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overview



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The findings of research carried out into awareness of sexual and reproductive health and rights in Pakistan

Introduction

In Pakistan, as in many developing countries, poverty is intrinsically linked with poor sexual and reproductive health (SRH). With each factor being both a cause and outcome of the other, a destructive cycle exists. Low levels of knowledge about SRH are a major barrier to people accessing SRH services, and information available to the Pakistani population remains limited, with women and young people being particularly marginalised.

In Pakistan, SRH is closely associated with marriage as there are strong social mores which discourage sexual activity outside of marriage. For many women, early marriage is followed by early and closely spaced pregnancies, resulting in high levels of maternal mortality and morbidity.

In order to assess the current SRH situation in Pakistan, Marie Stopes Society (MSS) conducted a baseline knowledge, attitude and practice (KAP) survey in four districts: Hyderabad, Mirpurkhas, DG

Khan and Multan. This report presents the findings from that survey that relate specifically to adolescence.

The objectives of the research were:

- to explore experiences of puberty, including the changes noticed and feelings about those changes
- to assess the sources, and type, of information received during adolescence
- to explore some of the social norms governing adolescence
- to explore opinions about age of marriage
- to sensitise the community to the needs of young people for information about SRH and access to SRH services.

Methodology

Interviews were held with key informants in the four study districts. Interviewees included representatives from local government, local religious leaders, health providers and representatives of local print media. Two focus group discussions

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were conducted in each study district, one with married men and one with married women. The age range in each group was 16-46. As well as providing qualitative findings, the information gathered from key informant interviews and from focus group discussions, was used to develop a face to face questionnaire which was pre-tested prior to being administered to 398 respondents. The respondents were made up of married men and women aged 17-60 from the four study districts.

Results

- three quarters of male respondents reported that they liked the changes they experienced and were satisfied that adulthood was upon them. Girls, on the other hand, reported much higher levels of anxiety during puberty (47%), especially surrounding first experiences of menstruation, which led many to report feeling shy and for some, ashamed (10%)
- only 13% of female respondents reported having received information about puberty prior to experiencing first menstruation (menarche). However, 94% of females sought information and advice after menarche, compared to only 16% of males who sought advice at any stage during puberty. Females tended to consult other female relatives, while males were more likely to report that they confided in friends
- almost 40% of female respondents reported experiencing some sort of social restriction following menarche, with a quarter reporting that they were told not to go out during their period
- opinions varied widely as to the ideal age of marriage. Fifty eight percent of male respondents reported that women should be married by, or at, the age of 18, compared to 41% of female respondents. Over a quarter of female respondents felt that the ideal age for women to marry is over the age of 22
- as a result of participating in the research, many focus group participants reconsidered their views on the provision of information to young people, in particular, by agreeing that

giving information about menstruation to girls, prior to them experiencing menarche, could be beneficial to them.

Conclusion

The researchers found that the study respondents had very little SRH information to equip them as they went through the changes of adolescence. In addition, there continue to be strong cultural barriers to the discussion of, or around, all issues associated with SRH.

The research shows that girls are far more likely to experience social restrictions as they enter adolescence than boys, reflecting the strongly traditional nature of Pakistani society. Similarly, the range of opinions about the ideal age of marriage for girls and boys reflected traditional values. As such, the research suggests that it will take time to overcome barriers to SRH in Pakistan. However, interventions aimed at both young people and those from whom they are likely to seek information, have the potential to reduce barriers to SRH.

In order to encourage the exchange of SRH information among and between both younger and older people, MSS established community run “Community Advocacy Networks” (CANs) and “Youth Advocacy Networks” (YANs) in the study districts, based on a model established in other areas of Pakistan.

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A year after the new CANs and YANs were established, the advocacy teams continue to hold regular information and discussion sessions among communities. These sessions are breaking the silence on SRH topics among young people, their parents and other adults, giving communities a common language through which they are able to discuss and explore SRH issues.

For further information about this research or for a copy of the full report, please email: research@mariestopes.org.uk