

Introductory Exercise 4

“Once [the monks] realized that desire and pleasure are linked to life and death, they began to discuss sexuality with greater ease and to value its importance when engaging with their communities.”

CARE staff member, Vietnam

“I want to be a man who respects women and their sexual desires.”

CARE staff member

Talking About Sex and Sexual Pleasure

Introduction

Through our work in ISOFI, we found that incorporating a sex-positive approach, including discussions of sexual pleasure, into our programs was very useful. Negotiating pleasure is relevant in the context of decision-making and consensus between adults; when adults are given permission to negotiate pleasure, it also implies permission to negotiate other fundamental rights and choices related to their own bodies (like when and if to have children, to use condoms, to refuse sex, etc.). Negotiating pleasure can have very empowering effects.

Many HIV and reproductive health programs aim to change people’s behavior to “safer sex,” meaning to reduce risks of unwanted infections or pregnancies. But in many societies, it is difficult to discuss sex frankly, due to long-standing taboos. Our own staff are often unprepared to discuss the differences between various sex acts, including which ones might provide fewer risks, or in fact more pleasure, which is what many people really want to know! Furthermore, in many societies, women are supposed to know less than men sexually, and women are supposed to play passive decision-making roles in all aspects of life, which make them particularly vulnerable to sexual coercion.

In ISOFI, we found it necessary to train ourselves first, and then work with our project participants, to improve our skills and ability to discuss and negotiate sex openly, respecting the other’s right to choose, to say no, and to sexual pleasure. These exercises are a good way to open the discussion.

Objectives

- To become more comfortable speaking openly about sex and sexual pleasure
- To establish a rationale for why sexual pleasure is relevant to participants’ work
- To explore linkages between gender and sexuality

Timeframe: 3 – 3 ½ hours

Materials needed: flipchart paper, markers

Ideal workspace: All participants must be able to see the flip chart. For Part B, enough space is needed for participants to work in groups of 4-5.

Number of participants: 10-25; preferably similar numbers of men and women

STEP 1

Part A:

Divide participants into groups of three. Give each group 15 minutes to prepare an answer on flipchart paper to the question: Why is it important for us to be able to talk about sex and sexual pleasure in both our personal and professional lives?

Ask each group to hang its answer on the wall and read their answer aloud to the entire group. Clarify any points of confusion or misunderstanding as you go.

Some possible responses:

- *Pleasure is recognized internationally as a sexual right of all human beings.*
- *Sex can be a source of great pleasure.*
- *Sex is the source of human reproduction.*
- *Pleasure is one of the primary motivations for having sex.*
- *Although pleasure is a good thing, sex can have a variety of negative consequences (unintended pregnancy, STI, HIV, violence, control, etc); however these risks can be controlled without sacrificing pleasure.*
- *Discussing pleasure can help us develop new ways to make sex safer.*
- *Open talk about sex can help people to be better informed and make better decisions about sex.*
- *Recognizing that the search for sexual pleasure as a basic human instinct makes it seem less 'dirty' or 'abnormal.'*
- *By speaking openly about sexual pleasure, we model positive behavior for other people to become more open on the subject as well.*
- *As reproductive health professionals, we can't deny that sexual pleasure is an important factor in human reproduction.*



Sarah Kambou/ICRW

“I am 40 years old. I have been married for many years. This is what I have learned from ISOFI: I have the right to refuse sex, and I have the right to ask for sex.”

female CARE staff member,
Vietnam

“I no longer judge out-of-wedlock sex. Our goal is safe sex.”

Youth Union leader, Vietnam

“Earlier I never had a book related to sex, now I have four. ISOFI made us feel that it is normal.”

CARE staff member

“This is the first time sex is being dealt with as sex, and not as a cause of infections and diseases.”

CARE staff member

“The vagina is the center of the city and the rest of the body is the suburbs. It is the site of intense pleasure but also the pain of childbirth.”

sex worker, Vietnam

Part B:

Divide participants into four groups, giving each group marker pens and large sheets of paper. Try to make the groups different from the groups in Part A.

