

Exploring Reproductive Health Awareness and Practices among University Students: A Comprehensive Study



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Abstract:

This paper aims to explore and analyze the level of awareness among university students regarding reproductive health issues. Adolescence reproductive health awareness is important for individual well-being and preventing negative consequences related to sexual and reproductive issues. The present study focuses on the awareness among the youth about these reproductive health issues and also suggest few measure to cope up with them. This research is based on discussions and in depth interviews with girl students master's initial and graduation final year. This paper also tries to assess the role of educational programs and institutional initiatives in shaping reproductive health awareness among students. The findings aim to contribute valuable insights for developing targeted interventions and educational strategies to enhance reproductive health knowledge and promote positive behaviors among university students.

Key Words: Reproductive Health, STI, HIV and Reproductive Rights

Introduction

The journey from adolescence to adulthood brings a wide range of physical, emotional, and social changes. Students attending university face a distinct set of challenges in reproductive health and hygiene. In today's transitioning higher education system, universities play a crucial role in moulding students' academic competence as well as their general well-being.

Reproductive health is characterised by complete Physical, mental and social well- being in all aspects of the reproductive system. It includes having a satisfying and safe sexual life, being able to reproduce and having the freedom to make informed and autonomous decisions about one's reproductive health. Access to comprehensive and affordable healthcare services, family planning, safe and legal abortions, prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections and promotion of healthy sexual behaviours are all important aspects of reproductive health (WHO). It emphasises the importance of individual empowerment, human rights and gender equality. The awareness among adults about the reproductive health awareness is essential for promoting well-being and preventing negative consequences related to sexual and reproductive issues. Comprehensive knowledge enables adults to make informed decisions about their reproductive health, promoting responsible behaviour and lowering the risk of unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infection (STI) and unsafe abortions. The present study focusses on the awareness among the adult about these reproductive health issues and also suggest few measure to cope up these issues. This research is based on the discussions and in depth interviews

with female students of graduation final and master's first year.

Significance of Reproductive Health

Reproductive health is an important issues of 21st century, and needs special attention specifically when it comes to the youth of India. As India at present has the highest youth population among the world. Reproductive health is pivotal of an individual's life. It includes PCOD, PCOS, Sexual health, and any other issue related to the reproductive organs. It also includes the freedom to decide about one's sexual as well as reproductive health. This concept was formalised during the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) 1994, emphasising the integration of reproductive health into broader health and development agendas.

The significance of reproductive health lies in its profound impact on the overall well- being of individuals, communities and societies. Reproductive health includes access to family planning services, empowering individuals to make choices about the timing and spacing of pregnancies. This not only contributes to maternal and child health but also has socio-economic implications, as well-timed and spaced births often result in healthier families and communities. It also ensures safe motherhood which is a crucial aspect of reproductive health. Reproductive health initiatives encompass education and preventive measures against sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS. Promoting safe sexual practices, raising awareness, and ensuring access to healthcare services are essential components in preventing the spread of these infections. Reproductive health is closely tied to gender equality and the fulfillment of

reproductive rights. It emphasizes the importance of respecting individuals' autonomy to make decisions about their bodies, including the right to choose or refuse contraception, seek safe abortion, and participate in family planning decisions. Empowering individuals, particularly women, to exercise their reproductive rights is fundamental for achieving social justice and equity. Reproductive health also encompasses mental health aspects. Issues such as infertility, pregnancy-related mental health conditions, and the psychological aspects of reproductive choices are integral considerations. Reproductive health is a comprehensive concept that goes beyond the absence of disease or disorders related to the reproductive system. It encompasses a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, involving the ability to lead a satisfying and responsible sexual life, and the freedom to make informed decisions about one's sexual and reproductive health. This concept was formalized during the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994, emphasizing the integration of reproductive health into broader health and development agendas.

Reproductive Health Issues

Reproductive health is a critical component of overall well-being, encompassing a range of issues that adults may face throughout their lives. These concerns extend beyond mere biological factors to include psychological, social, and economic dimensions. Here, we explore some of the diverse reproductive health issues that adults grapple with, touching upon both men and women.

Sexually transmitted Infection (STI)

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) continue to be a significant public health concern among adults globally. STIs affect millions of adults worldwide, with a particularly high prevalence among sexually active individuals. The risk factors for contracting STIs include unprotected sexual intercourse, multiple sexual partners, lack of awareness about preventive measures and limited access to healthcare services. Commonly known STIs are Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), gonorrhea, syphilis, chlamydia and herpes. STIs can have profound effects on reproductive health, causing infertility, ectopic pregnancies and complications during childbirth. In women, untreated infections like chlamydia and gonorrhea may lead to pelvic inflammatory disease, posing serious reproductive health risks. Beyond physical health, STIs carry social and psychological implications. The social consequences may exacerbate the spread of infection as individuals hesitate to disclose their status or seek preventive care due to fear of judgement.

