



An empirical study of reproductive health awareness among adolescent girls of Patna City

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The present study was undertaken to investigate the awareness level in adolescent girls between the ages 11-19 years regarding reproductive health. Proper and effective health and sex education is the best method to improve reproductive health. Other factors such as economic development and high standard of living are also helpful to a woman in taking decisions regarding her own reproductive health, but it is hampered by the social taboos, gender-biased mentality of the society, low educational level and poverty. For the study, a sample of 100 adolescent girls was drawn randomly from four educational institutions. They were given questionnaire and the data collected were consolidated and tabulated. The result revealed that they had very low awareness level about reproductive health and related aspects.

Key words: Reproductive health, Reproductive rights, adolescent.

Introduction : Everyone has the right to enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health and this right includes the adolescent's right of reproductive health which is an important component of general health. According to WHO "Reproductive and sexual ill health accounts for 20% of the global burden of ill health for women and 14% for men." The links between gender-based forms of discrimination and poor reproductive health varied across the life cycle of women in general and the adolescents in particular. Adolescent between the age group of 10 to 19 years comprise an important section of the society and promoting their rights is crucial to their existence. Reproductive health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirm reproductive health or sexual health/hygiene, addresses the reproductive processes, functions and system at all stages of life (WHO).

The knowledge of reproductive health is particularly important for married and unmarried adolescents who get known to be sexually active. Reproductive health concerns and sexual issues facing the adolescents are still not given adequate attention and appropriate intervention in patriarchal societies.

The reproductive health is a function of various components such as puberty, menarche, early marriage, early child bearing, teenage pregnancy,

contraception and family planning practices, unsafe abortion, sexually transmitted disease etc. Because of the lower socio-economic status and least access to quality and confidential reproductive health services and information, including contraception, adolescents are at greater risk. Lack of safe, legal abortion services jeopardizes adolescent health and undermines their rights to make decisions concerning child bearing. Poor socio-economic status, illiteracy or ignorance, knowledge of biological aspects of the body, health aspects of reproductive system, hygienic treatment of menstruation, sexual habits, early child bearing, sexually transmitted diseases, no knowledge about the use of condoms, prevention of HIV/AIDS, family planning – all these make the adolescents most vulnerable. Early marriage, lack of access to reproductive health services and unsafe sex became more important as determinants of poor health services. Gross neglect of reproductive health is also attributed to illiteracy and social taboos like shying out to even talk about sex and related problems.

Adolescence is a phase that leads to sexual maturity or fertility or the ability to reproduce. Puberty begins with a sharp increase in production of sex hormone. The biological changes of puberty, which signal the end of childhood, result in rapid growth in height and weight, changes in body proportions and joints, and attainment of sexual maturity. These dramatic physical changes are

part of a long, complex process of maturation. Menarche is the second important component of reproductive health. The girl's first period is called menarche. It is the principal sign of sexual maturity in girls. Menstruation, from the Latin word *Menis*, meaning "Month" has been given many names: period, curse monthly sickness and many more. In this period blood and tissues from the inner lining of the uterus combine to form the menstrual flow which in most girls lasts from three to five days.

The third component influencing reproductive health is child marriage. In India, about 37% of girls get married before attaining the legal age of marriage. This destroys the physical and mental growth of the girls. Child marriage is a better reality in India. The knowledge of reproductive health is particularly important for unmarried adolescents who get known to be sexually active. The NFHS-2 showed that one-third of married adolescents (ages 15-19) had given birth to their first child and another one-tenth to their second child. Early pregnancy or teenage pregnancy is associated with high neonatal mortality and child mortality. It is also a causative factor for poor reproductive health. Teenage pregnancy, almost all of which takes place within marriage, is the major cause of poor reproductive health. High fertility rates, high rates of adolescent pregnancy, high risk of STDs/AIDS and poor nutritional status are the main health problems among teenagers. The age specific fertility rate (ASFR) among 15-19 years old girls is as high as 0.017. Married adolescents have the risk of early child bearing. Contraception and family planning practices are the need of the hour. According to International Human Rights Covenants, it has been accepted that people have the right to freely and responsibly decide the number, spacing and timing of one's children. The issue of contraception lies at its core. It is unfortunate that adolescents who are susceptible to high-risk pregnancies are the ones who have limited opportunity to use contraception. The WHO reported that out of the estimated 5.3 million induced abortions in India (1989) 4.7 million are unsafe. Though abortion has been made a legal provision in India since 1971, a large number of young Indian women are unaware of this. Lack of safe and legal abortion services jeopardizes adolescent health and undermines the right to make decisions concerning child bearing.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases also influence reproductive health. The term venereal diseases have been recast under the euphemism "sexually transmitted

