



# AFRICA4HER WORKBOOK: WOMEN'S HEALTH



U.S. DEPARTMENT *of* STATE



# AFRICA4HER WOMEN'S HEALTH WORKBOOK: **STANDING UP FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH**

## INTRODUCTION

Women's health is more than a single condition — it encompasses physical, emotional and mental health — and that is why clear and concise information is more important than ever. Accurately reporting on women's health issues is critical, too, because sharing inaccurate information can have devastating consequences on you and your community.

This Africa4Her Women's Health Workbook includes the facts and resources you need to better understand these topics and advocate for women's health in your community. Strong, healthy women make for a strong, healthy future!

This workbook covers five of the most prevalent women's health issues across sub-Saharan Africa: human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and AIDS, menstrual and maternal health, gender-based violence, noncommunicable diseases and mental health. As you complete each section of this workbook, you'll learn more about each health topic, as well as some common misconceptions about how the disease is contracted, who it affects and how it could be treated. Each topic also contains links to more information, so you can be as informed as possible about the women's health issues affecting your community.

**Additional Resource:**

Be sure to visit [yali.state.gov/4her/#blog](https://yali.state.gov/4her/#blog) for stories and tips from YALI Network members who are advocating for women's health in your community.

## Questions to Consider

Advocating for women’s health starts with a thorough understanding of the health landscape in your community and the issues women face every day. Before you learn about women’s health, take a few minutes to answer the following questions, with your community members in mind. Remember, it’s up to you to take a stand for women’s health.

1. What are the three most common health issues facing women in your community?

---

---

---

2. For each of the issues you listed in response to Question 1, identify one or two reasons that issue has evolved in your community. What role do regional and economic factors play, if at all?

---

---

---

3. For each of the issues you listed in response to Question 1, list one or two resources in your community that are available to help or educate women. If there are not resources available in your community, where could you point someone for more information?

---

---

---

## How to Use This Workbook

To get the most out of this workbook, start by reading the health information at the beginning of each section, reviewing the myths and facts about each condition, and exploring the additional resources on these topics. Once you have completed this, try answering the question at the end of each section to review what you’ve just learned. After you’ve completed each health section, you’ll be ready to take the True or False Quiz at the end of this workbook and test your knowledge!

## HIV/AIDS

HIV spreads through bodily fluids and attacks the body's immune system. Left untreated, the virus can lead to AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). HIV/AIDS can affect the body's ability to fight off infectious diseases and infection-related cancers.

HIV/AIDS can affect anyone but disproportionately affects women and adolescent girls because of vulnerabilities associated with limited access to sexual health and HIV services.

Several HIV/AIDS prevention methods have proved highly effective. Individuals can protect themselves against HIV by taking antiretroviral medication, using clean syringes, using a condom during sexual intercourse and getting tested for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV regularly, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

### MYTH VS. FACT

**Myth:** HIV and AIDS are the same thing.

**Fact:** AIDS is the most severe phase of the HIV infection, but antiretroviral therapy (ART) helps control the virus. ART can extend life spans of infected people and decrease the risk of transmitting HIV to others. (Source: [U.S. Department of Health & Human Services](#))

**Myth:** Men and women are equally likely to acquire HIV.

**Fact:** Women account for more than half the number of people living with HIV worldwide. Young females (10 to 24 years old) are twice as likely to acquire HIV as males the same age. (Source: [Avert](#))

**Myth:** Only gay people can get HIV.

**Fact:** If HIV enters the bloodstream, it can affect anyone — regardless of sexual orientation. (Source: [Avert](#))

## WHERE CAN I GO TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HIV/AIDS?

Watch: [Building a Public Health Communication Campaign](#)

Read: [World Health Organization's 10 Facts on HIV](#)

Read: [Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS](#)

Read: [Global HIV & AIDS fact sheet](#)

## PERSONAL REFLECTION QUESTION:

What's one thing you learned about HIV/AIDS in this section that you didn't know before?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence (GBV) is violence that is directed at an individual based on his or her biological sex or gender identity. It includes physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and psychological abuse; threats; coercion; and economic or educational deprivation, whether occurring in public or private life.