Give the groups 15-20 minutes to brainstorm all the reasons they can think to answer their group’s question:

Group 1: Why do people use condoms?

Group 2: Why don’t people use condoms?

Group 3: Why do men have sex?

Group 4: Why do women have sex?

Possible responses:

WHY DO PEOPLE USE CONDOMS?

Birth spacing, avoid unintended pregnancy
Avoid STIs, including HIV
Avoid spreading STI including HIV to a sexual partner
Peace of mind, not worried about pregnancy or STI
Fear
Protection
Respect for own and partner’s body
They are knowledgeable about safer sex practices
To have an affair
Partner insists on it

WHY DON'T PEOPLE USE CONDOMS?

Too expensive
Not available
Not on hand when they are needed
Don’t know how to use them
Afraid of how partner will react
Too shy to bring it up
Sex is unplanned/unexpected
Not aware of condoms
Believe condoms are not effective
Believe condoms are sinful
Do not have proper information
Too awkward/disrupts sex
Belief that condoms reduce sensation during sex
Not worried about STI or pregnancy
Condom is damaged or expired
To become pregnant

WHY DO MEN HAVE SEX?

Love	Revenge	Fun
Desire	Excitement	Satisfaction
Control	Validation	Duty
Habit	Status	Intimacy
Boredom	Procreation	Curiosity

WHY DO WOMEN HAVE SEX?

Love	Revenge	Fun
Desire	Excitement	Satisfaction
Control	Validation	Duty
Habit	Status	Intimacy
Boredom	Procreation	Curiosity

Hang all the sheets on the wall and ask participants to walk around and look at the different lists.

Facilitate a group discussion, asking

- What can we learn from these lists?
- Look at the reasons why men have sex and the reasons why women have sex. Are they the same or different? If there are differences, what is the reason? What does this tell us about gender and power in our society?
- What happens when two people have different motivations for having sex?
- Was it easier to think of reasons why people use condoms or why people don't use condoms? Are some of the reasons answers that men might give or that women might give, or answers that both men and women might give? Why are some answers associated with one sex but not the other?



M.Prvulovic/CARE

“Doesn't the woman get to have an orgasm? Women want satisfactory sex, whether in or outside marriage.”

Youth Union Leader, Vietnam

“I never used to think that sexuality can also be enjoyed. These can be very pleasurable activities not only for you, but for your partner as well.”

India

We do not talk about sexual pleasure with women but we do talk about it with men, which we did not do before. This has led us to adopt safe sex.”

man, India

“The biggest change is that now we use condoms every time and practice safe sex. We had never heard of HIV before. We learned about HIV through ISOFI.”

male trucker, India

“Now all of us use condoms with sex workers. And now we talk about family planning with our wives and female relatives.”

migrant, India

Part C:

Divide participants into pairs of one man and one woman. Explain that each pair is to conduct a role play in which a couple is negotiating condom use. However, the man should play the role of the woman in the scenario, and the woman should play the role of the man.

First pair: Woman (man playing the woman) does not want to use condoms because she feels it reduces sexual pleasure. The man (woman playing the man) must argue why and how condoms can be pleasurable.

Second pair: Man (woman playing the man) is upset because his partner (man playing the woman) was supposed to buy condoms but did not do so.

Third pair: Woman (man playing the woman) insists partner (woman playing the man) should wear a condom because she suspects he has other girlfriends.

Fourth pair: Man (woman playing the man) does not want to admit to his partner (man playing the woman) that he does not know how to use a condom.

Fifth pair: A man (woman playing the man) is startled when his partner (man playing the woman) wants to start using condoms, because the pair has had sex without condoms on several previous occasions.

If you have more participants, you can think of more scenarios, or you can assign the same scenarios to more than one pair.

Give the pairs 10-15 minutes to practice their role plays, then invite some of them to perform in front of the entire group.

