

Sex and Sexuality among Unwed Mothers in Kerala

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Abstract

The lack of factual knowledge of sexual matters among teenagers is often attributed as one of the major causes of unwed pregnancies. This article attempts to find out the relevance of the knowledge on sexual matters among the unwed mothers residing in the licensed homes in Kerala. A standardized scale on Sex and Sexuality developed by Rao (2006) was used to measure the same. The study also seeks to understand whether there is any association between age and education, and the knowledge about sex. The respondents (unwed mothers) were selected from the nine licensed homes based on an inclusion criteria. Findings revealed that the overall knowledge about sex among the unwed mothers was very low. There was association between education and sexual knowledge. There was no association between the level of sexual knowledge and age of unwed mothers. The results offer guidance to human service agencies in making decisions on additional components and enhancements to existing programmes and services for unwed mothers.

Keywords

unwed mothers, licensed homes, knowledge on sexuality

Introduction

The phenomenon of illegitimacy or out of wedlock pregnancy is not new. It has recently shown an increase as a direct effect of the changing family systems in terms of its structure, stability and functioning (Agarwal, 2010). Adolescence had traditionally been considered as the most difficult period in an individual's development cycle wherein the young woman undergoes psychological, physical, hormonal, cognitive and sexual changes which are not only stressful but also confusing. These changes occur without much support and help from families and communities. The situation often aggravates with uncertainties regarding one's career, marriage partner, sexual life and the self itself. Societal and familial restriction to knowledge about human sex and sexuality was found to be associated with child sexual abuse and unwed pregnancy during teenage (Agarwal, 2010). Keeping in line with this the lack of factual knowledge of sexual matters among teenagers is often attributed as one of the major causes of unwed pregnancies across cultures (Connell and Jacobson, 1971).

A study on adolescent girls in rural India showed that girls become a prey of incest, rape, unwed pregnancies and low self esteem due to the lack of sex education and mainly due to the contrary notion subscribed by mainstream Indian society that sex education would corrupt the minds of young people and will promote sexual act before marriage (Agarwal, 2010). Similarly, in

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a survey conducted in California, Connell and Jacobson (1971) identified the factors associated with unwed pregnancies such as sexual knowledge, attitudes towards pregnancy and the role of parents during a girl's pregnancy. The study suggests that the unwed pregnant teenage girl possess limited sex knowledge (Connell and Jacobson, 1971).

It is important to examine what are the implications of sexual knowledge among teenagers to avoid or avert unwed or out of the wedlock pregnancies or illegitimacy. This becomes critical in the context wherein conservative and traditionalist parents and organizations have come forward to contain sex education programmes in Indian schools (Agarwal, 2010). In the context where many parents in the past have relied upon the school for the introduction and discussion of new ideas, however, many schools have recently come under fire from parents and communities when sex education has been added to their curriculum. Similarly, a wide range of objections are presented by those opposed to such programmes. They include the belief that sex education belongs to the home and the school is usurping parental responsibility, besides young minds are not able to cope with the intimate details of human reproduction. Charges have been leveled at the schools that they are corrupting the minds of youngsters and producing amoral behaviour by encouraging them to learn about their bodies and how they function sexually (Connell and Jacobson, 1971). Agarwal (2010) examined uneducated adolescent girls' knowledge about sex and sexuality in rural Uttar Pradesh (UP) and found that the major sources of sexual knowledge were from adult talks, jokes and something they saw in their own houses where intimate relations were no secret due to structural limitation of the houses. Adolescent girls who were educated up to 8-12 Standard had also come across some knowledge when they study science books.

