

CHAPTER - 9

WOMEN'S SEXUAL HEALTH AND PREVENTIVE CARE

Miss Shahida Bano¹, Miss Neelam Singh², Miss Geeta K Malavad³

¹Lecturer, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology

Smt.Nagarathnamma College of Nursing,

Rajiv Gandhi University of Health Sciences Bangalore, Karnataka, India

Phone Number: 8825049778, Email: shazyahameed54@gmail.com

²Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Nursing,

Smt.Nagarathnamma College of Nursing,

Rajiv Gandhi University of Health Sciences Bangalore, Karnataka, India

Phone Number: 8296517349 Email: neelamsinghthakuri07@gmail.com

³Assistant professor Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology

Smt.Nagarathnamma College of Nursing,

Rajiv Gandhi University of Health Sciences Bangalore, Karnataka, India.

ABSTRACT

An essential component of general health and preventative care for women is their sexual health. A comprehensive strategy that incorporates screening, education, management, and referral is needed to address sexual health issues. Many women suffer from common sexual dysfunctions like low desire, arousal issues, orgasmic disorders, and sexual pain, which are frequently disregarded in medical settings. Supported by patient-centered communication, universal screening promotes early detection of issues and normalizes conversations about sexual health. Gathering the patient's story, identifying and rephrasing the issue, empathic witnessing, and providing treatment or referral are the four steps that the International Society for the Study of Women's Sexual Health suggests. Clinicians can offer comprehensive support and improve women's quality of life by incorporating sexual health into routine preventive care. Clinicians can address unmet needs by putting sexual health first.

Keywords: Women's sexual health, preventive care, sexual dysfunction, screening, patient-centered communication, low desire, arousal disorders, orgasmic disorders, sexual pain.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

Despite being a vital aspect of overall health, women's sexual health is frequently disregarded in clinical settings. Many women of all ages suffer from sexual dysfunctions, such as low desire, arousal issues, orgasmic disorders, and sexual pain. Because of stigma, ignorance, and a lack of clinical training, these problems are commonly underdiagnosed and untreated despite their prevalence. Regular preventive care that incorporates sexual health can help normalize these conversations and guarantee that women get the assistance they require to enhance their quality of life. Screening, education, management, and referral when specialized care is needed are all part of a comprehensive approach to women's sexual health. A methodical procedure has been suggested by the International Society for the Study of Women's Sexual Health to assist medical professionals in recognizing sexual

Despite being a vital component of general wellbeing, women's sexual health is a subject that is far too frequently ignored. Despite being a vital part of life, sexual health discussions are usually avoided because of stigma, fear, or cultural expectations. However, neglecting this important aspect of health causes many women to feel alone, perplexed, or even embarrassed when faced with difficulties. Imagine a society in which women are free to discuss their sexual health in public without fear of criticism or reluctance. A society in which medical professionals address these issues with empathy, knowledge, and the appropriate resources to assist. If women's wellness is to be prioritized in a truly holistic manner, this change is not only ideal, but also essential.

9.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- **Raise Awareness:** To increase awareness of the importance of women's sexual health as an essential component of overall well-being.

- **Break the Silence:** To address the stigma and cultural barriers that prevent open discussions about sexual health, fostering a supportive and non-judgmental environment.
- **Promote Preventive Care:** To emphasize the role of preventive care in identifying and managing sexual health concerns before they become more serious.
- **Inspire Empowerment:** To encourage women to take charge of their sexual health by making informed choices and seeking care without fear or shame.
- **Support Healthcare Integration:** To advocate for the integration of sexual health into routine preventive care, making it a natural and normalized part of healthcare services.

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Support Healthcare Integration: To advocate for the integration of sexual health into routine preventive care, making it a natural and normalized part of healthcare services.

9.2.1 Research Methodology

The research study is using the descriptive research design. In the research study the researcher has used secondary data. The secondary data has been collected from research papers, published materials, online websites, and survey reports published by various research organisations.

