2. Start a discussion about the importance of understanding the risks of sex by asking questions like: Why didn't Fátima protect herself from AIDS? What difficulties do women like Fátima face if they try to practice safer sex? Why do women find it hard to talk with their partners about safer sex? What can women do to convince their partners to practice safer sex?
3. Talk about what can be done in your community to help women like Fátima. Discuss how you can help to overcome barriers to safer sex in your community. (For ideas about ways to work for safer sex in your community, see page 280.)