Agarwal (2010) finds huge gaps between adequacy of knowledge imparted through current educational system and actual knowledge outreach. During a discussion with girls across Gorakhpur District (in UP), the author noted that pregnancy outside marriage is an issue due to incest sexual relationship within the family context. The culprit would often be uncles, cousins, and rarely, even the father. Though there were no authentic data to show the gravity of incest relations with the father but it is not that rare in rural areas (Agarwal, 2010). It was also found that when the girls hints to her mother about being touched or fondled by uncles, close family friends, or relatives, it is completely ignored as incredible or a gesture of affection misconstrued by the girls. When such a fate befalls of the unmarried pregnant adolescent girls, the first move is to contact either a doctor or a dai for abortion while sometimes these girls are married off. If abortion is not possible for several reasons, the girl is put to death by one of the family members or her life is made so unbearable that she is forced to commit suicide. In one incidence an unwed mother said that they had not heard of being killed, but an unwed adolescent girl was expelled from the village alone together with her own mother and nobody knows what happened to them. Seven out of the 40 girls who joined residential literacy classes in Gorakhpur Mahila Samakhya were found to be involved in physical relations with men of their villages because these girls were lured by small gifts, words of appreciation and love, something that was lacking at home. These girls reported that they had no knowledge about the implication about physical relations before involving in sexual acts. It was also noticed that sometime parents encourage them to engage in sexual acts (Agarwal, 2010; Jose et.al., 2009).

The girls were found to be ignorant regarding 'what really occurs during physical consummation'; and the unchecked freedom allowed to the boys, who were brazen in their behaviour, because they subscribed to the popular view that men can do anything they like (Connell and Jacobson, 1971: 1840). Though girls in this region attain puberty at 12 years old, information about physical relationship and its consequences came to them only after they themselves had experienced sex, either through marriage, molestation or criminal assaults.

Some of the questions were directed towards learning what these young mothers regarded as the major precipitating cause for teenage illegitimate pregnancy. Their responses dealt with

interpersonal relationships, the role of the self-image, the lack of knowledge of human sexuality and the lack of appropriate health facilities (Connell and Jacobson, 1971). The analysis revealed that nearly half of the group (44%) replied it was concerning the boy-girl relationship. Some of the pertinent comments were: "to trap the boy into marriage," "because they loved the boy," or "they didn't intend to get pregnant, but wanted to satisfy the 'feeling'" or "because they became involved with a boy" while about 40 per cent of the informants answered that indicated teenage girls were primarily concerned with their image as a female (Connell and Jacobson, 1971:1842). Because, they wanted "to prove they are women," "to be one of the girls," and "to establish their independence." Some of them (about 16%) reported the reasons for these pregnancies were because "they do not know that sexual intercourse can lead to pregnancy," "they do not know about birth control methods," or "they know about contraceptives but can't get them."

Boy friends were cited as a second source by 25 per cent, a school nurse or a teacher by 22 per cent, and only 5 per cent reported parents and other relatives as their primary source of information (Connell and Jacobson, 1971). Equally informative was the third area explored as to what age they felt this education should take place. Slightly over two-thirds (68%) of the patients felt between the years 12 to 13 were the most critical. Almost a quarter (22%) selected the years from 14 to 17 and a considerably smaller group (10%) thought the ages of 9 to 11 were the best time to begin sex education. If educational material on sex were to be made widely available to youngsters, what would be the most effective point for distribution? Four different sites were selected by the readers: an educational facility (41%) (2) a community setting (29%), (3) a health facility (24%), and (4) a religious institution (6%). Apart from supplying information, how influential did the patients consider that such materials might help be in modifying behaviour? Would they stimulate discussions on the topic of out-of-wedlock pregnancy between teenagers and their parents, their teachers and their peer group members which might ultimately help in preventing these pregnancies?

A large majority (85%) of the young mothers stated that they thought such educational material would be helpful; the remainder did not consider that they would be of any benefit in this regard (Connell and Jacobson, 1971). Since the lack of knowledge and lack of availability of contraception were cited by some of the girls as the major reasons for out-of-wedlock pregnancy, they were asked if they would accept contraception if it were made available to them. Almost all of them (90%) said they would but 10 per cent were uncertain. However, it should be emphasized that no patient said that she would not accept any contraceptive care. Finally, when the patients were queried as to whether in the future they would permit their own single teenage daughters to use birth control, 80 per cent of the girls said they would encourage their teenage daughters to practise contraception, but the remainders were opposed to allowing them to do so. At the onset of her pregnancy, the girl should confide this information to the alleged father and her parents. The latter, when possible, will respond with both moral and financial assistance. This study further suggests that early dating, lack of proper sex education, and a lack of parental supervision are significant factors in the causation of unwed pregnancy (Connell and Jacobson, 1971).

Given this background a study was conducted to find out the knowledge of sex and sexuality among the unwed mothers residing in the licensed homes in Kerala.