9.3 Preventive Care in Women's Sexual Health

Preventive care is at the heart of keeping women healthy and thriving, especially when it comes to sexual health. It's all about taking proactive steps to reduce risks, catch potential issues early, and support overall well-being. Yet, despite how important it is, preventive care is often pushed aside or neglected. Why? Sometimes it's because of stigma, sometimes because of a lack of understanding, and other times because accessing healthcare just isn't easy.

A. Routine Screenings and Exams

Regular check-ups and screenings are essential for catching health issues before they become serious. They give women the chance to address problems early on, which can make a big difference in outcomes.

- **Pap Smears and HPV Testing:** These tests help detect any cervical abnormalities, which can prevent cervical cancer when caught early.
- **Breast Exams and Mammograms:** Regular exams are crucial for identifying early signs of breast cancer.
- **STI Screenings:** Getting tested for common sexually transmitted infections (like chlamydia, gonorrhoea, syphilis, and HIV) ensures that infections are detected and treated promptly.

B. Vaccinations

Vaccines are powerful tools in protecting against infections that can have long-term consequences.

- **HPV Vaccination:** This vaccine helps protect against human papillomavirus, a leading cause of cervical cancer.
- **Hepatitis B Vaccination:** Reduces the risk of hepatitis B infection, which can lead to liver complications.

C. Safe Sex Education and Practices

Education is key to making informed choices about sexual health. Safe sex practices not only protect physical health but also promote emotional and relational well-being.

- **Barrier Methods:** Using condoms and dental dams can significantly reduce the risk of STI transmission.
- **Contraceptive Options:** Understanding the various birth control methods helps prevent unintended pregnancies and supports reproductive autonomy.
- **Consent and Communication:** Open and honest dialogue with partners is crucial to maintaining safety and mutual respect in relationships.

D. Mental and Emotional Well-being

Sexual health is not just physical; it's deeply connected to mental and emotional wellness. Taking care of one's mind and feelings is just as important as looking after the body.

- **Counselling and Support:** Addressing stress, anxiety, or trauma related to sexual experiences helps build resilience and confidence.
- **Body Image and Self-Esteem:** Cultivating a positive relationship with one's body and identity supports overall well-being and self-acceptance.

E. Comprehensive Sexual Health Education

Knowledge is power. Women need accurate, unbiased information to make decisions that align with their values and needs.

- **Awareness and Knowledge:** Providing clear and factual information on sexual health, reproductive rights, and preventive care empowers women to take control of their health.
- **Addressing Myths and Misconceptions:** Breaking down misinformation ensures that women make choices based on facts rather than fear or myths.

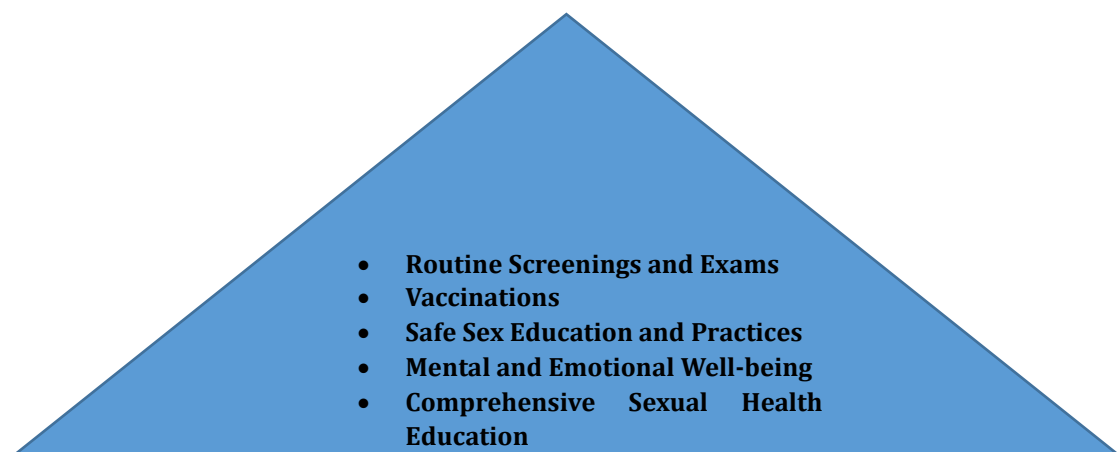


Figure 1. Preventive Care in Women's Sexual Health

7.4 Barriers to Preventive Care

Even though preventive care is essential for maintaining women's sexual health, many women still face significant challenges in accessing it. These barriers can make it difficult to seek help, stay informed, or receive the care they deserve. Let's take a closer look at some of the most common barriers and why they persist.

