

Perception Regarding Sex Education Among Female Students

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Abstract: *The present study intends to explore the sources of sex education among females and to learn about their perceptions and difficulties encountered in regard to sex education. Data was collected through three focus groups from six participants aged between 20–23 years, accumulated by a purposive sampling method and analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings demonstrated that the majority of females reported that sex education is considered taboo because parents usually restrict their daughters from talking about this topic. Some mothers usually talk to their daughters about hormonal changes but neglect their sons. Initial sex education helps to reduce childhood abuse, but unfortunately, most individuals get their sex education through different mediums instead of their parents. The difficulties in attaining sex education include social, cultural and personal values. Rural areas faced the most sexual and medical problems due to a lack of education and shame associated with bodily changes among both genders. Sexually transmitted diseases remain untreated in rural areas. This study helps to understand different perspectives, sources and difficulties in acquiring sex education. The findings are helpful for educators, policymakers and counsellors in addressing this most important topic of education and associated challenges encountered by young adults and adolescents.*

Key Words: Sex Education, Bodily Changes, Parental Bonding, Medium of Sex Education, Taboo

Introduction

Many societies still discourage young adults from seeking sex education as it is considered taboo.

Significance of Sex Education

Courses tackling sexuality, reproduction, and complicated pregnancies should be part of the education system (Kumar et al., 2017). Studies have also reported that sex education leads to a lesser number of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) (Wight et al., 2002) and unwanted pregnancies (Zelnik & Kim, 1982). Another study has supported the idea that sex education has a huge impact on shaping sexual behaviors and guiding sexual complications (Wight et al., 2002). A study in South India has demonstrated that one-third of girls have no idea about sex education and are facing the consequences of sexually transmitted diseases and unprotected sex. It is high time for spreading awareness regarding the importance of sex education (McManus & Dhar, 2008). Those who had been given sex education in the past exhibited a lack of risks and unwanted sexual consequences (Zelnik & Kim, 1982).

Components of Sex Education

Sex education should start at an elementary level where the base and foundation of children regarding it will be strengthened and nourished. Parents need to take some drastic and deliberate measures to make their children literate about the importance sex education (Measor, 2004). After parents, school is responsible to deliver information regarding sex education. According to one study, many students agreed that sex education is not accepted and is less common at schools (Silva, 2022).

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Theoretical Framework

Social learning theory often emphasizes and is influenced by direct experiences and modelling. These behaviors can be strengthened through reinforcement, punishment and rewards. Negative reinforcement is to eliminate any negative consequences to the likelihood of the desirable behaviors, this concept was being delivered in sex education where negative consequences with regards to lack of sex education was taught (Tri Harinie et al., [2017](#)).

According to the Fuzzy trace theory, when any individual is exposed to any meaningful chunk of information, that information is encoded in an individual's memory. There are two types of representations, i.e. *verbatim* representation and *gist* representation. Verbatim captures exact information in the form of words, numbers and images, while gist captures the initial meaning of information (e.g., a person thinking about sex education before indulging in any physical relationship). This information would be in working memory. Later, they transfer into long-term memory. Research shows that individuals who knew the least about risks indulge more in risky sexual behaviours (Reyna, [2008](#)). This theory is very useful in sex education as information regarding sex education is encoded into memory and later used when required in any risky or safe situation.

Attachment theory illustrates the bond between a child and a mother. It means that a secure attachment comprises positive parental bonding, whereas insecure parenting instils fear and a lack of assertiveness. A child who has been disregarded and devalued throughout his lifespan would choose to be dissociated and distant (Bretherton, [1985](#)). The absence of sex education was due to a lack of parental bonding between children and parents. It is of utmost significance to possess a secure and healthy relationship in childhood so that a child can develop a healthy bond and healthily attain early sex education.

Literature Review

Importance of Sex Education

The sex education ratio among females is very poor due to cultural differences across the world. A lot of cultures never let girls get knowledge on sensitive topics. Girls must struggle to get the right understanding of sex education from a secure source, as compared to boys. India is notorious for rape cases and childhood marriages. To examine why Indian girls don't seek medical or professional help in sexual matters, the study was conducted in South Delhi in 2007. Two fifty-one young Indian girls were included in this study, and data was collected from two senior secondary schools. One-third of the girls were unfamiliar with the symptoms of sexually transmitted diseases and the consequences of unsafe sex. 30% think that HIV can be cured and not that dangerous. 49% of girls gave their opinion that condoms should not be given to young girls. 41% were confused regarding the usage of condoms, and 32% of young girls thought that condoms should be used by married women only. These results were highly alarming because the situation in India regarding sex education is not pleasant. Sex education and the norms associated with it cause trouble among teenagers. Lack of gender equality and sex education at the school level is the main reason for such problems (McManus & Dhar, [2008](#)).