Methodology

Unwed mother: An unwed mother is a girl or woman (13-35 years) who is not legally married to a man by whom she has conceived a child. (This age group was selected as per the National Youth Policy, which defines youth as a person between 13-35 years of age.) She may be separated, divorced, widowed, married to someone other than the child's father or never married. She may be pregnant or has already delivered a child and is living presently in any one of the nine licensed institutions in Kerala for a minimum of one month period. (George and Joseph, 2012).

Licensed homes refer to those institutions in Kerala that have got the recognition-license from the Social Welfare Department to keep the women in distress (unwed mother in the present context) for a temporary period. All these homes were functioning along with the foundling homes from where babies are given for legal adoption. There were nine such homes in Kerala, during the time of data collection as per the record of ACA, Kerala (Adoption Co-ordinating Agency) functioning at Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, Kalamassery. All unwed mothers who were residing in the nine licensed homes in Kerala during the period of data collection (2007-9) were surveyed. A single unwed mother satisfying the operational criteria of the same was also included. Other participants included were unwed mothers belonging to the age group of 13-35 years, pregnant or delivered the child out of wedlock, living in any one of the nine licensed homes in Kerala during the period of study and unwed mothers without any mental illness. The sample population was based on the rate of admissions per month (1-3) approximately from the nine licensed homes in Kerala for a period of two years, there were 432 unwed mothers. From this, 362 unwed mothers satisfied the inclusion criteria. Among those who satisfied the criteria above, around 60 per cent were selected randomly using a lottery method and thus the total sample size was 210.

Findings and Discussion

The sex and sexuality knowledge inventory developed by Rao (2007) was used in the present study to assess the overall knowledge of the unwed mothers regarding the physical and psychological changes during adolescence, menstruation, reproductive process, sexually transmitted disorders, sexual orientation and sexual abuse. The knowledge inventory consisted of 50 items related to various dimensions of sex and sexuality. Responses of the respondents to the 50 statements in the scale are given below. The 50 statements in the inventory related to sexuality are grouped into/under nine aspects. The number of the positive and negative statements to each of the nine aspects is given in Table 1.

Table 1
Positive and negative items related to different aspects of sex and sexuality

Aspects	No. of items	Item no of +ve items	Item no of -ve items
Physical changes	12	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 30, 32, 42, 46	19, 20, 48
Menstruation	4	7	6, 8, 33
Sexual practices	8	9, 35	24, 25, 26, 43, 44, 49
Reproduction/conception	9	11, 12, 13, 34, 36, 37	10, 14, 22
Sexually transmitted diseases	5	29, 40	15, 16, 39
Virginity	4	18, 41	31, 47
Homosexuality	3	45	17, 28
Sexual life	4		21, 23, 27, 50
Abortion	1	38	

For getting an overall assessment about the knowledge on sex of the unwed mothers the mean per cent age scores were computed and the entire range was divided into three groups, viz., low knowledge with per cent age score less than 34, medium knowledge with per cent age score 34 to 66 and high knowledge with per cent age score greater than 66. The level of knowledge of the respondents was classified and is given in Table 2.

Table 2
Classification according to the level of knowledge
in different dimensions of sex and sexuality

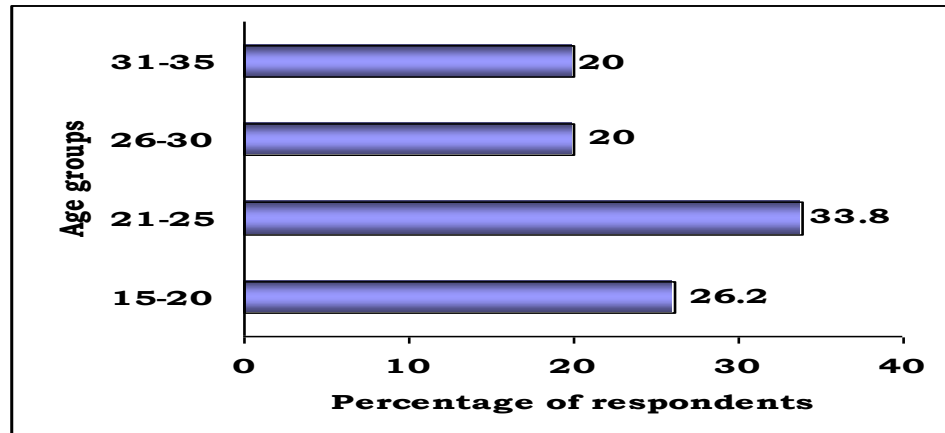
Dimensions	Low	Medium	High
Physical Changes	85 (40.5)	72 (34.3)	53 (25.2)
Menstruation	102 (48.6)	63 (30.0)	45 (21.4)
Sexual Practices	164 (78.1)	29 (13.8)	17 (8.1)
Reproduction/ Conception	137 (65.2)	30 (14.3)	43 (20.5)
Sexually transmitted diseases	122 (58.1)	71 (33.8)	17 (8.1)
Virginity	165 (78.6)	35 (16.7)	10 (4.8)
Homosexuality	202 (96.2)		8 (3.8)
Sexual life	182 (86.7)	14 (6.7)	14 (6.7)
Abortion	143 (68.1)		67 (31.9)
Overall	134 (63.8)	62 (29.5)	14 (6.7)

