

Sources of Adolescents' Information about Sexual and Reproductive Health: Gender Similarities and Differences

Farzaneh Soltani¹, Mahtab Sattari^{2*}, Parisa Parsa³, Maryam Farhadian⁴

¹ Assistant Professor, Research Center for Mother and Child Care, Hamadan University of Medical Sciences, Hamadan, Iran.

² Master of Science in Midwifery, Student Research Center, Hamadan University of Medical Sciences, Hamadan, Iran.

³ Associate Professor, Research Center for Chronic Diseases Home care, Hamadan University of Medical Sciences, Hamadan, Iran.

⁴ Assistant Professor, Department of Biostatistics, School of Public Health, Hamadan University of Medical Sciences, Hamadan, Iran.

Abstract:

A design and implementation effective intervention in order to prevent risky sexual behaviors in the adolescents requires identifying the sources of gathering information in this age group. On the other hand gender-sensitive preventative strategies can be more successful. The present study has compared the sources of sexual and reproductive information between Iranian teen girls and boys. In a cross-sectional population-based study, 770 Iranian adolescents (51.7% boys and 49.7% girls) aged 18-20 years old, filled out the adopted form of "illustrative questionnaire for interview-surveys with young people. The most common source of sexual and reproductive information was friends in both male and female adolescents (47.7%). After friends, the most common source of information for girls was their mothers; while movies and the internet were the top sources in boys. Over 50% of the adolescents and 28.6% of them had talked to their mothers and fathers about sexual and reproductive subjects respectively. 41.3% of the adolescents reported talking with their older brother or sisters about sex and reproduction. The current study showed that both male and female adolescents seek information about sex and reproduction from their friends which were far apart from other sources. On the other hand lack of good relationships between parents and adolescents is of great importance. Improvement the quality of parent-child interactions, proper monitoring of adolescents in the environment outside home and their peers, as well as paying attention to gender differences can be effective strategies in order to maintenance and promotion sexual and reproductive health of the adolescents.

Key Words: Adolescents' Information, Sexual, Reproductive, Gender Similarities.

INTRODUCTION

Over 85% of the world's 15-24 year old populations live in the developing countries [1]. In Iran, the 15-29 year old age range consists of 31.5% of the country's population (23.7 million people) [2]. Sexual and reproductive health is among the major elements in adolescents' growth, the topic of which was raised as "sexual and reproductive health rights" in the International Conference on Population and Development [3, 4]. After ICPD, despite Iran's agreement with reproductive and even sexual educational programs within the confines deemed appropriate by religion; since the focus of this type of education was narrowed down to only couples who are about to marry, a youth-friendly center which would provide useful and accurate information to this future-building age group has been practically non-existent [5]. This is while access to reliable and abundant information regarding sexual and reproductive health is one of the fundamental rights of the younger generation; and plays an important role in the formation of sexual concepts, tendency, behavior and roles [6]. Furthermore, the speed of information and social exchange in today's world as well as rapid changes in society, together with social and economic expansion alongside the advances that come along with the digital age, which all lead to changes in the perceptions the

society, have placed youth reproductive and sexual health among the prime health concerns at a global level [7, 8]. In Iran, two thirds of the country's populations, which are adolescents and young people, are exposed to the negative influences of changes in beliefs, points of view and sexual behavior caused by vast exposure to cultures and access to large amounts of information. All this is while comprehensive and reliable information on the aforementioned topic is still scarce [9, 10]. In Iran a limited number of studies performed in this field have shown that people's knowledge about sexual health is poor and incorrect and this lack of knowledge can increase the risk of hazardous sexual behavior, STDs as well as HIV [11, 12]. It has been reported that the prevalence of STDs is on the rise because of commencement of sexual activity before marriage [11]. A study by Garmaroodi showed the prevalence of sexual relationships in high school students to be 20%, which is in the same range as countries with similar cultural settings [13]. Nevertheless, a study on 1385 Iranian youngsters showed that their knowledge regarding sexual and reproductive health is limited or that they have false perceptions regarding unsafe sexual behavior and its associated dangers [14]. It seems that the greatest issue pertaining to adolescents sexual health, in particular in the pre-marriage group, is unawareness of healthy sexual

