time of the survey became even greater, while the effects of formal engagement and age at first intercourse remained similar. The perception that first intercourse occurred too early, however, no longer had a significant impact. Having high self-esteem and having an internal locus of control significantly increased the odds of ever having used a modern contraceptive (3.3 and 2.4, respectively). Together, the two models indicate that, for young women, much of the association between ever-use of modern contraceptives and perceived appropriateness of the timing of intercourse acts through psychological factors.

The data do not indicate whether low self-esteem is the cause or the consequence of early intercourse or of the wish that first intercourse had occurred later. Nevertheless, we put forward the hypothesis that if young women’s first sexual experience is unwanted, this perhaps serves to change their perception of themselves, their perceived ability to influence their situation and subsequent behavior. In particular, such unwanted sexual experiences may influence and form the psychological skills that they need to draw on subsequently to practice safe sex.

For young men, the evidence is not so clearcut. As was the case for young women, the odds that a young man had ever used a modern contraceptive rose significantly with each increase of a year in age (odds ratio of 2.1). However, none of the variables related to timing of first intercourse had a statistically significant effect.

In the model including the psychological variables, young men who had delayed intercourse until age 17 or older were significantly more likely to have ever used a modern method than those who had had their first sexual experience at age 14 or younger (odds ratio of 2.5). As was the case for young women, the perception of first intercourse as too early was not associated with ever-use of contraceptives. For young men, as for young women, having high self-esteem was strongly and positively associated with ever-use of modern contraceptives (odds ratio of 3.0).

These results suggest different patterns for young men and young women. For young women, the addition of self-esteem and other psychological factors mediate the association between age at first intercourse and ever-use of modern contraceptives among young women. Young women’s perceptions and evaluations of their early sexual experiences appear to have important implications for later risks to their sexual health. This does not appear to be the case for young men, who accrue self-esteem and other psychological skills from sources other than sex.

**Qualitative Data**

The qualitative data we gathered shed light on reasons for unwanted first intercourse. Findings from the focus groups for urban young men, rural young men and rural young women were generally consistent with the quantitative data from our survey. These data underline the importance of peer pressure, curiosity and promise of marriage, respectively, as respondents’ reasons for engaging in sexual activity before they felt ready. For urban young women, however, the quantitative data suggest romantic love as the primary factor behind unwanted first intercourse, while the focus groups reveal evidence that these respondents engaged in first and subsequent intercourse primarily for financial reasons.

This discrepancy raises important methodological issues. It is possible that, because focus groups tend to elicit norms as participants consider abstract or hypothetical situations, young women were more ready to talk about financial reasons as motivating others. During such discussions, they were not asked to talk about their own experiences. During the survey, which focused on individual behavior, they may have preferred to cite “love” as the reason for their first sexual experience. They may have considered love a more socially acceptable response than economic gain, although the latter was actually their primary motivation.

The focus-group data reveal that peer pressure for boys came from two sources—first, from their male counterparts, but also from their girlfriends, who threatened to denounce them as impotent if they refused to have sex.

“For me it was my girlfriend and my friends who pushed me to do it. My girlfriend kept asking if I was a man, so I had to prove it to her.”—Educated urban male, Bamako

Many of these young men may have been perfectly happy with the timing of their first intercourse; they may have said...