People who had previous knowledge regarding sex education are less likely to have sexual encounters as compared to those who haven't. On the other hand, sexually active women who had sex education are less likely to experience unplanned pregnancies than those who had no such kind of knowledge (Zelnik & Kim, [1982](#)).

Source of Sex Education

To know the differences between girls with sex education and girls without sex education, an experimental study was conducted in urban areas of England among school students with an age range of 12 to 16 containing control and experimental groups. One group received sex education, while the other one was not provided with sex education. During research, students were asked about their close friends and their sexual lives because the study was exploring the impact of friend circles and the sexual life of youth. The result shows that students who were aware of sex education performed well and were aware of sexually transmitted diseases (Wight et al., [2022](#)).

Sex Education in Rural Areas

Sex education and its benefits are not limited to educated people, as uneducated people need it the most. Most of the girls are not allowed to have sex education lectures at school and college level due to the fact that their mothers were illiterate. Sex education course was introduced in the United States, where $\frac{3}{4}$ of young men and women live in metropolitan areas. After delivering sex education in those areas, people show remarkable changes in their attitudes. They were less engaging in unsafe sexual activities, and young females used precaution before their first intercourse, over all the ratio of indulging in sexual activities wasn't reduced, but precautions were observed. These findings were based on two nationwide surveys conducted in the mid and late 1970s (Zelnik & Kim, [1982](#)).

Role of Parents

Sex education and gender-specific issues are common all around the world. In many areas, even sex education is seen as a threat at the school level. The perceptions of young, educated females were in favor of sex education and their sources of sex education were mainly friends or gadgets. Parents play an important role in allowing or permitting their daughters to acquire sex education. To know their perception, one thousand sixty-five parents were taken as a sample and telephonic survey method was used in Minnesota. Questions asked were open-ended and were regarding attitudes and perceptions of parents regarding sex education. This survey was conducted because of the controversy over sex education programs in public schools. Most of the parents exhibited typical stereotypes about sex education. When participants were explained that a combination of methods would be employed to address early pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, they recognized the importance of sex education in schools. This program would also provide knowledge about bodily parts, developmental changes and precautions to mitigate potential sexual harm. Consequently, they were convinced that sex education must be an integral part of public schools. Apart from parents who were against this idea, many parents encouraged sex education in middle school, and even conservative parents accepted the importance of sex education among teenagers. Parents agreed to all points highlighted in the sex education program. More than half the majority agreed that their kids need to get sex education at an early level so that they would have to face fewer negative consequences later in their lives. Parents were encouraged to ask questions and give suggestions to improve sex education methods in public schools (Eisenberg, Bernet, Bearinger & Resnick, 2008).

Role of Religion

Religion plays an important role in gaining sex education. Women from collective cultures or conservative societies usually end up with no sex education. Focus groups and semi-structured interview was conducted to explore immigrant Muslim girls and their communication regarding sex education with their mothers. The interview contained 38 members comprising mothers and daughters. In this semi-structured interview, the discussion was held to understand the perception regarding school-based sex education. Thematic analysis shows that little communication was held between mothers and daughters regarding sex education. Most of the girls gave their point of view regarding school-based sex education (SBSE); according to them, classes at school were very informative and gave them new knowledge regarding sexually transmitted diseases and sexual behaviours. Most of the girls were not attending those classes due to conservative beliefs and family pressures (Orgocka, [2007](#)).

Methodology

Qualitative research method was used as it helps in gathering data in depth and collect ideas from various mindsets, also it is best choice to for this topic, to highlight an issue, to gain an insight regarding sex education. The objective of study was to find out different sources regarding sex education among females and to explore female's perceptions and difficulties encountered by them in regard of sex education.

Research Questions

- ▶ The research questions of the study were:
- ▶ What are the sources of sex education among females?
- ▶ What is the perception of females regarding the acquisition of sex education?
- ▶ What are the difficulties faced by females in attaining sex education?



Sample

The Sample comprised of undergraduate females, between the ages of 20–23 years. The sample was gathered by employing a convenience sampling strategy. The inclusion criteria include undergraduate female students and participants with the age range of 20–23 years while physically handicapped students were excluded.

