PROBLEMS AND PERCEPTIONS OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN INDIA: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The Census 2011 data shows that there are more than 225 million adolescents (approx. 50 percent are female adolescents) who account for almost 21 percent of the country’s populations. The United Nations and most UN agencies like WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, etc. consider adolescents as individuals between 10-19 years of age. The present study analyzes the sexual behaviour, problems and perceptions of college going adolescent girls in Gwalior city of Madhya Pradesh (India). Structured interview method was used to collect qualitative and quantitative data. The study finds, that for a large number of respondents of joint families, autonomous behaviour of youths with outsiders and uncontrolled media are the major sources of spreading pre-marital sex in the general population whereas the respondents of nuclear families felt that communication gap between parents and their children and use of sex as a stress-buster instrument led to pre-marital sex primarily. The study concludes that today’s youth believes in upholding the cultural traditions by having faith in the marital bond, disapproving of premarital sex and abiding by social code of conduct. Lack of correct information about ‘safe sex’, ignorance about HIV testing and views such as ‘AIDS can’t happen to me’ can put them at risk. Joint families are the source of re-affirmation of cultural values, traditions and prove quite pragmatic when the issue of HIV testing of the respondents and the proposed boys arises. Nuclear family structure provides more opportunities to youth to discuss about their psycho-social problems. It is recommended that a programme should be developed for the parents so that they could come out of their cocoons and provide timely solutions to their growing children. Cultural engagements and sensitivity among youth is the need of the hour.

Key Words: Adolescent, Sexual behaviour, Perceptions, Family structure, Pre-marital sex, Indian culture, HIV/AIDS

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents account for 1.2 billion of the world’s population. As per the UNICEF The State of the World's Children, 2011 report, India has the largest National population of adolescents. The Census 2011 data (provisional) shows that there are more than 225 million adolescents in India, who account for almost 21 percent of the country’s population. However, there is no accepted definition of adolescents and they are most often subsumed with youth or with children or with young adults. The United Nations and most UN agencies like WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA etc. consider adolescents as individuals between 10-19 years of age. Adolescence is a vital stage of growth and development and marks the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. It is characterized by rapid physical, physiological and psychological changes. It is a period which requires attention, protection and meeting of the special needs of adolescents as the unmet needs during this phase affects the individual, family, community, society and nation at large. Adolescents comprise of both girls and boys but in India, girls are deprived of equal opportunities and are subjected to neglect and inequality which is also reflective in the negative sex ratio of the country. As per the Census 2011, the overall sex ratio is 940 females per 1000 males. The census 2001 shows that the sex ratio in the 10–19 years bracket is 882 females for 1000 males and in the 15-19 years bracket it’s 858 females for 1000 males. The adverse sex ratio is due to the strong
preference for a male child which leads to sex selective abortions, infanticide, neglect and exploitation of girls in different forms much before they are born and is carried out throughout their life.

Adolescent girls are subjected to various gender based inequalities. They are often forced into household work and sibling care, school dropout and low education attainment, child marriage and early child bearing, trafficking for sexual exploitation, risk of HIV/AIDS and discrimination even in terms of nutrition and food. According to NFHS-3, 2005-06, 21% adolescent girls and 8% adolescent boys have no education. Almost 50% of women are married before the legal age of 18 as compared to 10% of young men and overall one in six women in the age group of 15-19 have begun childbearing. It also states that girls are more at risk of malnutrition than boys and 56% adolescent girls are anaemic as compared to 30% adolescent boys. Anaemic adolescent mothers are at a higher risk of miscarriages, maternal mortality and stillbirths and low-weight babies. However, the Government is taking initiatives for meeting the requirements of the adolescents.

There are policies to ensure well being of adolescents. The National Population Policy (2000) and the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001) recognizes adolescents as an underserved and vulnerable population group with special sexual and reproductive health needs. The National Health Policy (2002) recognizes the nutritional needs of adolescent girls as well as the necessity of implementing school health programmes. The National Youth Policy (2003) visualises active participation of youth, including adolescents, at all levels of social enterprise. It recommends youth empowerment through education, nutrition, leadership development and equal opportunities.