behavior and lack of reliable and correct information [15, 16]. The importance of having access to accurate, comprehensive resources which are in accordance with the cultural aims, alongside the consequences of access to incorrect and unreliable sources as well as the presence of taboos and cultural obstacles in this age group necessitates performing research in this field. In fact, in order to design and execute effective interventions in order to prevent dangerous sexual behaviors in the young, identifying the sources of gathering information in this group is one of the most important and fundamental matters. On the other hand, sources of sexual and reproductive information vary among different countries and societies. A part of this difference is related to cultural, social and religious disparities among nations while another part is due to the gender differences. In countries with a large young population and limited resources such as Iran, the second part plays a more important role. Whereas the information sources are dissimilar in opposite genders, then prevention programs aiming to maintain adolescents' sexual and reproductive health will be ineffective. Furthermore, design and implementation of gender-sensitive preventative strategies can be more successful. Thus, the present study has compared the sources of sexual and reproductive information between Iranian teen girls and boys. It is important to mention that because of the barriers and limitations in high schools, this study was performed on the first semester university students studying at universities of Hamadan. The age range of participants was 18-20 years, which is within the late adolescence range.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This descriptive, cross-sectional study has been performed on 770 subjects aged between 18-20 years, in the early days of commencing university in the universities of the city of Hamadan. The sampling method was two-staged clustering. At first, each of the faculties of Boo-Ali-Sina University (literature and human sciences, economics and social sciences, engineering, agriculture and basic sciences) as well as the industrial and medical universities were considered as one cluster. Afterwards the number of required samples for each was determined based on the size of the group. Since universities had different majors, the majors who were generally similar as well as the faculties, were considered as second stage clusters. From each of

these clusters a class was randomly selected. Criteria for entry into the study were being single, and belonging to the age group of 18-20. After acquiring informed consent and reassurance about the privacy and anonymity of questionnaires, they were completed by the students. Data collection instrument was "illustrative questionnaire for interview-surveys with young people" conceived by John Cleland for the World Health Organization [17], that was modified by research team based on Iranian culture and research objectives. The questionnaire's validity was assessed using different experts' opinions, and its reliability was calculated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient (0.89).

FINDINGS

Among the participants, 51.7% were boys and 49.7% girls. The average ages of participants were 18.87 ± 0.76 and the average numbers of family members were 4.73 ± 1.38 (Table 1). The most common sources which adolescents gain sexual and reproductive information based on gender (Figure 1). The most common source of sexual and reproductive information as well as boy and girl relationships issues were friends in both male and female adolescents (47.7%). After friends, the most common source of information for girls was their mother (20.9%); while movies and the internet were the top sources on this subject in boys (19.7%). Friends were the most common way of learning about boy and girl relationships in both genders (29.1%). The distribution of the subjects based on their interaction with family members regarding sexual and reproductive subjects (Table 2). According to the results, 28.6% of adolescents had talked to their fathers about sexual and reproductive subjects. Among these, 62.7% had rarely talked about this subject with their father. On the other hand, more than 70% of the study group had not spoken to their father about these subjects at all. Over 50% of the subjects had spoken to their mother about sexual and reproductive themes; from which 39% had done this rarely. This is while 49.7% of the studied population had never talked to their mother about this subject. 41.3% of the adolescents reported talking with their older brother or sisters about sex and reproduction; among which 49.6% had done this only occasionally. 58.7% of adolescents had never discussed this topic with their older brothers or sisters.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants

Characteristics		Boys	Girls	Total
Living area	Rural	346(89.2)	340(92.4)	686(90.7)
	Urban	42(10.8)	28(7.6)	70(9.3)
University Type	Medical Sciences	90(22.7)	111(30.1)	201(26.1)
	Non-Medical Science	307(77.3)	258(69.9)	569(73.9)
Educational Level	Masters	354(88.9)	330(89.9)	684(89.6)
	General Practitioner	43(10.8)	37(10.1)	80(10.4)
Students Forum Membership	Yes	93(24.9)	81(23.2)	175(24.1)
	No	280(75.1)	268(76.8)	550(75.9)