disease". Major conditions that are sexually transmitted are venereal syphilis, HIV/AIDS, gonorrhoea, non specific arthritis, chancroids or soft sore etc. The highest rate of modifiable STDs are usually observed in the age group of 20-24 years, followed by the 15-19 years of age groups. Where STDs are a major health problem, the incidence tends to be higher in women aged 15-19 than in men of the same age group. Among sexually active young people, STDs are most frequent in the youngest.

Despite the fact that adolescents represent almost one quarter of the Indian population, their reproductive health needs are poorly understood and ill served. Reproductive health education is required for adolescents to provide them positive direction, and right information which would avoid unnecessary consequences (Bhan el al, 2004). Lack of attention in almost every dimension of reproductive health including sexuality, reproductive morbidity is still present. In the light of the cultural and economic constraints, the information regarding reproductive health should be made available. Appropriate knowledge and correct attitude during adolescence may help in promoting healthy and safe sexual life and reduce the risk of STD and AIDS whereas insufficient and wrong information on adolescent's behavior, knowledge, views, needs and problems most of the countries in the region poses serious problems for any program or activity to be implemented in the field of adolescent reproductive health.

The state of Bihar is stricken by poverty, illiteracy, gender bias against the girls, and unfriendly patriarchal norms. The reproductive health situation in India and particularly in Bihar has been very poor and far away from the international standard. It is evident from the fact that the body mass index (BMI) of women in Bihar is 19.4. Chronic energy deficiency is usually indicated by a BMI of less than 18.5. About 39% of women have BMI below 18.5 and 63% of mothers did not receive any prenatal check-up from their births during the three years. The poor nutritional and health status of women and wide ranging gender disparities in feeding practices and access to health care from an early age are salient features in Bihar (NFHS-2, Bihar). Lack of awareness is the major factor of the poor reproductive health of women.

The present empirical study will serve both exploratory as well as confirmatory purposes. Various studies have been conducted in abroad but very little

has been done in India with regard to reproductive health and awareness among adolescent girls. So, it is the need of the time that adolescent girls should be made aware of this fact. The discussion on reproductive health has been recent in origin in the light of ICDS program and very recently on the issue of sexually transmitted disease. High-quality adolescent friendly services should be provided through which adolescent girls can get the information about the general and reproductive health. The people, who are providing these services, should be skilled and should have proper knowledge of the health problems so that they can give curative and preventive advice to them. Then only the new generation and our country will be healthy, happy and prosperous. And for this a holistic approach to women's health in general and adolescent girls in particular which includes both nutrition and health services, should be given to the women and the girl at all stages of life. Measures should be adopted that take into account the reproductive rights of women to enable them to exercise informed choices in order to reduce their vulnerability to sexual and health problems. The social, developmental and health consequences of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases should be tackled from a gender perspective.

Significance of the study :

- Proper and correct information about reproductive and sexual health will help adolescent girls to lead happy and healthy life.
- Adolescent girls constitute an important section of the society and promoting their rights is crucial to their existence. So, they need accessible and affordable reproductive health services.
- Awareness is the need of the time when the adolescent girls should be made aware of this fact.

Objectives :

- To find out reasons behind lack of knowledge of reproductive health among students.
- To find out the determinants of reproductive health.
- To find out the awareness level of reproductive health and sexually transmitted diseases.