Adolescents are also addressed in the Five Year Plans. The Ninth Five Year Plan placed special emphasis on adolescent girls, expansion of the adolescent girls’ scheme and on assessing the health needs of adolescents in the Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) program. The Department of Women and Child Development initiated the Kishori Shakti Yojana to improve the nutritional and health status of adolescent girls. The importance of adolescents as a distinct subgroup was highlighted by the Planning Commission’s Working Group on the Development of Adolescents for the 10th Plan in 2001. The Working Group had emphasized the need to view adolescents as a valuable human resource for nation building and as a representative of the nation’s unique economic opportunity for the future. The Working Group on Youth Affairs and Adolescent Development for the 11th Plan stated the need to formulate a separate policy for adolescents and emphasized on shift from the welfare approach to a rights and empowerment oriented approach. The report of the Working Group on Child Rights for 12th Five Year Plan outlined specific recommendations for adolescents to provide inputs into the 12th Five Year Plan.

The Ministry of Women and Child Development initiated a new comprehensive scheme, Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls- SABLA in the year 2010 by merging the erstwhile Kishori Shakti Yojana and Nutrition Program for Adolescent Girls. The scheme is primarily for out of school adolescent girls (11-18 years) and aims at empowering adolescent girls by improving their nutritional and health status and upgrading various skills like home skills, life skills and vocational skills etc. so that they have greater control over their life, grow up to be healthier, more confident and empowered women, equipped to make informed choices as well as take decisions on their own. There is another comprehensive scheme of the Ministry “Ujjawala” which covers women and children who are vulnerable to or are victims of trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation. There are other Ministries and different departments which have also actively integrated development and promotion of adolescents in their programmes.

Sexual behaviour is a social behaviour influenced by the family of orientation and culture of the community as well. In India intermingling with the opposite sex and pre-
marital sex is traditionally unacceptable and considered immoral. But nowadays free access to advanced communication techniques, less cohesion between family members, deficit cultural ethics due to structural-functional changes in family etc., lead to conflicting sexual norms. As a consequence all these conditions can move youths away from the set norms of the society leading to unsafe sex practices and the possibility of contracting HIV infection. Young girls are more vulnerable to it due to socio-cultural factors. A recent country-wide survey states that one in four girls and young unmarried women were found to be sexually active with little knowledge of sex.1 When the society is undergoing rapid change and vulnerability to unrecoverable severe health hazards is on increase, family is that strongest social institution which has the courage to call back its members to socially approved norms to safeguard their interests.

A brief review of literature suggests that unsafe sex accounts for 87 per cent of new HIV infections in India, placing young people in the centre of the epidemic. Young people aged between 19 and 25 years make up for 50 per cent of all new HIV/AIDS infections in the country.2 The Population Foundation of India reported that one youth is infected with HIV/AIDS almost every 15 seconds.3 Prevalence rate of AIDS in young women appears to be on a steep rise. NACO (2007) has also established that one million out of 2.5 million HIV/AIDS people are women in India. A number of studies,4-9 Analyze the perception of youths about AIDS, the correlates and factors responsible for its spread. However, there is a paucity of studies highlighting the impact of family structure on sexual behaviour, knowledge and attitude about HIV/AIDS among the youths.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

A study was conducted on college girls to find out the possibility of contracting HIV infection by analyzing their opinion and awareness on sexual behaviour and HIV/AIDS practices. This study explores how the family structure determines sexual behaviour of the young girls that further affects their life-saving attitude from AIDS.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A cross-sectional study was carried out among 250 unmarried girls, pursuing their graduation and post graduation courses in Gwalior city of Madhya Pradesh, India. Average age of the respondents was 20.6 years. Structured interview method was used to gather qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative data was analyzed by means of Chi test of significance. 109 (43.6 per cent) respondents belonged to joint families and rests of the 141 (56.4 per cent) respondents were from nuclear families.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This article is divided into two parts. The first half attempts to analyze the opinion and awareness of college girls on sexual matters and its correlation with the family structure. The second half focuses on knowledge and attitude of the college girls about HIV/AIDS with reference to their family structure.

Friendship with the opposite sex

It was found that 167 (66.8 per cent) respondents have friends of the opposite sex. Of these 103 (61.67 per cent) belong to nuclear families. The rest of the respondents feel that it is not necessary to have a friend of the opposite sex. An analysis of the data shows that inclination towards having a friend of the opposite sex among youth of joint families is comparatively less than those of nuclear families. The study population was asked about the various reasons for having developed friendship with boys. While 92 (55.08 per cent) said that having a boyfriend proves the respondents modern in their peer group and is a source of self confidence, 61 (36.52 per cent) responded that boys are more reliable and dependable than friends of the same sex. Last but not least, boys are good ‘time pass’ for 14 (8.38 per cent) respondents.