While physical and sexual violence may be the most recognizable, psychological and economic violence are also extremely harmful. Psychological gender-based violence can include controlling or restricting someone's movements, threatening another person or verbally disrespecting and degrading another person. Examples of economic gender-based violence can include withholding family finances, spending jointly earned income without consent or preventing someone from getting an education or earning their own income.

In most cases, this violence is committed by men against girls, women, boys or other men. That's because many cultures around the world teach young boys and men early on that being violent, aggressive and sexual is part of their nature. However, GBV is not just something experienced by women. GBV is any type of violence that is directed at an individual based on his or her gender.

### MYTH VS. FACT

**Myth:** Sexual violence is more likely to be committed by a stranger.

**Fact:** Two-thirds of sexual assaults are committed by someone known to the survivor. Some studies estimate that only 2% of abusers are complete strangers. (Source: [UN Women](#))

**Myth:** Gender-based violence is equally likely in peaceful or conflict zones.

**Fact:** Situations of conflict, post conflict and displacement may exacerbate existing violence, such as by intimate partners, as well as non-partner sexual violence, and may also lead to new forms of violence against women. (Source: [World Health Organization](#))

**Myth:** Adolescent girls are more likely to experience forced sex by a stranger.

**Fact:** In the vast majority of countries, adolescent girls are most at risk of forced sex by a current or former husband, partner or boyfriend. (Source: [UNICEF](#) (PDF, 4.9 MB))

## WHERE CAN I GO TO LEARN MORE ABOUT GBV?

Watch: [What Is Gender-Based Violence?](#)

Read: [10 myths about violence against women and girls](#)

## PERSONAL REFLECTION QUESTION:

Did anything surprise you in this section about GBV? Explain.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## MENSTRUAL AND MATERNAL HEALTH

Menstruation is a natural fact of life and a monthly occurrence for women of reproductive age. Yet millions of women and girls across the globe are denied the right to manage their monthly menstrual cycle in a dignified, healthy way. Gender inequality, discriminatory social norms, cultural taboos, poverty and lack of basic services are often the root cause of why girls' and women's menstrual health and hygiene needs go unmet.

A closely related topic is maternal health. At present, 810 women die every day from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth, according to the [World Health Organization](#). Young women can take steps to improve their maternal health, including seeking antenatal care, skilled care during childbirth and support after childbirth. Greater access to these and other services can reverse these statistics and pave the way to a healthier future.

### MYTH VS. FACT

**Myth:** Abnormal menstrual bleeding is a sign that your partner is cheating on you.

**Fact:** There are various reasons for abnormal menstrual bleeding, but a cheating partner is not one of them. A visit to a medical doctor can provide proper diagnosis. (Source: [American Cancer Society](#))

**Myth:** The menstrual cycle is a punishment inflicted on women.

**Fact:** Menstruation is a natural occurrence. Hormones control menstrual cycles in all women of reproductive age. (Source: [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#))

**Myth:** Women are just as likely to die in childbirth in low- and high-income countries.

**Fact:** Ninety-four percent of all maternal deaths occur in low- and lower middle-income countries. (Source: [World Health Organization](#))



## WHERE CAN I GO TO LEARN MORE ABOUT MENSTRUAL AND MATERNAL HEALTH?

Read: [Maternal Health](#)

Read: [Reproductive Health](#)

Read: [Maternal, Infant, and Child Health](#)

### PERSONAL REFLECTION QUESTION:

Does the information in this section change your views on menstrual or maternal health? If so, how?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## NONCOMMUNICABLE DISEASES

According to the [World Health Organization](#), noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), primarily heart and lung diseases, cancers, and diabetes, are the world's largest killers. Preventive health, or taking steps to prevent illnesses and diseases, can help decrease the worldwide rise in preventable deaths. There are a few NCDs that primarily affect women, including cardiovascular diseases and women's cancers such as cervical, ovarian and breast cancer.

Cervical cancer is a type of cancer that occurs in the cervix, which is the lower part of the uterus. Cervical cancer is mostly caused by strains of the human papillomavirus (HPV), which is a sexually transmitted infection. According to the [World Health Organization](#), cervical cancer is the fourth most common cancer among women. The best way to prevent cervical cancer is to receive the HPV vaccination and to screen for cancerous lesions.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer affecting women across the globe. The incidence of women's breast cancer is rising globally, particularly in developing regions. It is important to learn about breast cancer prevention, early diagnosis, treatment and care for the women in your community, according to the [World Health Organization](#).