Note: Values in the brackets are percentages.

About 64 per cent of the unwed mothers were having only low knowledge on sex and about 30 per cent had only average knowledge. The percentage of respondents having high knowledge on sex was very low (7%). These results indicate that overall knowledge on sex and sexuality among the unwed mothers was very low.

While analyzing the age group of the unwed mothers in the licensed homes, it was found that about 34 per cent of the unwed mothers belonged to the age group of 21-25 years, followed by 26 per cent in the 15-20 year category. This shows that majority of the unwed mothers (60%) were below 25 years of age which is a matter of great concern. Among this 26 per cent belonged to the adolescent age group (15-20 years), which again reveals the intensity of the problem of unwed motherhood and teenage pregnancy. Adolescence itself is a crisis period, as it is a time of establishing social, emotional and economic independence from one's parents. The girl, who has an illegitimate child at adolescence suffers physical, mental torture from her parents and relatives who may finally desert her to let her do what she pleases.

Figure 1
Age distribution of unwed mothers



Teenage pregnancy is a widely acknowledged common public health problem worldwide, whereas the problems presented by the pregnant unwed teenagers are among the most difficult and perplexing issues faced by those who work in the fields of health, education and social services (Saran, 1999). No society is immune to teenage pregnancy. Teen pregnancy fact sheet reveals that 13 per cent of all U.S. births are to teens (ages 15 to 19). About 43 per cent of all American girls will experience at least one pregnancy before they reach age 20 (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1981).

Older adolescents are likely to have more frequency of sexual intercourse than younger adolescence, even-though, first sexual encounter is likely to happen at younger age (Zelnik and Shah, 1983). Studies conducted among unwed tribal mothers in Kerala showed that the mean age at first pregnancy was 19.63 years that ranged between 13-30 years (Jose et.al., 2010a).

Table 3
Association of knowledge on sex with age of the unwed mothers

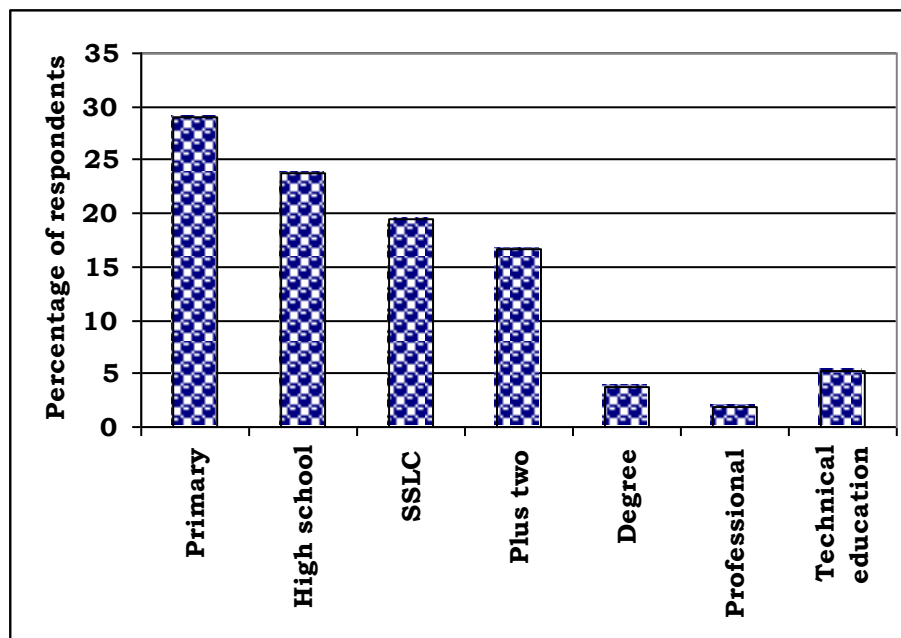
Level of knowledge on Sex	Age group (years)			
	15-20	21-25	26-30	31-35
Low	40 (72.7)	42 (59.2)	28 (66.7)	24 (57.1)
Average	9 (16.4)	23 (32.4)	12 (28.6)	18 (42.9)
High	6 (10.9)	6 (8.5)	2 (4.8)	--
Total	55	71	42	42