Nature of friendship

The respondents had different views about the nature of friendship they have with a person of opposite sex. Table 1 states that 108 (43.2 per cent) respondents who have boyfriends opined that the nature of friendship with a boy is the same as with that of a homosexual friend, i.e., they are simply not more than a friend. They do not see them as their sexual/life partner.
However, given a chance, three of them want to marry their boyfriends. Seventy-seven (30.8 per cent) respondents who had no boyfriends also share the same viewpoint. Fifty-nine (33.6 per cent) out-rightly reject this view and 34 (13.6 per cent) of them want to marry their boyfriends.

**Table 1 : View about friendship with the opposite sex**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whether has a Boy Friend?</th>
<th>Yes (Percent)</th>
<th>No (Percent)</th>
<th>Total (Percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whether nature of (%) friendship with a boy is different/Whether wants to marry the boyfriend</td>
<td>105 (92.77%)</td>
<td>77 (62.87%)</td>
<td>182 (72.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>03 (1.8%)</td>
<td>00 (0.00%)</td>
<td>03 (1.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25 (14.97%)</td>
<td>06 (7.23%)</td>
<td>31 (12.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34 (20.36%)</td>
<td>00 (0.00%)</td>
<td>34 (13.60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>167 (100%)</td>
<td>83 (100%)</td>
<td>250 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Calculated by Author

**Attitude towards Pre-marital Sex**

Two hundred and twenty-one (88.4 per cent) respondents in all, disapprove of pre-marital sex. The respondents opine that a couple indulging in pre-marital sex should get married to stop randomization of sexual relationships in the society. Twenty-nine (11.6 per cent) respondents believe that it is purely a personal matter. It is not necessary to give such relationships the shape of marriage and no social compulsion should be imposed on a couple. These views have no direct correlation with the family structure of the respondents. The positive attitude of overwhelming number of the respondents about pre-marital sex supports the study of \(^{10}\) where about three quarters (74 per cent) of female respondents also disapproved of pre-marital sex relationships. This perception of youths can go a long way in reducing the risk of HIV infection. Various agencies have also reported that where HIV transmission has been reduced, the greatest reductions are often seen among young people.\(^ {11-12}\) As regards why today’s youth indulges in pre-marital sexual relationships the field investigation reveals that one problem of the youths coupled by another leads to promiscuity in the society. However, among various reasons, as provided by the respondents, the most important are given in **Table 2**.

The respondents state that nowadays pre-marital relations have become quite common in the youth population due to various reasons.

**Table 2 : Opinion on Pre-Marital Sex**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for spread of pre marital sex relations</th>
<th>Joint family (per cent)</th>
<th>Nuclear family (per cent)</th>
<th>Total (per cent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication gap</td>
<td>50 (45.87)</td>
<td>69 (48.94)</td>
<td>119 (47.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness in behaviour</td>
<td>33 (30.28)</td>
<td>40 (28.37)</td>
<td>73 (29.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of media</td>
<td>26 (23.85)</td>
<td>25 (17.73)</td>
<td>51 (20.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As stress buster</td>
<td>0 (0.00)</td>
<td>7 (4.96)</td>
<td>7 (2.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>109 (100)</strong></td>
<td><strong>141 (100)</strong></td>
<td><strong>250 (100)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Calculated by Author

Note: Chi Test significant (\(X^2 = 5.609,\) D.F. 3, \(p < 0.05\)).
30.28 per cent of joint families said that it is taken as part of daily life because today’s youth is more autonomous and less hesitant. The respondent also mentions that rules related to pre-marital chastity and virginity is considered old fashioned and is losing their shine in the general population. Nearly half of the respondents of nuclear families feel that communication gap between parents and children or between siblings gives rise to such kind of relations. About a fifth of the respondents of both types of families blame the media for its irresponsible role played through soap serials where promiscuous behaviour of characters is highlighted as if it were a day-to-day affair. Only 4.96 per cent respondents of nuclear families opine that it is used as a stress-buster instrument. Flexibility in rules of social distance also contributes immensely to the situation of pre-marital sex. For a large number of respondents of joint families autonomous behaviour of youths with outsiders and uncontrolled media are the major sources of the spread of pre-marital sex in the society whereas the respondents of nuclear families feel that primarily, communication gap between parents and their children and use of sex as a stress-buster instrument leads to pre-marital sex. The combination of authority and intimacy in joint families and proper communication among the members in a nuclear family may help youths to protect them from unwanted exposure to the outside world as evident from the significant value of chi test.