Screening, detection and treatment of NCDs are some of the best response mechanisms. Generally speaking, limiting tobacco use, increasing physical activity and eating healthy foods can also strongly reduce your chances of contracting an NCD.

## MYTH VS. FACT

**Myth:** Cervical cancer screenings damage the uterus and make women barren.

**Fact:** Cervical cancer itself — and not the preventive screenings — can cause infertility. Early detection through screenings is very important. (Source: [World Health Organization](#))

**Myth:** Cancer is caused by a curse and is a disease of the West.

**Fact:** Cancer affects everyone, regardless of race, socioeconomic status and gender. (Source: [World Health Organization](#))

**Myth:** Early screenings don't make a difference in the treatment of cancer.

**Fact:** Early cancer screenings greatly increase the chances for successful detection and treatment. (Source: [World Health Organization](#))

## WHERE CAN I GO TO LEARN MORE ABOUT NONCOMMUNICABLE DISEASES?

Read: [Cervical Cancer Key Facts](#)

Read: [Breast Cancer: Prevention and control](#)

## PERSONAL REFLECTION QUESTION:

What did you learn in this section about noncommunicable diseases that you didn't know before?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to his or her community, according to the [World Health Organization](#).

Depression and anxiety are predominant in women and affect 1 in 3 people globally. Women are twice as likely to have unipolar depression, which is the second-leading cause of global disabilities, according to the [World Health Organization](#) (PDF, 287 KB).

Women are also the [single-largest group suffering from PTSD \(post-traumatic stress disorder\)](#) as survivors of sexual violence. Gender-based roles, stressors and negative life experiences can be addressed to stem the prevalence of mental illnesses among both men and women.

### MYTH VS. FACT

**Myth:** Mental illnesses are caused by witchcraft, are contagious, are a sign of weakness and affect only the rich population.

**Fact:** A variety of genetic and environmental factors can cause mental illnesses. They can affect anyone in society, regardless of socioeconomic status. (Source: [Mayo Clinic](#))

**Myth:** Mental illnesses cannot be treated.

**Fact:** There are many types of mental illnesses that require different types of treatment. Medical professionals can help to control the illness and significantly reduce symptoms. (Source: [Mayo Clinic](#))

**Myth:** If a person feels sad or overwhelmed for a short period of time, that means he or she suffers from depression.

**Fact:** The effects of depression can be long-lasting or recurrent and can dramatically affect a person's ability to function and live a rewarding life. (Source: [World Health Organization](#))

## WHERE CAN I GO TO LEARN MORE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH?

Read: [Maternal Health and Child Health and Development \(PDF, 287 KB\)](#)

Read: [Mental Illness: Diagnosis and Treatment](#)

### PERSONAL REFLECTION QUESTION:

Did anything surprise you in this section about mental health? Explain.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## TRUE OR FALSE QUIZ

Now that you've learned about some of the important women's health issues, it's time to put your knowledge to the test! Read each statement below carefully and indicate if it is true or false in the spaces provided. Once you're finished, you can check your responses using the Answer Key at the end of this workbook.

1. Cancer is caused by a curse and is a disease of the West. \_\_\_\_\_
2. The menstrual cycle is a punishment inflicted on women. \_\_\_\_\_
3. HIV and AIDS are the same thing. \_\_\_\_\_
4. Gender-based violence is more common in areas affected by war and other conflicts. \_\_\_\_\_
5. Mental illnesses can be effectively treated. \_\_\_\_\_
6. Women are more likely than men to be living with HIV. \_\_\_\_\_
7. Cervical cancer screenings damage the uterus and make women barren. \_\_\_\_\_
8. Abnormal menstrual bleeding is a sign that your partner is cheating on you. \_\_\_\_\_
9. Mental illnesses are caused by witchcraft, are contagious, are a sign of weakness and affect only the rich population. \_\_\_\_\_
10. Only gay people can get HIV. \_\_\_\_\_
11. Adolescent girls are more likely to experience forced sex by a stranger. \_\_\_\_\_
12. Early screenings can help in the treatment of cancer. \_\_\_\_\_
13. Women in low-income countries are more likely to die during childbirth. \_\_\_\_\_
14. Sexual violence is more likely to be committed by a stranger. \_\_\_\_\_
15. If a person feels sad or overwhelmed for a short period of time, that means he or she suffers from depression. \_\_\_\_\_