Unplanned Pregnancy

unplanned pregnancies among university students represent a complex issue that can significantly impact the lives of those involved. According to the study conducted by the Guttmacher Institute, approximately fifty one percent of all pregnancies in the United States are unintended, with higher rates observed among women aged 18-24, a demographic that largely overlaps with university students. The study revealed that a substantial number of students lacked access to comprehensive sex education and contraceptive resources. The financial constraints and the high cost of contraceptives were identified as barriers to consistent and effective contraceptive use among university students. Unplanned pregnancies can have profound consequences on a student's academic and personal life. Research indicates that students facing unexpected pregnancies are more likely to drop out of college, with implications for their long-term career prospects and financial stability. The emotional and psychological toll of an unplanned pregnancy can also impact mental health and overall well-being.

Infertility

One of the primary reproductive health challenges for women is infertility. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), infertility affects about 10-15% of couples globally. Various factors contribute to infertility, including age, hormonal imbalances, structural issues, and lifestyle factors. Advanced maternal age, in particular, is associated with a decline in fertility, making it challenging for some women to conceive naturally. Access to fertility treatments, such as in vitro fertilization (IVF), remains a concern due to its cost and availability, adding another layer of complexity to this reproductive health issue.

Maternal Health

Maternal health remains a significant focus in reproductive health discussions. While maternal mortality rates have declined globally, disparities persist. Access to quality prenatal care, skilled birth attendants, and postnatal support are crucial factors in ensuring the well-being of both mothers as well as infants. Inadequate healthcare infrastructure, especially in developing countries, can hinder women's access to essential maternal health services.

Menstrual Health

Menstrual health is another important aspect of reproductive well-being for women. Menstrual disorders, such as polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) and endometriosis, can impact fertility and overall quality of life. Addressing menstrual health

involves not only medical interventions but also breaking societal taboos and ensuring access to menstrual hygiene products.

Mental Health

In recent years, mental health has gained recognition as a significant component of reproductive well-being. Issues such as postpartum depression, anxiety related to infertility, and the emotional toll of pregnancy loss can have profound effects on individuals and couples. Integrating mental health support into reproductive healthcare services is crucial for addressing these aspects of well-being.

Lloyd and Mensch (2006) found that education provides individuals, particularly women, with the knowledge and skills needed to make informed decisions about their reproductive health. Education is associated with a later marriage, a higher age at first childbirth and a better understanding of sexual and reproductive rights. Blanc (2001) emphasise the importance of education in reducing maternal morality by increasing access to healthcare services and encouraging safer childbirth practices. Smith (2019) in his study found that a significant number of university students lack essential knowledge about contraception methods, sexually transmitted infections and menstrual hygiene. They included more than one thousand students from various academic backgrounds. The finding revealed that a concerning number of students were unfamiliar with proper menstrual hygiene practices and a sizable proportion were unaware of available contraceptive options. This further emphasised on the need for sex or reproductive health education among students.

Challenges faced by University Students

Johnson and Brown (2020) conducted a study, "Assessing Reproductive Health Literacy in University Settings" which echoed these concerns. The researcher used qualitative methods such as interviews and focused group discussions. It was discovered that cultural taboos, inadequate sex education in schools and a lack of reliable information were major barriers to reproductive health literacy among university students. Smith, Johnson and Williams (2018) conducted a study that examined how cultural norms influence students perception and behaviour regarding reproductive health. Their findings emphasised the importance of tailoring educational programme to reflect cultural values in order to raise awareness and promote positive reproductive health practices.

In the present study, initially the girls were a bit hesitant for talking about reproductive health issues but after two or three discussions, they became little comfortable as well as vocal. In the initial discussions it came into light that for most of the

girls, reproductive health comprised only to reproduction and issues a woman face while giving birth to a child. Only a handful of students knew about major hormonal imbalances lead to PCOD or PCOS that too because they are facing it or someone in close relation faced it. While the girls enrolled in Masters program were quite vocal of sexual health when told that it is also part of the reproductive health. It was surprising that girls were not aware of their anatomy, while the chapter related to reproduction is part of the curriculum in the ninth and tenth standard itself. Then another fact which came up was, the chapter of reproduction was asked to read on their own when they were in school. After having all these facts, it became essential to interview them individually.

Reeta a graduation final year student who was in relation from past two years narrated while once on a date she got intimate with her partner and as they were not carrying protection, she remained in stress till she had her next cycle which got delayed by a week because she had pills to avoid unwanted pregnancy. On asking is she aware of the side effects of those pills, she said they only help us to get rid of these unwanted pregnancies. Are they harmful to us? This question of her reminded of Holly Grigg-Spall's "Sweetening of Pills" which focused how these pills brings an immediate solution of the current problem but in the long run it is harmful for the body, which the author herself faced in later ages. Reeta reminded me of a case where one such young girl faced similar situation but instead of this fear of unwanted pregnancy she faced severe STI and died because of it at a very young age.