The study also attempts to find out the steps (Table 3), which the youths think appropriate for not getting trapped in such relations. About 90 per cent girls say that we should value our culture. One can refrain from pre-marital sex by upholding cultural values and observing physical and emotional distance from heterosexual friends. 14.4 per cent respondents feel that discussions on issues causing excitement should be avoided with boyfriends at any cost. The aforesaid observations show that the joint family structure significantly influence the opinion of the respondents on this matter. It is interesting to note that when compared, respondents of joint families insist on observance of cultural values (no matter if the discussion on certain sexual matters is almost prohibited in the family) whereas the

**Table 3 : Steps to refrain from pre-marital sex**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Joint steps to refrain from pms</th>
<th>(per cent)</th>
<th>Nuclear (per cent)</th>
<th>Total (per cent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uphold cultural values</td>
<td>70 (64.22)</td>
<td>86 (60.99)</td>
<td>156 (62.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain distance from boyfriend</td>
<td>28 (25.69)</td>
<td>30 (21.28)</td>
<td>58 (23.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid discussion on sex and sexuality</td>
<td>11 (10.09)</td>
<td>25 (17.73)</td>
<td>36 (14.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>109 (100)</strong></td>
<td><strong>141 (100)</strong></td>
<td><strong>250 (100)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Calculated by Author
Note: Chi Test significant ($X^2 = 3.109$, D.F. 3, $p < 0.05$).

respondents of nuclear families feel that to avoid discussion on sexual matters can be instrumental if one wants to refrain from pre-marital relationships. The reason for it is that in the joint family, cultural values are enforced in a simple and routine way but sexuality matters are not given proper space whereas in the nuclear families there is a higher scope of freedom to discuss sexuality matters with parents (mothers in this study), paying hardly any heed to outsiders. Thus, the ways to refrain from pre-marital sex are deep rooted in age-old sex norms of Indian culture in both types of families.

**Family environment and problems of the youth**

Hundred per cent respondents of joint families informed that all family members sit together for chit-chats for sometime every day whereas this environment was lacking in 28 (19.86 per cent) nuclear families. The assumption is that outsiders influence the youths less, who have freedom and opportunity to discuss problems with their family members. In this regard it was found that the youths face various problems related with menstrual cycle, body-image changes, sex and sexuality. However,
choice of the person with whom the problem is shared varies with the nature of the problem. **Table 4** states that the person with whom the respondents want to share their problems is not directly related with the family structure as the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems related to</th>
<th>Joint (per cent)</th>
<th>Nuclear (per cent)</th>
<th>Joint (per cent)</th>
<th>Nuclear (per cent)</th>
<th>Joint (per cent)</th>
<th>Nuclear (per cent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source of Information</td>
<td>Mensurual Cycle</td>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td>Sex and Sexuality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends in person</td>
<td>53 (48.62)</td>
<td>65 (59.63)</td>
<td>98 (89.91)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>37 (33.94)</td>
<td>35 (32.11)</td>
<td>5 (4.59)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>7 (6.42)</td>
<td>5 (4.59)</td>
<td>0 (0.00)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatives</td>
<td>12 (11.01)</td>
<td>3 (3.67)</td>
<td>0 (0.00)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>0 (0.00)</td>
<td>4 (3.67)</td>
<td>0 (0.00)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>109 (100)</td>
<td>141 (100)</td>
<td>109 (100)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source : Calculated by Author
Note : Chi Test insignificant

but in case of nuclear families parents are preferred. More than 50 per cent girls prefer friends to discuss problems related with menstrual cycle. 59.63 per cent and 43.97 per cent respondents of joint and nuclear families respectively, were entirely dependent on their friends to satisfy their curiosity about bodily changes. 59.03 per cent respondents of nuclear families discuss about such problems with their parents (mothers in this case) and siblings, whereas only 36.7 per cent girls of joint families approach their mothers and siblings in this matter.