A. Social and Cultural Stigma

Talking about sexual health is still considered taboo in many communities. Cultural norms and social expectations can make women feel ashamed or embarrassed to discuss their sexual well-being, even with healthcare professionals. This stigma often discourages women from seeking preventive care, leading to missed opportunities for early detection and treatment.

B. Financial Constraints

The cost of healthcare services, including screenings, vaccines, and consultations, can be a major barrier. For many women, especially those without insurance or adequate financial resources, the expense can make preventive care seem out of reach. This financial burden often results in delayed or neglected care, increasing the risk of health complications

C. Lack of Education and Awareness

Many women simply don't know what preventive care services are available or why they're important. Without proper education, it's easy to overlook routine screenings or dismiss symptoms as unimportant. This lack of awareness can prevent women from taking proactive steps to protect their sexual health.

D. Limited Access to Healthcare

Geographical and logistical challenges also play a significant role. Women living in rural or underserved areas may struggle to find healthcare providers who offer comprehensive sexual health services. Even when care is available, long wait times and transportation issues can make it difficult to keep appointments.

E. Healthcare Provider Hesitancy

Sometimes, healthcare providers themselves may feel uncomfortable discussing sexual health topics. This hesitancy can create an environment where women feel judged or unsupported. If a provider is dismissive or avoids the topic, patients may be less likely to bring up their concerns or seek necessary care.

F. Fear and Shame

Feelings of fear or shame often prevent women from seeking preventive care. They may worry about being judged for their sexual behaviour or fear receiving a positive diagnosis for an STI. This anxiety can discourage women from taking steps to protect their health, leaving conditions undiagnosed and untreated.

G. Lack of Inclusive and Culturally Competent Care

Women from diverse backgrounds may encounter healthcare systems that do not understand or respect their unique cultural or personal needs. Language barriers, discrimination, and lack of cultural competence can make healthcare settings feel unwelcoming or even hostile, discouraging women from seeking care.

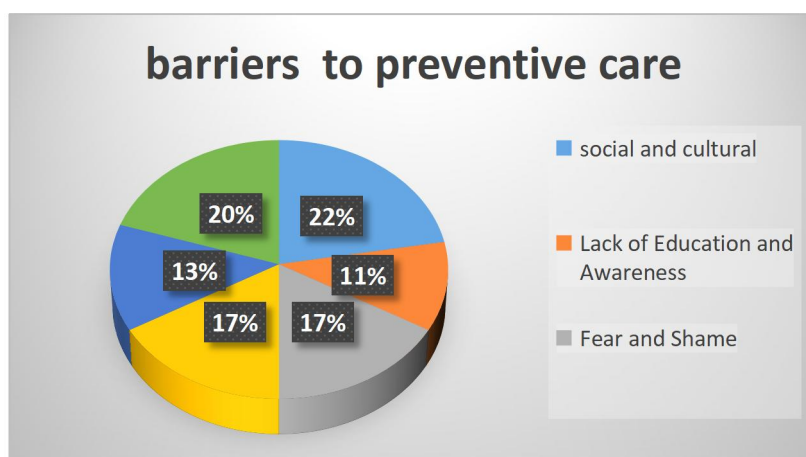


Figure 2. Barriers to preventive care

9.5 Intersectionality and Health Disparities

When it comes to women's health, not all experiences are the same. Intersectionality helps us understand how different aspects of a person's identity—like race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and more—overlap and create unique challenges. The term "intersectionality" was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw to explain how people who belong to multiple marginalized groups can face more significant and complex disadvantages. In healthcare, intersectionality plays a vital role in understanding health disparities. These disparities happen when certain groups of people consistently experience worse health outcomes compared to others. For women, especially those from marginalized communities, multiple factors often come together to make accessing quality healthcare more difficult.

