third or fewer of women at these ages know of the pill or condom, more than half know of abstinence (Figure 1). Many believe that the best way to prevent pregnancy is to avoid men.

“To avoid a pregnancy, you keep quiet, you don’t go to town at night and if you are a student, you spend your evenings doing your homework. On Saturday and Sunday evenings, you study, and afterward you go to bed.”—Female pupil

There is a widespread fear among young women that contact with men will inevitably lead to a sexual encounter, often by force. The critical point is entering a man’s house or room.

“If you enter the house, the man invites you to have sex, and if you refuse, he’ll beat you and you will accept.”—Female pupil

Male respondents also mentioned abstinence as one means of avoiding pregnancy, but they argued that it is not acceptable for more than a few weeks.

Modern contraceptives are regarded with suspicion, because of perceived biological and social side effects—primarily that they cause infertility and enable young women to frequently change sexual partners or even engage in prostitution without fear of pregnancy. The condom is often mentioned, though mainly in relation to disease prevention or for individuals who do not trust their partner or who engage in one-night stands.

The menstrual cycle plays an important role in discussions on pregnancy prevention. Respondents of both sexes want to learn more about the menstrual cycle, on the assumption that infrequent intercourse combined with a sound awareness of fertile and infertile days would facilitate pregnancy prevention. Young women acknowledge that it is their responsibility to understand their cycle, but are worried by its irregularities. Furthermore, the concept of regularity is often misunderstood to mean that a woman’s period will begin on the same date every month (e.g., the fifth of January, the fifth of February and so on).

**Pregnancies and Abortions**

Overall, 25% of sexually active young women reported having been pregnant, and 8% of sexually active young men reported having impregnated a partner. The pregnancy rate increased with age, but did not differ significantly between pupils and young people who were not in school (Table 2). The incidence of pregnancy also did not vary according to ethnic or religious group (not shown). Contrary to expectations, 20–24-year-old women who were in school had a higher pregnancy rate than their out-of-school counterparts. Thus, knowledge apparently is not the decisive factor for women in their 20s.

Focus-group participants described a premarital pregnancy as the major threat to a young woman’s well-being. A pregnant young woman will likely be ridiculed by peers and teachers, and may face severe punishment at home. Her father may banish her from the house until her partner acknowledges his paternity and agrees at least to take financial responsibility.

For this reason, young men also regard involvement in a premarital pregnancy as a threat. Furthermore, since an adolescent’s father may regard her mother as responsible for guarding a young woman’s chastity, the mother may be punished as well. On the other hand, many women, especially those aged 20–24, feel pressured to find a spouse or to prove their fertility.

Of the young women who had ever been pregnant, 22% reported having had an induced abortion. No significant difference was found in abortion between pupils and out-of-school women or among ethnic or religious groups.

The young people in the focus groups spoke of abortion as a definite possibility. The fact that abortions are not available legally in Guinea was not mentioned. Participants did, however, worry about the frequency with which abortion has fatal consequences.

**Discussion**

The mean age at onset of sexual activity among the young people in our sample is similar to means elsewhere in the region. These men and women perceive sex as a normal part of their lives, a sign of modernism. As a result, young women are exposed to the risk of premarital pregnancies and their potentially negative consequences, including unsafe abortions.

Premarital pregnancies are widespread in part because young people have unprotected sex, owing to either ignorance or a lack of accessible services. The high value of fertility and the deeply rooted fear of infertility make young people susceptible to rumors about the side effects of contraceptives. In addition, young men may view modern method use as a threat to their control within their relationships and therefore tend to oppose these methods.

Young people in Guinea are still far from using contraceptives effectively, but their level of use compares quite favorably with that of the general population. In 1992, 6% of all women and 12% of all men had ever used a modern method; by contrast, about half of the sexually active unmarried young people in our sample had ever used one. Generally, survey data in Sub-Saharan Africa show that contraceptive use is lower among female adolescents than among women older than 20. But these data are misleading in that they tend not to differentiate between married and unmarried adolescents, and between sexually active and sexually inexperienced, unmarried teenagers. Data from Côte d’Ivoire and The Gambia show that sexually active, unmarried women are more likely to use modern contraceptives than are married women.

A common stereotype is that young women are seduced into their first sexual relationship by rich partners, or “sugar daddies.” Our results, however, which are similar to findings for Nigeria, show that sexual initiation tends to be an affair between young peers; only once young women are sexually active do they begin to have older partners.

We found that one of the main reasons for this shift is that if young women are going to risk becoming pregnant, they want a partner who will be able to help support them and their children. If young women were sufficiently informed about contraceptive methods and had access to acceptable services, their interest in a partnership with an older and wealthy man might be reduced. (However, the fear of pregnancy