



AWARENESS REGARDING SEXUAL HEALTH, RIGHTS AND LAWS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge has always influenced the health behaviour of individuals. In India awareness about sexual health, sexual rights and related laws are often ignored. This lack of knowledge increases the risk of sexual health and behavioural issues among young adults. This study investigates the knowledge about sexual health, rights and laws related to adolescent health in college students of age 18 - 21 years in Thrissur. A questionnaire was distributed among 200 college students excluding students from the healthcare sector and the responses were collected. The result depicted that the knowledge of young adults regarding sexual health and related laws were poor. In questions about rights and laws males students performed better than female students. On the other hand, female students were more aware about health aspects. The primary source of the participants' knowledge was social media and peers. It is evident that a proper education and communication about sexual health and laws is necessary to avoid high risk behaviors.

2. INTRODUCTION

Sexual health is as important as other aspect of health as it has an impact on the overall wellness of the individual. To attain complete sexual health it is necessary to have proper sex education, information regarding risk practices, sexual healthcare services and health promoting environment (WHO, 2021). In India the sexual and reproductive health curriculum primarily focuses on the topic reproductive health. It does not include sexual rights, gender identities, sexual orientation, adolescent pregnancies and other sexual health issues. Similar to health information, knowledge regarding laws is also significant so that individuals can understand and adopt healthy and acceptable behaviours of society.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. SEXUAL HEALTH AND RIGHTS

As per World Health Organisations sexual health is defined as “*a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.*” The

knowledge about sexual rights are important to attain proper sexual health. Basically sexual rights are adopted from human rights such as

- *“the rights to equality and non-discrimination*
- *the right to be free from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment*
- *the right to privacy*
- *the rights to the highest attainable standard of health (including sexual health) and social security*
- *the right to marry and to found a family and enter into marriage with the free and full consent of the intending spouses, and to equality in and at the dissolution of marriage*
- *the right to decide the number and spacing of one's children*
- *the rights to information, as well as education*
- *the rights to freedom of opinion and expression, and*
- *the right to an effective remedy for violations of fundamental rights” (WHO, 2021).*



Ignorance about sexual health education at young age can cause health risk behaviours like unsafe sexual practices. These behaviours make young adults susceptible to sexually transmitted disease, unplanned pregnancies and sexual abuse. Apart from education at schools and families, less number of adolescent health clinics also decrease the access to accurate information (Rajni Sharma, 2020). Due to the influence of the media, young people are often misguided and mostly girls are becoming victims of this misinformations (Deshmukh & Chaniana, 2020).

3.2. LAWS IN RELATION TO ADOLESCENT HEALTH IN INDIA

India has many marriage acts based on religious communities. As per Special marriage Act, 1954 (regardless of religion) a male should have completed 21 years and female should be 18 years. Marriages before legal age is punishable under The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006. Marriage should be with the mutual consent of both parties. Adultery, sexual violence and venereal diseases are considered as legal grounds for divorce. According to the National Family Health Survey - 5 (NFHS-5, 2019-21) the percentage of women (age 20 - 24 years) who were married before 18 years is 23.3%. Men (age 25 -29 years) married before 21 years were 17.7%. Adolescent fertility rate was 43%. In September 2018, the Supreme Court of India has declared same sex relations as legal by partially decriminalising Sec 377 IPC.

Sexual violence or Rape is a criminal offence in India irrespective of the culprit's profession and position in the society. The victims of sexual violence may suffer from health issues like Sexual dysfunction, STDs, unsafe abortion, genital mutilation, fear, shock, chronic anxiety and depression. As per Criminal Law Amendment Act 2013, in Sec 357C Cr.PC, it is mandatory for public and private health workers to provide treatment to rape victims. If services are denied, it is punishable under the Section 166B IPC. This is also applicable in the instances where the victim is from marginalized groups like children, persons with disability, LGBTQ persons, sex workers and minority communities (MoHFW, 2014).