Why Intersectionality Matters in Health

1. Discrimination and Bias

Women from minority racial or ethnic backgrounds often face discrimination within healthcare settings. Healthcare providers may hold implicit biases that lead to misdiagnosis or inadequate care. For example, Black and Indigenous women in the U.S. experience significantly higher maternal mortality rates compared to white women.

Similarly, LGBTQ+ women may feel uncomfortable discussing their sexual health with providers who lack understanding or show judgment. This can prevent them from seeking preventive care or openly discussing their concerns.

2. Financial and Socioeconomic Barriers

Financial challenges can also add another layer of difficulty. Low-income women often lack health insurance or face high costs when accessing preventive care, such as screenings or vaccinations. Economic hardships can also mean limited access to transportation or unpaid time off work, making it harder to keep healthcare appointments.

3. Cultural and Language Barriers

Cultural differences can create gaps in understanding between patients and healthcare providers. Women from different cultural backgrounds may feel uncomfortable discussing personal topics like sexual health. Language barriers can also make it hard to communicate symptoms or understand medical advice, leading to lower quality care.

4. Disability and Accessibility Issues

Women with disabilities often face unique challenges when accessing healthcare. Many medical facilities are not fully accessible, and healthcare professionals may not be trained to address disability-related health needs. This lack of accommodation can result in unmet health concerns or poor experiences that discourage future visits.

5. Geographical Challenges

Rural and remote areas often lack specialized healthcare services. Women living in these regions may have to travel long distances to receive routine screenings or specialized care, which can be both time-consuming and expensive.

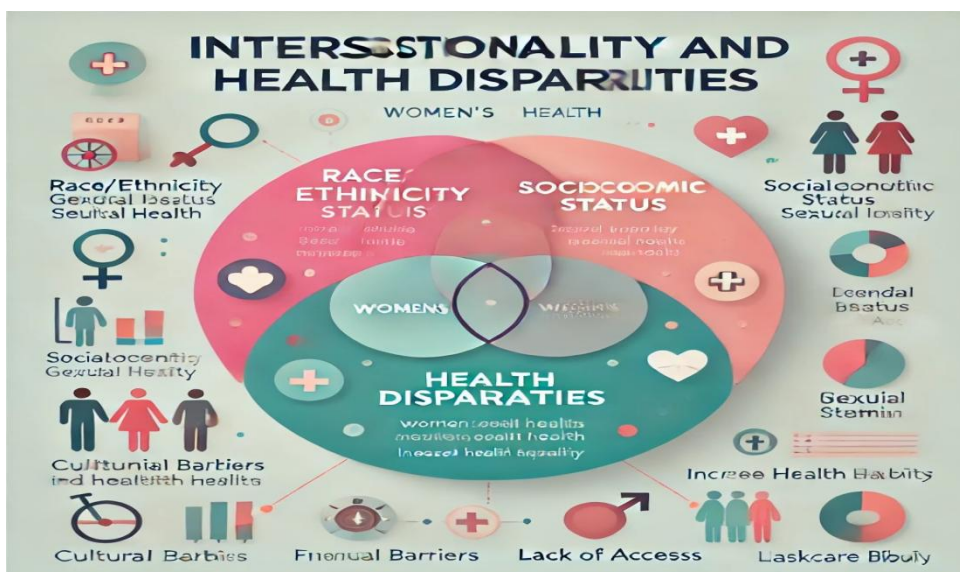


Figure 3. Intersectionality and Health Disparities

9.6 Strategies to Enhance Women's Sexual Health and Preventive Care

Women's sexual health is a fundamental aspect of overall well-being, yet it is often overlooked or underserved. Enhancing preventive care in this area is essential to reducing health disparities, promoting well-being, and empowering women to take control of their health.

A. Promote Routine Screenings and Exams

Regular screenings are vital for early detection and prevention of various health issues. To enhance preventive care, it is important to:

- **Increase Awareness:** Educate women about the importance of routine exams, such as Pap smears, HPV testing, breast exams, and mammograms.
- **Remove Barriers:** Provide affordable or free screenings, particularly for underserved communities.
- **Encourage Regular Check-Ups:** Establish partnerships with community health centers to offer walk-in clinics and mobile screening units.