Hypotheses :

- Proper and effective health and sex education can improve the reproductive health of adolescents.
- Social taboos, gender biased mentality of the

people, lack of education, poverty are the factors responsible for poor reproductive health of women.

- Economic development and rising standard of living will help women to take decisions about reproductive health and to avail the reproductive rights.

Methodology :

- a) **Sample size :** 100 samples of the respondent in the age group of 13-19 years were taken.
- b) **Sampling method :** A purposive random sampling technique was adopted for the study.
- c) **Research tool :** An Interview schedule was prepared for data collection.
- d) **Statistical technique :** The data collected were tabulated and analysed with the frequency distribution method and further expressed in percentage.
- e) **Area of study :** R.D.Pandey School (non-govt.), Govt. Girls High School, and J.D.Women's College, Patna.

Results and Discussion :

The obtained results were discussed under the following headings:

1. Awareness of health and hygiene.
2. Decision regarding reproductive matters.
3. Awareness about reproductive rights.
4. Awareness about Government policies.
5. Sex education compulsory or not.

These findings are presented through graphical representation as:-

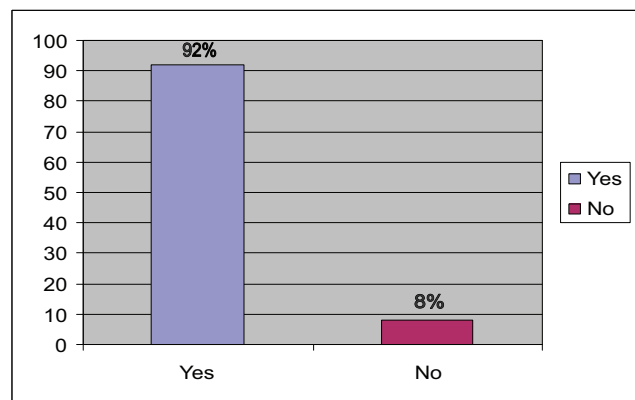


Fig-1: Awareness of health & hygiene. (N=100)

It is very essential for adolescents to maintain their health and hygiene during menstruation. It is not only for a better health but also prevents various infectious diseases. Results show that 92% respondents said that they are aware of it but rest of 8% respondents were not aware of it.

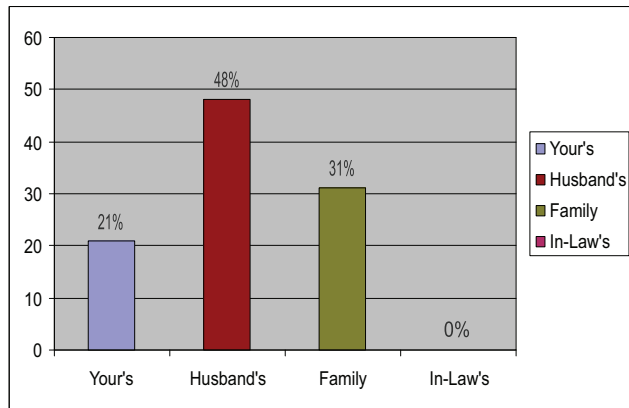


Fig-2: Decision about reproductive matters (N=100)

The above graph shows the opinion of selected adolescent girls in case of taking decision about reproductive matters. It shows that 21% of respondents take their decision freely according to their own will because they are economically independent but 48% respondents agree with their husband's decision in the matter of pregnancy and abortion while 31% of respondents obey the decision of their family members as they live in joint families.