It was not only Reeta but many girls I interviewed faced such situation in their life and used the same method to resolve their issue at that moment without knowing its consequences. Another girl Lucy in her masters narrated how she is suffering from PCOD and always being asked to keep mum by family and relatives whenever it comes to her marriage proposals and people misconception to consider it as infertility. Infertility is a stigma in Indian society, therefore she has been asked to keep quiet on it and never disclose this issue to her husband even post marriage and pretend that she is facing this issue post marriage only. Lucy raised few questions, how many Lucies were there in our society who were asked to keep mum and live in silence, why do we need to maintain silence on issues related to health? Why talking about menstruation and reproductive health is still a stigma?

Nguyen and Williams (2020) investigated the impact of cultural norms on sexual health communication among university students. Their findings revealed that culturally sensitive education promoted open dialogue and increased awareness,

thereby breaking down cultural barriers that frequently impede reproductive health discussion. Rani was 23 when I interviewed and a divorcee. She narrated how her ex-husband used to abuse her and force her for unnatural sex despite saying no many times. She was beaten, forced and raped many times in her one year marriage. She kept quite for the initial six months as her mother taught her that she has to follow what ever her husband asks her to do. After six months when she narrated everything to her mother she again asked to keep quite and said she will ask her husband to be polite. Another quarter passed and she was tortured more brutally. It was the day when her parents visited her and saw her unable to walk, when they understood the seriousness of the issue and took her back home. Now it's been a year, and she overcome all that trauma but she too has questions about why always women are asked to remain in silence. Why don't we teach reproductive health and rights to men too? Why women can't be treated as humans?

Another discussion with these young girls raised the issue of personal hygiene, UTI and how to save themselves from such infections. Even these young girls feel that the reproduction, reproductive health issues as well as reproductive rights are few topics which should be taught to them at this age in order to create gender sensitization irrespective of gender. A study by Asekun- Olarinmoye, Adebimpe and Bamidele (2011) investigated reproductive health knowledge among University students in Nigeria, revealing significantly gender differences. The research found that male students had lower awareness levels regarding contraception and sexually transmitted infections compared to their female counterparts. This highlights the need for targeted educational interventions to address gender specific gaps in reproductive health awareness. Similarly Kabagenyi et al. (2014) in Uganda explored the knowledge and attitudes towards family planning among university students. The findings indicated variations between male female students, with female demonstrating a higher level of awareness and positive attitudes towards family planning. Such differences underscore the importance of tailoring reproductive health education to address the specific needs and challenges faced by each gender.

Preventive Measures

Education

Education and preventive measures play pivotal roles in addressing the STI burden. Promoting safe sexual practices, emphasizing the use of barrier methods such as condoms, and encouraging regular screenings contribute to reducing transmission rates. Comprehensive sex education programs are

essential to increasing awareness, fostering responsible sexual behaviour, and breaking down societal taboos surrounding STIs.

Access to Healthcare

Improving access to healthcare services is critical in combating STIs. Timely diagnosis and treatment significantly reduce the spread of infections and mitigate health complications. Public health initiatives, including awareness campaigns, free or affordable testing, and treatment programs, can contribute to minimizing the impact of STIs on communities.

Discussion

One striking revelation was the limited understanding of reproductive health among female students, with many associating it solely with the process of childbirth. The lack of awareness about conditions like PCOD or PCOS, hormonal imbalances, and basic anatomy highlighted the inadequacies in sex education programs. Even the chapter on reproduction, taught during the ninth and tenth grades, was often left for students to read on their own, contributing to a significant knowledge gap.

Individual interviews revealed alarming instances where young women, like Reeta, resorted to emergency contraceptives without understanding their potential side effects. This echoes concerns raised by Holly Grigg-Spall in "Sweetening of Pills," emphasizing the need for comprehensive sexual education beyond immediate problem-solving to prevent long-term health risks.

The study brought to the forefront the silence and stigma surrounding reproductive health issues, as exemplified by Lucy's experience with PCOD. Her story unveiled the societal pressure to conceal such matters, particularly in the context of marriage proposals and the prevalent stigma associated with infertility. Lucy's questions resonated deeply, challenging the need for silence on health issues and questioning why discussing menstruation and reproductive health remains taboo. However, Rani's harrowing experience as a divorcee underscored the pervasive societal expectation for women to remain silent about abuse, even within the confines of marriage. Her story raised poignant questions about the need for reproductive health education for men and the broader issue of treating women as equals with rights.

The study also uncovered discussions among young girls about personal hygiene, UTIs, and the urgent need for education on reproductive rights to foster gender sensitization. The concluding discussion, therefore, advocates for a comprehensive and culturally sensitive approach to reproductive health education. It underscores the imperative of breaking the silence surrounding these

issues, fostering open dialogue, and challenging societal norms that perpetuate ignorance and stigmatization. Education, tailored to reflect cultural values, emerges as a crucial tool to empower individuals with knowledge, debunk myths, and dismantle barriers that hinder informed decision-making and the pursuit of reproductive health rights. Ultimately, the study underscores the urgency of transformative educational programs to foster a society where reproductive health is destigmatized, discussed openly, and treated as a fundamental aspect of human well-being.

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