B. Provide Comprehensive Contraceptive Counselling

Access to reliable contraception is crucial for women's reproductive autonomy and overall health. Effective strategies include:

- **Personalized Guidance:** Help women understand the pros and cons of different contraceptive methods, including birth control pills, IUDs, implants, and emergency contraception.
- **Accessible Services:** Make contraceptives affordable and easily available through clinics and pharmacies.
- **Follow-Up Support:** Ensure women receive guidance on how to use their chosen method correctly and address any side effects or concerns.

C. Educate About Safe Sex and STI Prevention

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) remain a significant health concern. To promote safe sexual practices:

- **Health Education Programs:** Conduct workshops and seminars in schools, colleges, and community centers.
- **Safe Sex Resources:** Distribute free condoms and educational materials in public health clinics and pharmacies.
- **Routine Testing:** Encourage regular STI testing, especially for sexually active women, and provide confidential services.

D. Enhance Vaccination Programs

Vaccines play a critical role in preventing infections related to sexual health. Key actions include:

- **Promote HPV Vaccination:** Educate parents and adolescents about the benefits of the HPV vaccine to prevent cervical and other cancers.
- **Increase Access:** Offer vaccinations at schools, community health events, and primary care clinics.
- **Educate About Other Vaccines:** Highlight the importance of hepatitis B and hepatitis C vaccines.

E. Support Mental and Emotional Health

Women's sexual health is closely linked to their mental and emotional well-being. Support can include:

- **Counselling Services:** Offer therapy and support for issues like sexual trauma, abuse, or relationship challenges.
- **Body Image Programs:** Help women build self-esteem and develop a positive body image through group discussions and workshops.
- **Stress Management:** Provide resources to cope with stress and anxiety related to sexual health concerns.

F. Use Technology and Digital Health Tools

Technology can make sexual health services more accessible and convenient.

- **Telemedicine Services:** Offer online consultations for sexual health concerns and follow-ups.
- **Health Apps:** Provide mobile apps that track menstrual cycles, fertility, and sexual health symptoms.
- **Educational Platforms:** Create websites and apps with accurate information about sexual health, contraception, and disease prevention.

G. Foster Community and Peer Support

Building a supportive environment encourages women to prioritize their sexual health. Strategies include:

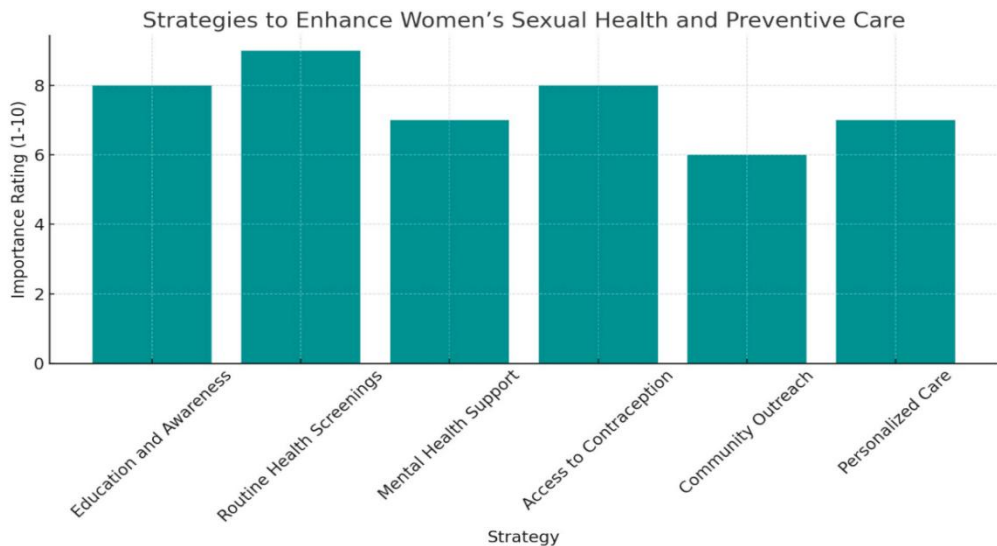
- **Support Groups:** Create safe spaces for women to discuss sexual health issues without stigma or judgment.
- **Community Workshops:** Involve healthcare professionals to discuss topics like contraception, STI prevention, and self-care.
- **Peer Education Programs:** Train community leaders to spread awareness and guide women to available services.