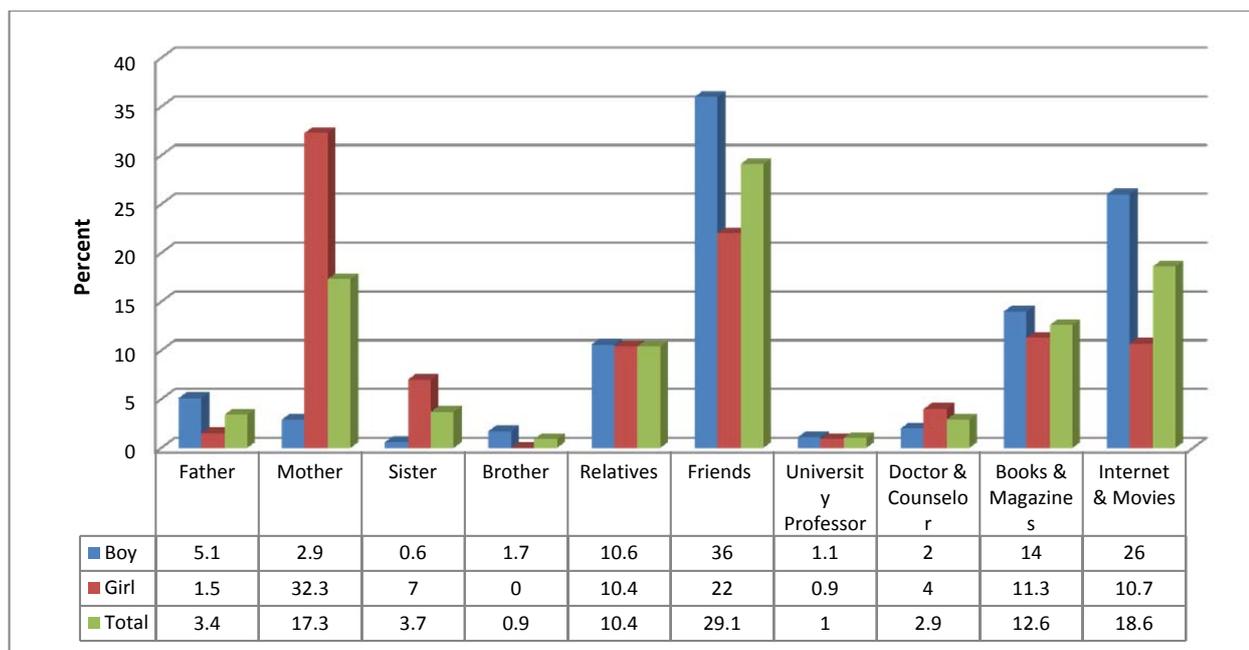


Figure 1. Adolescent’s information resources about sexual and reproductive issues by gender

Table 2. Distribution of participants based on interaction with family members about sexual and reproductive issues

Question	Answer	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Have you ever talked about sexual and reproductive issues with your father?	Yes	144	36.8	75	20.9	220	28.6
	Often	13	9.0	7	9.3	20	9.1
	Sometimes	47	32.6	14	18.7	62	28.2
	Rarely	84	58.3	54	72.0	138	62.7
	No	247	63.2	283	79.1	532	70.7
Have you ever talked about sexual and reproductive issues with your mother?	Yes	124	32.3	251	69.3	377	50.3
	Often	14	11.3	53	21.1	67	17.8
	Sometimes	46	37.1	115	45.8	163	43.2
	Rarely	64	51.6	83	33.1	147	39.0
	No	260	67.7	111	30.7	372	49.7
Have you ever talked about sexual and reproductive issues with your older siblings?	Yes	135	39.1	134	43.9	270	41.3
	Often	35	25.9	34	25.4	69	25.6
	Sometimes	61	45.2	72	53.7	134	49.6
	Rarely	39	28.9	28	20.9	67	24.8
	No	120	60.9	171	56.1	383	58.7