Procedure

Three focus groups were conducted for data collection, each comprised of six participants. The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, and for that purpose, an interview guide was prepared. It was based on existing literature, and nine open-ended questions were asked. The interview guide was further refined by the interview guide based on experts' opinions. The pilot study was conducted in which six participants participated in the focus group. Based on the pilot study, an interview guide was further refined, which led to nine open-ended questions. The focus groups were conducted in the time range of 50 – 75 minutes. All participants were encouraged to speak freely and express their point of view. The audio recording device was used to record the opinions of all participants with their consent. Data was analyzed by employing thematic analysis, specifically focusing on subjective human experiences. The approach deliberately highlighted individual feelings, perception, and understanding as the utmost object of study in which the deductive method was used. This method is used to see how generalizations apply to specific phenomena. In this approach, codes were generated from the data, and these codes were made into categories and themes (Hyde, 2000).

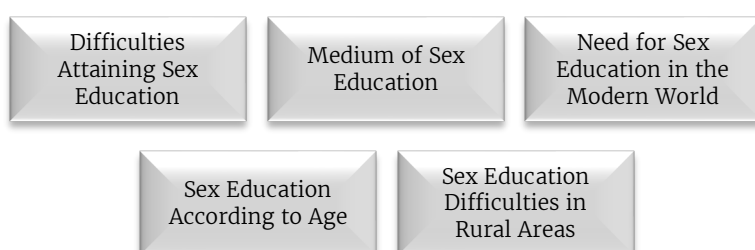
Findings and Discussion

Through thematic analysis, fifteen themes were generated. Culture has an impact on female personalities, lifestyles, health, and reproductive behaviors. The finding of the study shows the obstacles faced by young girls in getting sex education. These difficulties include social and cultural barriers, gender-based issues, issues related to bad parenting, lack of trust in family members, difficulties faced in rural areas, taboos associated with sex, misogyny and personal experiences. Most girls got their initial sex education from their mothers. According to girls, most boys don't share problems with their mothers; instead, they explore the internet or ask their friends about sex-related knowledge. Gender inequality had a negative influence on young girls to attain sex education at home and educational centres. Mothers usually inform girls about sexual matters but don't give sex education to their sons.

The study's findings highlight the barriers adolescent girls encounter when trying to access sex education. Social and cultural impediments, gender-based concerns, issues related to poor parenting, mistrust of family members, challenges in rural locations, sex taboos, misogyny, and personal experiences are some of these challenges. Findings also indicate that social and cultural barriers have sex education taboo in society. Typically, parents steer clear of discussing sex education with their kids. Giving children age-appropriate sex education is crucial. Lack of knowledge about sex education among teenagers causes a lot of issues such as hormonal, puberty and sexual complications (McManus & Dhar, 2008). Without early sex education, a youngster may experience maltreatment and puberty problems. Information on STIs, unsanitary surroundings, lifestyle choices, and their effects was available to some of the girls. The importance of sex education was emphasized by the participants as a fundamental topic to be discussed by parents or a trusted source like an educational institute. Figure 1 displays the first five themes of sex education, which emphasise difficulties in attaining sex education and mediums of acquiring knowledge.

Figure 1

Barriers to Accessing Comprehensive Sex Education



Spreading awareness about sex education is significantly important. Sex education helps to answer all the possible stereotypes and misconceptions attached to sexual encounters (Fentahun, 2012). People have different modes and mediums to spread sex education. Initially, sex education should be provided by primary caregivers. Strong parental bonding helps young children to develop and share concerns regarding their bodily and hormonal changes. The rest of the five themes talk about the basis of sex education and the measure of security in childhood, sexually abused victims and gender-based education. Figure 2 displays the themes below.

Figure 2

Psychological and Social Foundations of Sex Education



Most of the young girls often feel reluctance to discuss sex-related issues even with their mothers, and it generates internal conflict and reflects a low sense of self-esteem. Strong and positive parental bonding plays an important role when discussing sex education. Due to this lack of parental bonding in the Pakistani indigenous culture, children hesitate to share any matter with their parents. Addressing and speaking about sex education is considered a taboo in society. When it comes to sexual matters, a child needs a trusted relationship with parents to share problems. Unfortunately, most parents don't give their kids leverage to speak on this topic as they consider it taboo. Due to this strain in relationships, children look for alternatives to satisfy curiosity. There is a high conflict between males and females attaining sex education from different internet-based sources. The last four themes talk about parental bonding, childhood abuse and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in figure 3.

