



# Let's Talk About Sex

Urban soap opera shows the power of young urban women in reducing their HIV sexual risk BY RACHEL JONES, PhD, RN

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**W**HEN IT COMES TO AIDS and women, the numbers speak for themselves.

Most women who have HIV (78 percent) were infected through unprotected sex with an infected male partner.<sup>1</sup> Infection with HIV is disproportionately affecting young women of color. Although African-American and Latina women represent about 25 percent of all women in the U.S., they account for 81 percent of AIDS diagnoses.<sup>1</sup>

Health promotion efforts typically are geared toward increasing one's awareness about a male partner's risk behaviors and knowledge about ways to reduce HIV risk. However, it is common for women to perceive their male partner is engaging in an HIV risk behavior, yet continue to engage in unprotected sex with him anyway.<sup>2,5</sup>

The risk of sexual transmission of HIV

may be perceived to be real. But the risk of losing a male partner if one doesn't engage in unprotected sex may be perceived as greater. There is an implicit understanding that unprotected sex is a means to initiate or hold onto a male partner and to communicate relationship trust.<sup>5,6</sup> Considering its association with relationship promoting outcomes, approaches to health promotion that address the meaning of unprotected sex are needed.<sup>7</sup>

To this end, urban soap opera-type video vignettes were developed to show real-life situations in relationships with men that make it hard to act to reduce HIV risk. But the video vignettes also dramatize the powerful ways women can and do act to reduce their risk.

## Focus Group Analysis

The videos are based on the findings of a series of studies funded by the National

Institute of Nursing Research, the National Library of Medicine, and a Busch Biomedical Research Grant from Rutgers University.

In the current study, the author and her research team conducted seven focus group discussions with 43 African-American and Latina women, ages 18-25, in public housing and community settings in Jersey City and Newark, NJ. The videos are based on the stories of urban women's relationships with men. Barrett's theory of power as knowing participation in change, and sex script theory provided the framework to aid in interpreting the themes and story development.<sup>8-9</sup>

What emerged from these studies was a picture of low-power sex scripts and high-power sex scripts. Low-power sex scripts involve believing you have to "do what you have to do to keep your man," and accepting a partner's cheating "as long as he comes home to me." In particular, it is feeling "stuck in your ways" repeating the same patterns with men, "hoping things will get better." High-power sex scripts involve "girl power." These scripts involve the belief that "expecting sex is not all right," "you don't own me," and the demand to "show you care, use a condom."<sup>10</sup>

## Filming the Soap Opera

Performing arts students at Rutgers scripted the stories. Actors were cast after auditioning via a casting call. An independent, documentary filmmaker, Alan Roth, directed and produced the videos while a digital applications developer prepared the videos to be viewed on computers.

By grounding the stories in urban women's own life experiences through a soap opera format, women identify with the heroine's emotionally charged process of change. In the beginning, the leading characters enact low-power sex scripts. At the end, the HIV risk reduction message is communicated as the heroine reenacts each high-risk scene, this time acting with power, making different choices and actualizing her potential. By acting with power, relationship- ➤

## HIV/AIDS Series, Part I

*Editor's note:* This article is the first in a three-part series focusing on HIV/AIDS. The other two will discuss legal rights of the HIV-positive nurse and HIV and African-Americans.

promoting objectives that may otherwise result in high-risk sex are instead satisfied in ways that promote health.

Entertainment education is a modality that has used the soap opera format to communicate pro-social messages and behavior

lar heroine who experiences real-life problems and rises to the occasion.<sup>11</sup>

Nurses can show soap opera-type videos in reaching out to this dynamic population. The most effective health promotion weaves the message into real-life dramas. It is not

**'The most effective health promotion weaves the message into real-life dramas. It is not enough to just say no and send patients off with a pamphlet.'**

change.<sup>11</sup> Research suggests that health promotion messages should be associated with the usual patterns of behaviors in order to increase the likelihood they be adopted.<sup>12</sup> According to this view, by popularizing high-power sex scripts and associating these with contemporary sex scripts, the new behavior will more likely be adopted.<sup>5</sup>

### Unleashing the Power

The current effort is to associate HIV sexual risk reduction messages with familiar sex scripts by presenting them in an emotionally charged, entertaining modality to promote behavior change. High-power themes, such as "girl power" and "you don't own me," were integrated into familiar low-power relationship scripts.<sup>6</sup> The intent was to create exemplars of more powerful ways of taking action to reduce HIV risk — in essence, a method of sharing women's wisdom.

The videos were recently pilot-tested in a randomized, control experimental study design among women in urban public housing developments and community settings. Findings indicate the video vignettes, including identification with the lead characters and their trials and tribulations, were very appealing to the target audience. This formative work suggests the video vignettes are a feasible and acceptable methodology to promote HIV risk reduction.

### Reaching Out

Efforts to promote sexual health in adolescent and young adult urban women who are already engaging in sex require age- and culture-appropriate approaches. Stories may be most effective when they involve a popu-

lar heroine who experiences real-life problems and rises to the occasion.<sup>11</sup> Soon, the videos will be available for use and may be accessed over the Internet. ■

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