DISCUSSION

The sources from which adolescents obtain information regarding sex and reproduction are key to their sexual choices and in case of deprivation from appropriate sources, chances of hazardous sexual behaviors such as early unprotected intercourse increase, which may lead to a raise in the prevalence of unwanted pregnancy, abortions, drug abuse, depression and suicide in this population [18, 19]. Therefore easy and sufficient access to reliable sources of information plays an important role in the formation and expansion of sexual concepts, orientation, and behaviors of this age group in the future. The current study showed that both male and female adolescents seek information about sex and reproduction as well as opposite gender relationships from their friends which were far apart from other sources. For many years, numerous studies have

focused on the role of peers and friends in the development of social or antisocial behaviors in adolescents [20, 21]. When the social relationship of the youth expands to outside home, peers are somehow considered part of their family. During these developmental periods, the parent-child communication is reduced, meaning that the child spends less time with their parents and the amount of partnership and being together with family is reduced [22]. It is even said that the power and influence of the peers overtakes that of the parents in this stage of the teenager’s life [23]. In the study of Mohammadi et al adolescent boys considered their friends to be the primary means of gaining information. They also preferred to talk to their friends about sexual issues and relationships with the opposite sex [24]. The results of the study by Mazloomi et al on university students also showed that their main resources

for sexual health were primarily friends, and books were the second resource [25]. In the current study, after friends, mothers were the second source for girls and movies and internet for the boys. Researchers in Iran and other countries have shown that girls consider their mothers as the preferred source of information about sexual issues [26, 28]. In a qualitative study by Mousavi et al, mothers were the primary source for knowledge regarding puberty; meanwhile friends were preferred for sexual subjects. The girls admitted, though, that their friends' information was not always accurate and that they would have liked to acquire this knowledge from their mothers rather than friends. This preference has also been noted in studies from other countries [27]. The role of family as the most important unit of the society on the formation of health and sexual behaviors of adolescents is known to everyone. Establishment of communication between parents and children, especially spending time with them can protect teenagers from the consequences of poor sexual health such as early sexual activity and unwanted pregnancy. Providing the possibility of parent-child interaction guarantees their healthy growth and development [29, 30]. Despite this fact, the studies show the lack of good relationships between parents and children in this regard. For example, in a study by Kennedy et al, the main source of youths' sexual and reproductive health has been friends, and parents had rarely been consulted for this information; although some teenagers, particularly girls, preferred to acquire this knowledge from their parents [10]. The current study confirmed the valuable role of mothers in conveying sexual and reproductive knowledge to their girls. Other researchers also believe that this is because girls are probably more sensitive family matters or probably since they spend more time at home than boys, they are prone to more communication with parents, in particular mothers [31]. In the current study more than two-thirds of the boys had never spoken to their fathers about sexual and reproductive issues and close to 60% of the boys who had communication with their fathers mentioned that this was a rare occasion. The interesting point is that the interaction of boys with their fathers regarding sex and reproduction issues was very close to their interactions with their mothers. Although establishment of inappropriate communication between parents and children depends on gender standards and social status [32], and parents usually establish a better relationship with the child of their own gender; but mothers are mostly the ones first consulted by both boys and girls [33, 34]. Studies performed in different countries also reflect limitations in boys communicating with their fathers [34]. One must admit, though, that the parents' level of knowledge about sex and reproduction health as well as their correct attitude plays an important role in communicating with adolescents. In Ethiopia, high school teenagers primarily prefer to gain their knowledge from school, then radio, television and publications; while parents are the next preference [35]. In contrast, because of disappearance of the taboos and past constraints, Chilean teens consider the information acquired from parents, teachers, and health professionals as the most reliable sources [36]. In our study, while the internet was among the

main sources of teenager information, boys reported more use of internet and movies compared to girls, which can be because of boys having more access and freedom in Iran. It seems that cultural and religious influences and sense of shyness and not being comfortable with the parents is what encourages teenagers to more use of the internet, media, magazines, and friends as sources of information [37]. Easy and appropriate access to reliable and suitable resources and using the accurate information plays an important role in prevention of adolescents' risky behaviors such as hazardous sexual behavior, unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, as well as STDs.

CONCLUSION

Given the findings of the present study, growth and development of children and adolescents in various social units including family, peers, school and the society as a whole is affected by the quality of interactions within these units. Thus, increasing parents' awareness and knowledge, improvement of parents' perspective and the quality of parent-child interactions, proper monitoring of teenagers in the environment outside home and their peers, higher quality and quantity of sexual and reproductive education (particularly in the late adolescence) as well as paying attention to gender similarity and differences can provide effective strategies in order to maintenance and promotion of sexual and reproductive health of the adolescents.

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