H. Advocate for Policy Changes

Supportive policies are crucial to ensuring long-term improvements in women's sexual health care.

- **Insurance Coverage:** Advocate for comprehensive insurance plans that cover contraceptives, screenings, and preventive services.
- **Funding for Women’s Health Programs:** Support community health initiatives aimed at women’s wellness.
- **Legislative Advocacy:** Work with policymakers to protect and expand access to reproductive and sexual health services.

Figure 4. Strategies to Enhance Women’s Sexual Health and Preventive Care



9.7 Case Studies

Case Study 1: Navigating Contraception Choices

Emma, a 28-year-old marketing professional, had been using oral contraceptive pills for five years when she began experiencing migraines and mood changes. Concerned, she consulted her gynaecologist to explore other contraceptive options. After discussing her lifestyle and medical history, Emma chose a hormonal IUD for long-term protection and fewer side effects. She shared that the transition was challenging but worth it, as her symptoms gradually subsided. Emma emphasizes the importance of advocating for oneself and finding a healthcare provider who listens.

Case Study 2: Facing an Unexpected Diagnosis

Sophia's Sophia, 32, scheduled her routine Pap smear with little worry, as previous tests had always been normal. A week later, she received a call that her results showed abnormal cells, indicating potential precancerous changes. Terrified, she scheduled a follow-up colposcopy. Her provider reassured her that early detection was key and guided her through the next steps. Fortunately, a minor procedure addressed the issue before it progressed. Sophia now speaks openly about her experience, encouraging other women to stay consistent with screenings despite feeling nervous.

Case Study 3: Addressing Sexual Pain and Finding Support

Lily's Lily, 40, had been dealing with pain during intercourse for nearly a year before finally seeking help. Embarrassed and unsure of how to explain her symptoms, she found a gynecologist specializing in sexual health. After a thorough evaluation, Lily was diagnosed with vaginismus and pelvic floor dysfunction. Her treatment involved physical therapy, relaxation techniques, and open communication with her partner. Slowly, Lily regained confidence and comfort. She now advocates for reducing stigma around discussing sexual pain and encourages others not to suffer in silence.

Case Study 4: Overcoming STI Stigma

Jenna's At 25, Jenna tested positive for genital herpes after experiencing painful sores. Devastated, she struggled with feelings of shame and fear of judgment. With the support of a therapist and an online community of women with similar experiences, Jenna learned to manage her symptoms and reclaim her self-worth. Today, she educates others about living with an STI and emphasizes that it doesn't define a person's value or ability to find love.

Case Study 5: The Power of HPV Vaccination

Maya's As a mother of two teenage daughters, Maya wanted to protect them from cervical cancer and other HPV-related conditions. After

doing her research and consulting their paediatrician, she opted for the HPV vaccine. Years later, both daughters are grateful that their mother prioritized preventive care. Maya's story underscores the importance of vaccination and dispelling myths about it.

