Unit 3: Adolescent vulnerabilities, risk-taking Behaviors, and consequences
We know that major physical, cognitive, emotional, sexual and social changes occur during adolescence that affect young people’s behavior. These include:

- **New social relationships.** Peers become very influential and family influence decreases. Adolescents may engage in risky behaviors that identify them with their peer group, or demonstrate how they “fit in”.

- **Curiosity combined with sexual maturity.** Adolescence is naturally a time of experimentation. Experimentation is a normal aspect of development because it helps adolescents learn more about their body, feelings, and values.

- **Questioning authority and established “rules”.** An important “task” of adolescence is to create an independent identity and personality. However, this questioning of authority can also lead to impulsive decision-making and a lack of awareness of future consequences.
REASONS FOR RISK-TAKING

• **Adolescents test their limits.** Young people often underestimate risk, although the level of risk and vulnerability varies with culture, individual personality traits, social influences, needs, pressures, and opportunities.

• **Brain development.** There is a period of significant brain development during adolescence; however, areas of the brain grow and mature at different rates. The limbic system grows rapidly in early adolescence, while the prefrontal cortex completes its growth in late adolescence/young adulthood. The limbic system gives us a rewarding feeling when we take a risk, which likely contributes to young people’s propensity to engage in “risk behaviors.” Since the pre-frontal cortex completes its growth later as young people mature they also develop better reasoning skills, more control over impulses and better judgment.
COMMON VULNERABILITIES

• Age-based discrimination
  – Adolescents are frequently denied information and services based on their age or marital status.
  – Adolescents are denied the choice and autonomy/independence to make their own decisions.
COMMON VULNERABILITIES

- Gender inequality
  - Adolescent women are discriminated against for being sexual.
  - Adolescent women are not encouraged to act independently and make their own choices, especially with regards to sexuality.
  - Adolescent women are expected to be responsible for their own and their partners’ health.
  - Adolescent women are more likely to experience discrimination in housing, education, employment, or other areas.
  - Harmful traditional practices, like female genital mutilation and early and forced marriage, seriously affect the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents.
  - Adolescent boys are expected to conform to rigid norms of masculinity, including expectations around sexual prowess.
COMMON VULNERABILITIES

• Sexual and gender-based violence
  – Adolescents experience violence in their families, intimate partnerships, and societies.
  – Adolescents who experience sexual violence are frequently stigmatized or shamed for their experience when they report it.
  – Adolescent women and men may face violence to correct their behaviors when they fail to conform to social norms about gender and sexuality.
COMMON VULNERABILITIES

• Economic hardship
  • Adolescents have less access to money, employment opportunities, and disposable income than other age cohorts.
  • Adolescents who work, frequently do so to support their families.
COMMON VULNERABILITIES

• Disability-based discrimination
  – Adolescents with disabilities are rarely regarded as subjects of sexual rights.
  – Adolescents with disabilities are often assumed as asexual, not sexually active, or hypersexual.
  – Adolescents with disabilities are often assumed as not able to decide by themselves about their sexual life.
  – Adolescents with disabilities face significant attitudinal, physical, communication and financial barriers in reporting violence and abuse and when accessing SRH information and services.
  – Adolescents girls with disabilities are often denied their reproductive autonomy.
  – Adolescent boys with disabilities may be considered less able to meet the expectations around sexual prowess.
COMMON VULNERABILITIES

• Disability-based discrimination
  – Adolescents with disabilities are three to four times more likely, to face violence than their peers without disabilities.
  – Behaviours such as undressing or masturbating in public, hugging, kissing or touching other people’s breasts and genitalia without permission have been reported as frequent among young persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities who are entering adolescence. They are usually unaware of such behaviours being perceived as inappropriate. Parents and teachers often recur to punishment trying to control and prevent them.
  – Mental health conditions such as depression or schizophrenia often set in during adolescence and result in psychosocial disabilities. Parents and teachers often mistakenly attribute them to adolescents’ attitudes and tend to criticize or punish them instead of providing adequate support.
TYPES OF RISK-TAKING BEHAVIOR

• Impulsive decision-making
• Failure to consider consequences
• Lack of information about risk
• Social, sexual, or other experimentation
• Provoking or testing limits through argument
OUTCOMES OF ADOLESCENT RISK-TAKING

• Development of sense of independence, resiliency
• Potential for unintended pregnancy, infection with HIV/STIs
• Growth in or failure of social and family relationships
• Early child-bearing, complications in childbirth and/or unsafe or forced abortion, and forced sterilization
• Risk of sexual or interpersonal violence
• Loss of educational or economic opportunities
• Poor nutrition or other health outcomes