## NEXT STEPS

Now that you've completed this workbook and learned a bit more about women's health, take a few minutes to review your answers in the "Questions to Consider" section at the beginning of this workbook, then complete the following:

1. What have you learned after completing this workbook about the health issues facing women?

---

---

---

---

2. What information surprised you? Why?

---

---

---

---

3. What steps can you take today to be a better advocate for women's health in your community?

---

---

---

---

## TAKE ACTION

Having completed this workbook and learned more about the health issues affecting women, take the next step of facilitating a discussion in your community on women's health. Download the [Africa4Her Women's Health Facilitation Guide](#) to get started planning your YALILearns session on one of the topics you've learned about today.

For additional guidance on how to plan a YALILearns session, you can also download the [YALILearns Toolkit](#) for more information.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Are you looking for even more ways to lead discussions on women's health? You can also use the courses and videos below, plus the corresponding facilitation guides to continue to stand up for women's health in your community.

1. [Effective Communication for Healthy Outcomes \(Facilitation Guide\)](#)
2. [What Is Gender-Based Violence? \(Facilitation Guide\)](#)
3. [Understanding the Rights of Women and Girls \(Facilitation Guide\)](#)



## QUIZ ANSWER KEY

- 1. FALSE.** Cancer affects everyone, regardless of race, socioeconomic status and gender. (Source: [World Health Organization](#))
- 2. FALSE.** Menstruation is a natural occurrence. Hormones control menstrual cycles in all women of reproductive age. (Source: [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#))
- 3. FALSE.** AIDS is the most severe phase of the HIV infection, but antiretroviral therapy (ART) helps control the virus. ART can extend life spans of infected people and decrease the risk of transmitting HIV to others. (Source: [U.S. Department of Health & Human Services](#))
- 4. TRUE.** Situations of conflict, post-conflict and displacement may exacerbate existing violence, such as by intimate partners, as well as nonpartner sexual violence, and may also lead to new forms of violence against women. (Source: [World Health Organization](#))
- 5. TRUE.** There are many types of mental illnesses that require different types of treatment. Medical professionals can help to control the illness and significantly reduce symptoms. (Source: [Mayo Clinic](#))
- 6. TRUE.** Women account for more than half the number of people living with HIV worldwide. Young females (10 to 24 years old) are twice as likely to acquire HIV as males the same age. (Source: [Avert](#))
- 7. FALSE.** Cervical cancer itself — and not the preventive screenings — can cause women infertility. Early detection through screenings is very important. (Source: [World Health Organization](#))
- 8. FALSE.** There are various reasons for abnormal menstrual bleeding, but a cheating partner is not one of them. A visit to a medical doctor can provide proper diagnosis. (Source: [American Cancer Society](#))

## QUIZ ANSWER KEY

- 9. FALSE.** A variety of genetic and environmental factors can cause mental illnesses. They can affect anyone in society, regardless of socioeconomic status. (Source: [Mayo Clinic](#))
- 10. FALSE.** If HIV enters the bloodstream, it can affect anyone — regardless of sexual orientation. (Source: [Avert](#))
- 11. FALSE.** In the vast majority of countries, adolescent girls are most at risk of forced sex by a current or former husband, partner or boyfriend. (Source: [UNICEF](#) (PDF, 4.9 MB))
- 12. TRUE.** Early cancer screenings greatly increase the chances for successful detection and treatment. (Source: [World Health Organization](#))
- 13. TRUE.** Ninety-four percent of all maternal deaths occur in low- and lower middle-income countries. (Source: [World Health Organization](#))
- 14. FALSE.** Two-thirds of sexual assaults are committed by someone known to the survivor. Some studies estimate that only 2% of abusers are complete strangers. (Source: [UN Women](#))
- 15. FALSE.** The effects of depression can be long-lasting or recurrent and can dramatically affect a person's ability to function and live a rewarding life. (Source: [World Health Organization](#))