It is also clear from the **Table 4** that friends are preferred for discussion when the matter of sex and sexuality comes up. The family structure has no bearing on it. Parents and relatives are preferred only in case of 10.09 per cent and 5.67 per cent respondents of joint and nuclear families, respectively. 7.8 per cent girls of nuclear families prefer to gather such information by surfing internet sites. **Knowledge about HIV/AIDS**

The study finds that family structure has no bearing on respondents’ knowledge about AIDS, sources of information and modes of transmission. In all, 51.33 per cent respondents had first got the information about AIDS from print and electronic (primarily television) media. 38.8 per cent had come to know about it through friends. Teachers and school-level seminars were the first source of information about AIDS in 6.67 per cent cases. Only 3.2 per cent had got the information while surfing the internet. Not a single respondent intimates that their parents had ever imparted any information regarding AIDS. 86.4 per cent girls were quite aware about causes of its spread. The rest believe that it can also spread through excessive sex, tick bites, living and sharing utensils with HIV/AIDS patients, using a urinal which is used by a HIV’ person and environmental pollution also. Only 7.6 per cent respondents know that HIV testing could be done in pathological labs also, besides hospitals.

**Attitude towards HIV Testing**

As regards their possibility of undergoing HIV test and the proposed boys for marriage, 231 (92.4 per cent) respondents (95.4 per cent and 90.07 per cent of joint and nuclear families, respectively) say they would surely undergo any such test, if demanded. However they are very sure that AIDS cannot happen to them. 19 (7.6 per cent) respondents showed a very rigid attitude in response. A majority of the respondents of joint families’ state they wouldn’t hesitate to ask the proposed boy to
undergo the HIV/AIDS test as the severity of AIDS is on increase in the general population. But 34.75 per cent respondents of nuclear families were reluctant to make any such demand. This finding establishes that the family structure plays a very important role regarding HIV testing of the proposed mate. Major reasons traced for not raising any such a demand are rooted in the socio-cultural milieu of the respondents, as given below:

- Parents of the respondents wouldn’t allow them to do so
- The respondents themselves have the fear of being rejected by the proposed boy and his parents
- The respondents feel that any such demand is against the nature of being feminine.

Thus, acceptance of HIV testing of the self and the proposed mate among majority of the respondents of joint families proves that they are more aware about safe sexual relationship and less scared of being rejected. Vinitha et al. also find that youth of extended families have heard more about safe sex compared to those living in nuclear families.13,14 This study observes that presence of elderly members proves to be an immense source of moral strength and a measure to protection.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals that today’s youth believe in upholding cultural traditions by having faith in the marital bond, disapproving of pre-marital sex and abiding by social code of conduct. It is well known that family is the first school of a child and parents are the best life-time preachers. It is high time that parents be motivated to come out of their cocoons and provide timely solutions to the personal, emotional and sexual problems of their growing children. Congenial family structure would help the youth to a great extent in protecting them from unimaginable problems. However, in this study, friends are the preferred choice for solution of various problems.

The youth is well aware about prevalence of AIDS. Television is the predominant source of information about it. Most of the respondents were aware about its commonest mode of transmission. However, lack of correct information about ‘safe sex’, ignorance about facilities available for HIV testing and having views such as ‘AIDS can’t happen to me’ can put them at risk. The ways to refrain from pre-marital sex are deep rooted in age-old sex norms of Indian culture in both types of families. Joint families are the source of re/affirmation of cultural values, traditions and prove quite pragmatic when the issue of HIV testing of the respondents and the proposed boys arises. The study recommends that the Information, Education and Communication (IEC) programmes be elaborated keeping in mind the cultural issues. A holistic preventive programme should be developed to enhance cultural engagements and sensitivity among youth and to bring change in the parents’ perception.

The overall large number of adolescent population in India and the vulnerability of adolescent girls and their specific needs points towards an urgent need of spreading awareness, enhancing school enrolment, raising the age at marriage and first birth, meeting nutritional needs and empowering and capacity building of adolescent girls so that they can deal with the challenges of life in more effective way. This requires combined efforts of different sections of society and all the stakeholders working for the empowerment of adolescent girls. Government in coordination with NGOs can address the needs of adolescent girls by working for their protection from harmful traditional practices including early marriage leading to teenage pregnancy and vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases, lack of education, sexual exploitation and abuse and for the development of life skills and self-esteem.

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