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted among 200 college students of age 18 - 21 years in Thrissur in November 2021. A questionnaire was distributed among students. Students from medical colleges and other allied medical courses were not included in the survey. The questionnaire was adopted from Deshmukh & Chaniana, (2020). These questions were modified, and new questions were added for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire had 4 sections such as socio-demographic data, questions related to sexual health, questions regarding laws related to adolescents and sources of information. The questions were provided with options like correct and wrong and 1 point was allotted for each right answer.

	Sexual health and rights	Correct	Wrong
1	Sexology is the study of human sexual life.	1	2
2	HIV is a sexually transmitted disease.	1	2
3	Hepatitis B is a sexually transmitted disease.	1	2
4	STDs can spread through sex with same gender like in sex with opposite gender.	1	2
5	Contraceptives are only for birth control.	1	2
6	It is necessary to plan pregnancy	1	2
7	Adolescent pregnancy can affect the health of mother and infant	1	2
8	Spacing between pregnancy is unnecessary	1	2
9	Both partners in a relationship have the right to decide the number and spacing of children.	1	2
10	It is okay to force your partner to involve in sexual activities after marriage	1	2



	Laws related to Adolescent health	Correct	Wrong
1	It is legal to marry a 20 year old male in India.	1	2
2	Child marriage is legal if both parties agrees.	1	2
3	Same sex relations are illegal in India.	1	2
4	The victim of sexual violence have the right to get treated from whichever hospital they choose.	1	2
5	Rape victims with disability and LGBTQ persons have equal rights for medical care like other victims.	1	2

	Sources of information
1	From where did you get this information a. Schools b. Parents c. Friends d. Social media

5. RESULTS

From the data collected the majority of participants were male (55%) and the rest were female(45%) . Out of 200 participants only 29.26% have given the correct answer. Female participants have scored high in topic related to sexual health and rights (males - 12.05% & females - 17.25%) while males have more scores in questions related to laws (males - 17% & females - 12.2%) (Figure 2 & 3). It is

evident that the majority of the participants were aware that HIV is a sexually transmitted disease. However knowledge about Hepatitis B, spread of STD in homosexual relation, impacts of adolescent pregnancy, family planning and sexual rights were poor (Figure 1). The main source of information about sexual health and laws are social media (45.5%) followed by friends (28%), schools (16%) and parents (10.5%) (Figure 4).

	Socio-demographic data	
1	Age :	
	a) 18	63
	b) 19	51
	c) 20	40
	d) 21	46
2	Sex:	
	a) Male	110
	b) Female	90
	c) Transgender	0
	d) Non - binary	0
	e) Other	0

