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Factors that limit women’s ability to practice safer sex: A feminist perspective
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Abstract:
Background: Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are widespread throughout the world and carry significant physical and emotional consequences. Though a number of public health campaigns have promoted safer sex strategies, prevalence of STIs among young women continues to increase.

Aim: This study aimed to identify factors that limit women’s ability to practice safer sex, through exploring young women's stories of having an STI.

Methods: This research used a qualitative feminist methodology. Stories were collected in 2007 via online conversational interactions with ten women, and were thematically analysed using a feminist narrative technique.

Results: Findings from this study revealed that although all the women in this study were vulnerable to STIs through participating in risk activities, they did not believe themselves to be at risk due to perceptions they held about women who contract these infections. Further, the women’s affection for their male partners led to the belief that these men were not a sexual risk nor a possible source of STIs, which superseded their risk perceptions. The women also revealed experiencing considerable barriers when attempting to negotiate the use of condoms, and difficulties in adequately protecting themselves when engaging in unplanned sexual activity.

Discussion: Findings suggest a need for health professionals to help young women to develop skills in negotiating safer sexual encounters.

Conclusion: Recognition of the factors that limit women’s ability to practice safer sex and the perceived invulnerability to STIs among young women can guide healthcare education and promote the development of public health campaigns. Safer sex education needs to incorporate strategies to empower young women to practice safer sex and should aim to dismantle the perceived invulnerability to STIs held by some young women.

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