$X^2 = 12.062^*$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.1$

Note: Values in the brackets are percentages

Association of knowledge on sex with age of the unwed mothers was tested using Chi-square test. Results show that Chi-square value was non significant at 0.05 significance level. This implies that there is no association between knowledge on sex and age of the unwed mothers. Though there was no statistical significance at 0.05 levels, majority of the unwed mothers belonging to 15-20 age groups had low knowledge on sex.

Figure 2
Educational status of the unwed mothers



Majority of the unwed mothers (72%) were educated up to SSLC (Fig. 2). The figure clearly shows that majority of the respondents were less educated which signifies the severity of the problem of unwed mothers. “Children having children” is a phrase applied to young unwed mothers to imply that they are inexperienced and incompetent parents. The combination of limited education, basic skills, life skills, career skills and parenting skills means that these young parents (unwed mothers) have limited academic opportunities and are restricted to employment and wages that are below the poverty level (Moore et al., 1993; Hoffman et al., 1993; Rangarajan et al., 1992 cited in Cooper-Lampley, 2003).

Low educational attainment of adolescents and other women in their families were also likely to associate with teenage pregnancy (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1981). In a study among tribal women in Kerala, Jose et al. (2010a) revealed that education was widely ranged and showed variation from no academic background to nine years of education. According to them, the mean completed years of education among unwed tribal mothers was 4.9 years, with a standard deviation of 2.6.

Table 4
Association of education with knowledge on sex among unwed mothers

Knowledge on Sex	Primary	High School	SSL C	Plus Two	Degree Above	and
Low	55 (90.2)	32 (64.0)	26 (63.4)	17 (48.6)	4 (17.4)	
Medium	6 (9.8)	18 (36.0)	14 (34.1)	11 (31.4)	13 (56.5)	
High			1 (2.4)	7 (20.0)	6 (26.1)	
Total	61 (100)	50 (100)	41 (100)	35 (100)	23 (100)	

$X^2 = 61.262, p < 0.01$

Note: Values in the brackets are percentages.

Association of education with knowledge on sex among unwed mothers was tested by using Chi-square test. It was found to be significant indicating that knowledge on sex and education is associated. From Table 4 it was clear that as the respondents become more educated the per cent age of respondents belonging to higher level of sexual knowledge increases and per cent age of respondents having low sexual knowledge decreases.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to find out the knowledge of sex and sexuality among the unwed mothers residing in the licensed homes in Kerala. It was found that there was association between education and knowledge on sex, higher the education, higher the knowledge on sex and vice versa. The more deficits (or problems) an individual faces or accumulates in her life, the more vulnerable she would be than an individual with fewer deficits. Kerala being known for the highest literacy rates in the whole of India, the situation of unwed mothers in other states will be highly dismal. It is high time that we think of alternative systems of education that will empower the weak and the vulnerable. Therefore, improved socio-economic status along with increased empowerment on personal autonomy, domestic consultation and family decision making facilities were likely to reduce deficit accumulation in the social life, resulting in improved quality of social life. Thus it is necessary to explore and create new educational programmes that will reduce the probability of these young unwed mothers becoming pregnant again and which will also help them to have the opportunity to attain success in their life. The findings reiterate the need for developing an intervention package for unwed mothers in the licensed homes with the aim of assisting their future life.

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