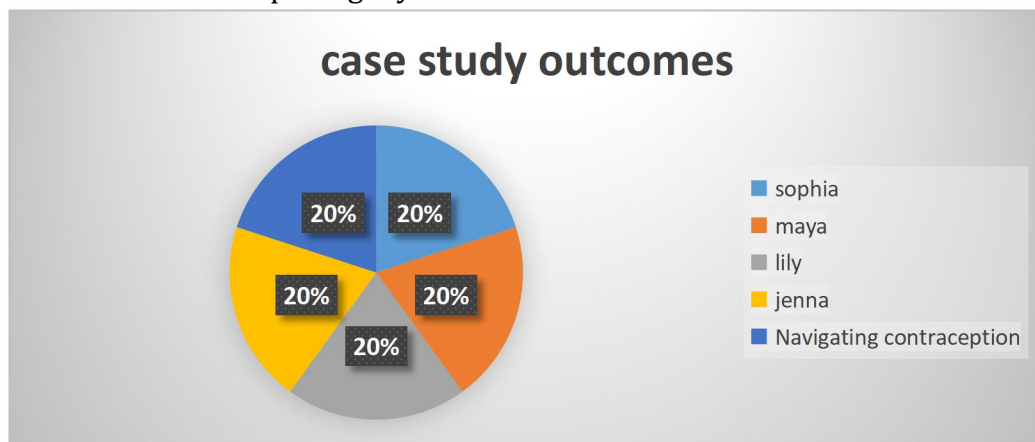


Figure 5. Case studies outcome

9.8 Recommendations and Future Directions for Women's Sexual Health and Preventive Care

1. Strengthening Education and Awareness

One of the most crucial steps toward improving women's sexual health is increasing education and awareness. Comprehensive sexual education should be accessible to individuals of all ages, covering topics such as contraception options, STI prevention, HPV vaccination, and recognizing signs of common health issues. Creating open dialogues within communities and healthcare settings will help reduce stigma and empower women to make informed decisions.

2. Enhancing Access to Preventive Care

Access to preventive care services, including routine screenings like Pap smears and mammograms, must be prioritized. Governments and healthcare organizations should work toward making these services affordable and available to all women, regardless of socioeconomic background. Investing in mobile clinics and telehealth options can also improve access for women in rural or underserved areas.

3. Reducing Stigma and Encouraging Support Networks

Sexual health issues, such as STIs or sexual dysfunction, often carry social stigma that prevents women from seeking help. Healthcare providers should receive training to approach these topics with sensitivity and empathy. Encouraging support groups and peer networks can help women feel less isolated and more confident in addressing their concerns.

4. Advancing Research and Innovation

Ongoing research is essential to develop new contraceptive methods with fewer side effects and to better understand the complex causes of conditions like vaginismus and other sexual dysfunctions. Additionally, studies focused on vaccine efficacy and long-term impacts will help build public trust and encourage vaccination uptake.

5. Integrating Mental Health Services

Sexual health and mental well-being are closely intertwined. Including mental health support as part of routine sexual healthcare can help address issues related to trauma, self-esteem, and relationship dynamics. Holistic care approaches that consider both physical and emotional well-being can lead to more positive outcomes.

6. Encouraging Personalized Healthcare

Every woman's body and experiences are unique, making personalized healthcare vital. Healthcare professionals should take time to discuss individual needs and preferences when recommending contraceptive methods or treatments. A patient-centered approach fosters better communication and improves overall satisfaction with care.

7. Policy Advocacy and Support

Policymakers must advocate for inclusive healthcare policies that protect women's rights to access comprehensive sexual and reproductive care. Addressing disparities in healthcare and eliminating systemic barriers will ensure that more women receive timely and appropriate services.

Table .1 Recommendations and future directions for women's sexual health and preventive care:

Focus Area	Recommendations
Education and Awareness	<p>Promote comprehensive sexual health education.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implement public health campaigns to raise awareness. - Engage schools and communities to discuss preventive care openly.
Access to Healthcare Services	<p>Increase availability of affordable sexual health services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensure healthcare providers are trained in women's sexual health. - Develop mobile clinics to reach underserved populations.
Stigma Reduction and Support	<p>Launch community programs to address stigma related to STIs and contraception.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offer counselling and peer support networks. - Educate society to normalize conversations about sexual health
Personalized Care and Contraception Options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advocate for individualized contraception plans based on lifestyle and health needs. - Support informed decision-making with clear information. - Integrate patient preferences in contraceptive counselling.
Research and Innovation	<p>Invest in research on women's sexual and reproductive health.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop innovative solutions to overcome barriers. - Collaborate to improve evidence-based practices.

Figure 6. Recommendations and Future Directions for Women's Sexual Health and Preventive Care

9.9 Reflection and Directions for Women's Sexual Health and Preventive Care

Reflection:

Women's sexual health has historically been underrepresented and stigmatized, leading to gaps in care and education. The case studies presented highlight the diverse challenges women face, from navigating contraceptive choices to dealing with unexpected diagnoses and overcoming stigma related to STIs and sexual pain. Each story underscores the importance of compassionate, individualized care and the power of education in fostering positive health outcomes.