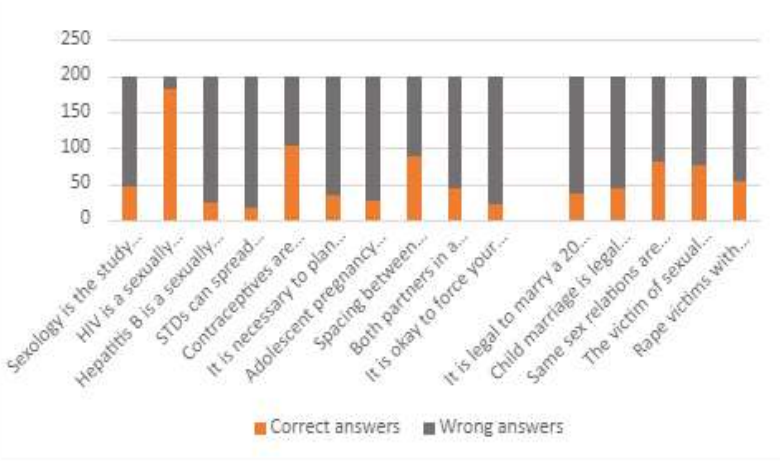


Figure 1

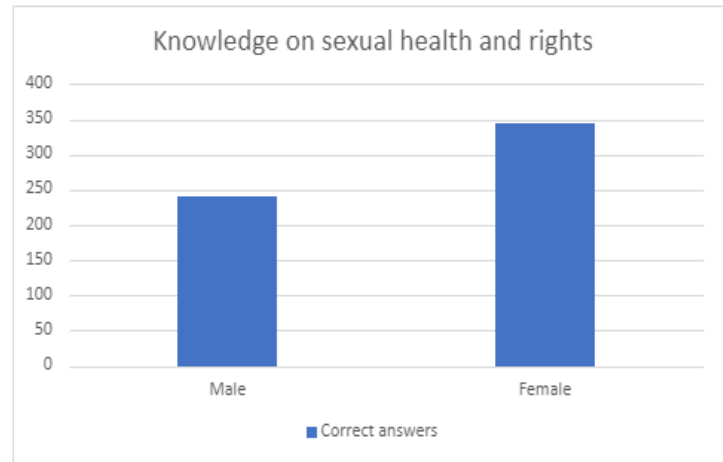


Figure 2

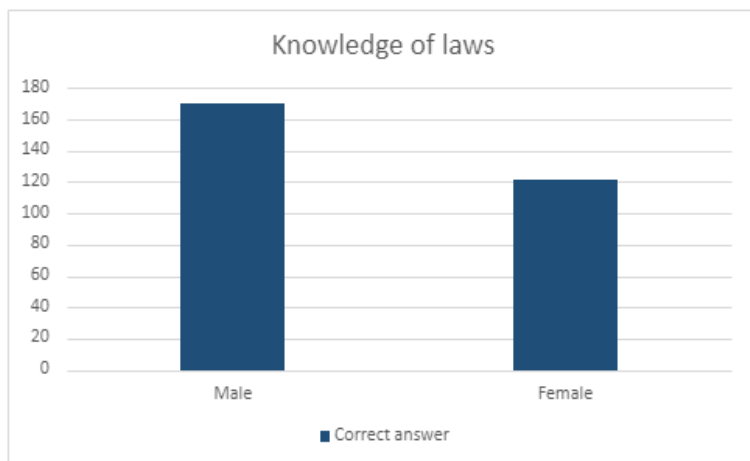


Figure 3

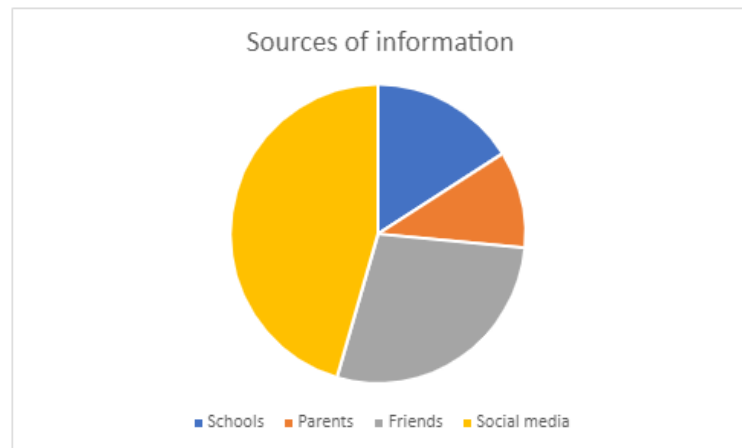


Figure 4

6. CONCLUSION

Based on the results obtained it is evident that young adults of age 18 - 21 years have poor knowledge about sexual health, rights and laws related to adolescent health. The female students have more knowledge about health aspects and males students are more aware about laws. Most of the students were educated about HIV and contraceptives. It is observed that a high number of students have misconceptions about the rights of partners in a relationship. Moreover participants is more informed about sexual violence laws than marriage laws. Schools and parents were the least source of information and social media and friends were the major source. However sometimes this information is unauthentic and inappropriate for age. This misinformation will also cause health risk

behaviours. Thus education should be provided from reliable sources like teachers or sex educators.

7. RECOMMENDATION

- The school curriculum should include topics related to sexual health and health related laws. This will help to provide age appropriate information to children and to prevent misleading information.
- Teachers should be given extra training to teach children regarding sexual health as this is a sensitive topic unlike other academic subjects. This will also help teachers to communicate with children without embarrassment.
- Parents should also be trained to actively communicate with children regarding sexual health and laws. This can be done through



schools by providing classes either by teachers or sex educators during the time of termly parents - teachers meeting.

- To improve sexual health care services government should allot sexologists in district hospitals and community health centres.

8. REFERENCES

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