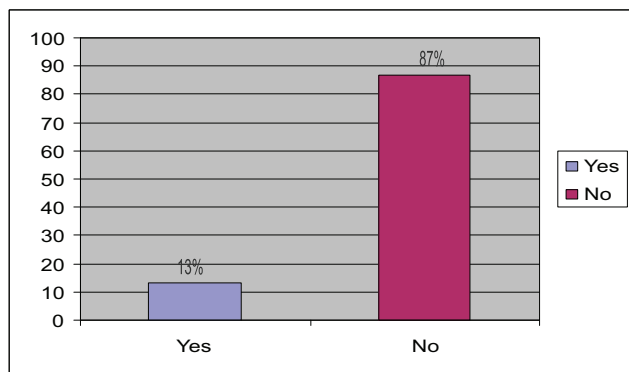


Fig-3: Awareness about reproductive rights (N=100)

When asked about the reproductive rights of the adolescent girls, 87% respondents told that they don't know about the rights. Rests of 13% of adolescent girls have heard about these rights but they also had no sufficient information about it.

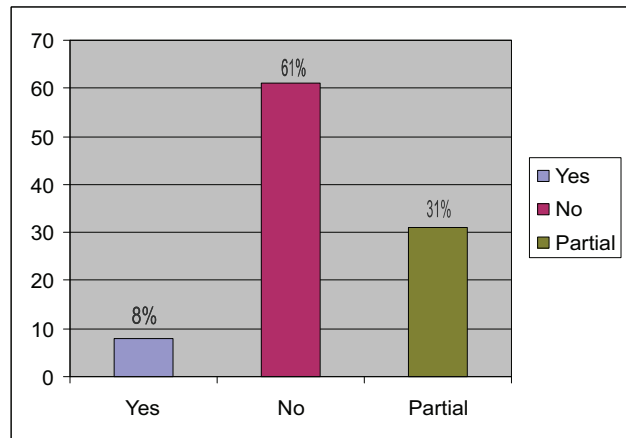


Fig-4: Awareness about Government Policies (N=100)

When asked about government's efforts and policies, 8% respondents answered yes, 31% had partial knowledge but 61% answered negatively because they did not have proper information about this.

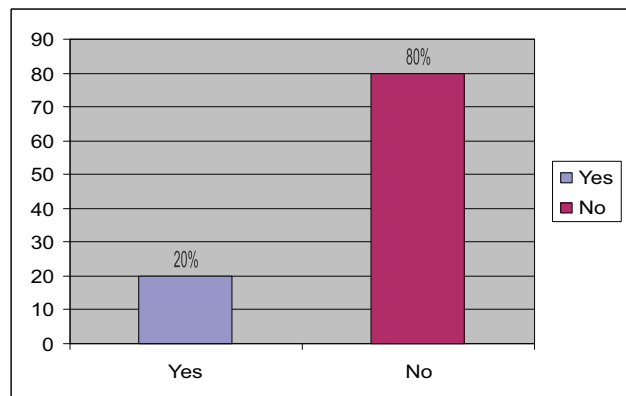


Fig-5: Sex education compulsory or not (N=100)

The above graph shows the opinion of selected adolescent girls about sex education. It is clear that 20% respondents think that sex education should be made necessary but rest of the 80% think that it should not be compulsory because for them sex education means only the knowledge about physical relationship.

Conclusion and Recommendation :

The present research shows that the adolescent girls are unaware about their reproductive health, reproductive rights and they have incomplete knowledge about the reproductive organs. In communities many adolescent girls are underweight.

The scenario of reproductive health is not good and this scenario calls for immediate response from the society as well as the government. It is of great concern

because adolescents are in formative stage of their lives and have a long way to go in terms of physical and mental responsibility. So, adolescent girls need access to correct information and services related to nutrition, reproductive health matters and general health.

Hence, it is clear that adolescents are not aware of their reproductive health. So, it is very essential to make aware. To improve the awareness level regarding all them aspects of reproductive health as reproductive rights, health rights and technologies, an intervention programme from government should be essential. Government should help to run community based programs for adolescents girls to help them in establishing healthy habits.

School can play a key role in making the adolescent girls aware of sex related matters. Programs should be based on facts of reproductive health. Adolescent girls are future mothers. It will help to ensure that adolescent girls get proper and correct knowledge and information so that they can delay their pregnancy, protect themselves from STDs and another reproductive diseases. This will also help to eradicate gender bias in the society and help girls to become happy and healthy women.

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