A common thread in these narratives is the value of early intervention and open communication. Whether it's seeking help for pain or addressing the emotional impact of an STI diagnosis, women benefit from healthcare environments that prioritize understanding and support. Real-world experiences like those of Emma, Sophia, Lily, Jenna, and Maya remind us that women's health is not just about physical well-being but also about emotional resilience and empowerment.

Directions:

1. Promote Holistic Health Approaches:

- Address both physical and mental aspects of sexual health through integrated care.
- Encourage holistic treatment plans that include counselling, physical therapy, and medical management where needed.

2. Strengthen Preventive Care Efforts:

- Increase awareness of the importance of regular screenings and vaccinations, particularly in underserved communities.
- Develop community-based programs to educate women on their sexual health rights and resources.

3. Foster Open Communication:

- Educate healthcare providers on how to build trusting relationships with patients, encouraging open discussions about sexual health without fear of judgment.
- Empower women to advocate for their own needs and seek second opinions when necessary.

4. Address Stigma and Mental Health:

- Launch public health campaigns to reduce stigma around STIs and sexual dysfunction.
- Offer mental health support alongside medical treatment, recognizing the psychological impact of sexual health issues.

5. Leverage Technology and Innovation:

- Utilize telemedicine to increase access to care, particularly in remote areas.
- Support the development of innovative contraceptive methods and treatments that address side effects and personal preferences.

6. Policy Advocacy and Equity:

- Advocate for policies that ensure equitable access to sexual and reproductive healthcare.
- Push for insurance coverage of preventive services and treatments related to sexual health.

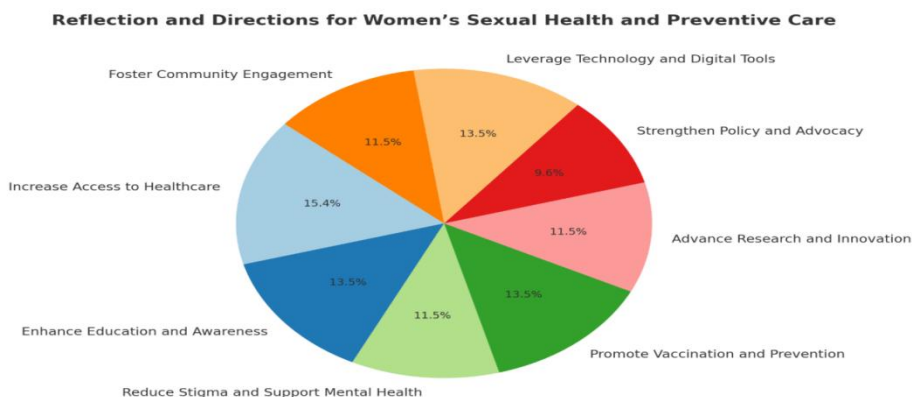


Figure 6. Reflection and Directions for Women's Sexual Health and Preventive Care

9.10 Conclusion

Women's sexual health and preventive care are fundamental aspects of overall well-being and public health. Despite progress in recent years, there remain significant challenges, including limited access to healthcare, social stigma, lack of awareness, and gaps in personalized care.

Addressing these challenges requires a holistic and multifaceted approach, combining education, advocacy, community engagement, and innovative solutions. Promoting routine screenings, enhancing contraceptive counselling, and educating women about safe sexual practices are essential steps in improving preventive care. Moreover, expanding vaccination programs and supporting mental and emotional health contribute to a comprehensive approach to well-being. Technology and digital health tools offer new opportunities to reach underserved populations and provide reliable information, while community-based programs foster support and reduce stigma. Policies that advocate for accessible and affordable healthcare services are crucial in sustaining long-term change. Investing in research and innovation will ensure that women's sexual health receives the attention and advancement it deserves. By fostering a supportive environment and advocating for evidence-based practices, we can empower women to take charge of their health, make informed decisions, and break down barriers that hinder access to quality care. Women's sexual health is not just a medical issue—it is a matter of equity, dignity, and empowerment. By continuing to push for comprehensive, compassionate, and inclusive healthcare, we can pave the way for healthier and more empowered generations to come.

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