Facilitate a group discussion, asking

- Was it difficult to take on the role of the opposite sex? What did you learn by trying to speak from a different perspective?
- Did you agree with the men’s portrayal of women, and the women’s portrayal of men? What do you think was accurate or inaccurate?
- Did anyone in the group challenge traditional gender roles, or speak in a way that is not usual for a particular sex?
- How was pleasure used as a justification for condom use?

STEP 2: Discussion

Initiate a discussion with the group using some or all of these questions as a starting point; ask additional probing questions as appropriate. Encourage debate within the group, and be ready to spend some time discussing the issues that arise.

- What prevents people from talking about sex and sexual pleasure?
- Under what circumstances is it acceptable to talk about sex and sexual pleasure?
- Even if it's not usual (difficult, taboo, awkward, etc) to talk about sex and sexual pleasure, why is it important?
- What do we mean when we say 'have sex'? Are there other ways to define having sex? Is it possible to have sex with out intercourse? What words do we use to talk about this?

STEP 3: Closing

Thank participants for their efforts, and congratulate them on keeping an open mind. Encourage them to continue to push the boundaries of their personal comfort zones.

Provide pieces of paper to each participant and invite them to write how their understanding of sex and sexual pleasure has changed after this exercise. Also ask them to write one action or change in their life they will take this week as a result of participating in this exercise. No one is asked to write their name on the paper, so it is anonymous. Anyone can volunteer their thoughts on what they wrote out loud with the group, after everyone is finished.



Maggie Steber/CARE

"A lot of things changed in me personally. Communication with my husband is better. At first he thought it was odd to discuss things... the first time he laughed. CARE encouraged me; so I said to him, 'You won't get angry. If we don't talk about likes and dislikes, things will go unresolved.' So he likes talking now. [Smiles]."

local health volunteer, India

“In the earlier days, my husband wanted sex every night and would beat me if I didn’t agree, even though I had swelling in my groin. Now he has reduced to having sex with me every three to four days. Now if I have pain, he stops, and doesn’t beat me any more. I can even enjoy sex now. And I, myself, have initiated sex. This makes him happy. [Laughs].”

local health volunteer, India

Notes to the Facilitator

It is important to acknowledge that participants may have fears and anxieties in relation to discussing sexual matters. One purpose of this exercise is to expand participants’ comfort zones, and give them a safe space to practice speaking openly. Things that seem impossible become less scary once we practice doing them ourselves, and once we observe others modeling the desired behavior.

Pleasure, in general, is not inherently a bad thing. We get pleasure from our families, from doing our work well, from expressing ourselves artistically, and so on. There is nothing shameful about taking pleasure in these things; likewise, sexual pleasure should not be seen as embarrassing or shameful.

Tradition, culture and education often tell us it is taboo or shameful to talk about sex. Because it is taboo, we receive inadequate information, and we grow up with this sense of shame. We are forced to get pieces of information from our friends, books or any source that we may find, which may or may not be accurate.

The way we express our sexuality is often determined by our gender. Often men are expected to be sexually promiscuous, while women are expected to protect their virginity and reputation for chastity, and deny that they feel sexual pleasure. In many places, there is an assumption that a woman’s or a man’s sexuality is uncontrollable. For example, if a man rapes a woman, it is assumed he could not control his sexual urges.

Sex is an everyday part of our lives yet we never talk about it publicly. This lack of conversation drives it underground, and makes it feel shameful, naughty. Even in situations where it should be perfectly normal to talk about sex (for example, a patient speaking to his or her doctor, or a parent speaking to his or her child), we still feel uncomfortable.

On the other hand, certain actions that SHOULD be condemned at a societal level (for example, child sexual abuse, domestic violence, rape, incest, human trafficking, etc) are allowed to persist because we do not discuss them openly; we pretend they do not exist, and the problems continue. **Sometimes it is crucial to bring private issues into the public space.** By talking about them, we can achieve change.

Sex is natural and normal, it is nothing to be ashamed of. When we as a society learn to speak openly and explicitly about sex, people will be better informed about safer sex practices.