Figure 3

The Psychological Impact of Parental Bonding on Child Development



It often comes true that many adolescents learn about sexual matters through informal and unreliable sources of the internet, especially through pornography and adult jokes; while adult jokes and pornography can considerably influence perceptions, they shouldn't be the fundamental medium of sexual education. Comprehensive, deferential and accurate information is crucial to maintaining and developing a healthy understanding of sexual matters. These drastically impact one perception in quite different dimensions.

Precautionary measures at primary ages can save a child's precious childhood. Reflecting a healthy bond with the mother, shouting about inappropriate touch, and defensive modes are some crucial weapons to save children from child sexual abuse. Use precise names for body parts to help children develop a good understanding of their bodies and communicate efficiently. Giving children awareness regarding good touch and bad touch makes them understand the triangle of the body. Kids must feel comfortable setting boundaries about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate touching.

Discussion

Some participants talking on this topic were open-minded, while some of them were conservative. Some of the participants were in favour of sex education, while others were emphasizing getting sex education in certain ways, such as getting sex education from the person and at age. According to the participant:

"If we start educating kids at an an early age, we should inform them about where to sit and where to not and everything. This is somehow the first step. After this, everything is included" (P1).



The taboo associated with sex education was prominent among participants as well. Most of the participants were ashamed of themselves. Bodily and hormonal changes were found to be embarrassing among females. It might also trigger their mental well-being along with their physical wellbeing. Participants felt a huge inferiority complex when they reached puberty. They hesitate to share their childhood abuse, and even after sharing, they feel embarrassed and guilty. One of the participants shared her personal experience regarding inappropriate touch:

When I was studying in the academy, one of my teachers used to touch me inappropriately, and I felt bad about it. I told my mother about it, and she stopped sending me to the academy. I didn't know everything about sex education when I was a teenager; the only thing I knew about sex education was that no one is allowed to touch body parts except parents" (P4)

It is important for children to know how to survive and defend themselves in dangerous situations. According to protection motivation theory (PMT), individuals protect themselves because of four major factors: perceived threat, perceived occurrence of an event, perceived vulnerability, perceived preventive behaviour and self-efficacy. Behavior automatically changes when an individual perceives a threat or perceived occurrence of bad events. Self-efficacy is coping with mechanisms for an individual to overcome this situation (Rogers, [1975](#)).

According to girls they feel hesitant to share about periods with mothers. Most of the participants were not having good healthy relationships with their mothers and they don't share a comfortable bond. They accepted the fact that their brothers were having different treatments compared to them. According to girls, no one in the family gives information to their brothers about bodily changes.

"We educate girls, but we don't educate boys. Due to these rapes are common" (P4)

Participants shared their experiences and exposure to rural areas. Most of the participants were stressed, anxious and fearful due to a lack of sexual knowledge from childhood. Whenever a participant talks about sex, the word "sex" typically seems like a taboo. Participants assumed that talking about such things can deliberately lead towards sexual activity or having sexual intercourse. Instead of using the word "sex", neutral words could help people to discuss such topics in a broader way to acknowledge the difficulties of people regarding sex education. The data is more likely to represent stereotypical thinking of individuals that comes into their minds due to cultural and social barriers. Victims of sexual abuse go through a lot of troubles, which include fear of physical harm, anxiety, depression, anger issues, trust issues, substance abuse, and maladjustment regarding sexuality. The most damaging abuse is childhood abuse, which later leads towards multiple personality drawbacks (Browne & Finkelhor, [1986](#)).

The mediums of sex education were different for every female. The majority of them get sexual information through their mothers, while others get information through sisters, friends, media and cousins, as one of the participants added.

"If I talk about the source of sex education, it was media or the internet. Obviously, I can't talk to my parents; it's a taboo in our society" (P1)

Parental role plays a vital role in delivering and understanding new information to kids. The girls who have comfortable bonds with their mothers were more likely to share personal information with their mothers. The attachment of child and mother is a very important part of sex education at an early age. The lack of parental bonding leads to insecurity and detachment. Sex education is important for both genders. Study shows that boys hesitate to share their ejaculating experience with their peers as compared to girls, who openly share periods with their mothers (Brooks-Gunn & Furstenberg, [1990](#)).

The mediums of sex education were of two types: safe and unsafe sources of informations. Safe sources included family members and trusted members, while unsafe sources were media, internet, pornography and friends. The female sample was selected because female feels comfortable while discussing sex education with female researchers. The male sample wasn't chosen because they won't freely interact with female researchers; they feel reluctant to express their point of view in front of female participants, and research would consume more time. Sons with close associations with family were less likely to have multiple partners. Family bonding, secure parenting and less gender discrimination leads to healthy and confident children (Roche et al., [2008](#)).

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