

## A SURVEY OF STUDENTS' KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS FAMILY LIFE AND SEX EDUCATION: A CASE OF FEMALE COLLEGE STUDENTS

F. Sahfii  
M.R. Turabi

### ABSTRACT

The study of cognition and attitudes toward family life and sex, particularly among the young population, is one of the important areas of health behaviour. This study attempts to find the degree of knowledge and attitudes of the female students of Teheran University.

The findings reveal that although the girls under the study expressed some attitudes towards family life not common in the traditional cultural patterns of Iranian society, such as selecting their own future husband, and prefer to have a boyfriend before marriage. However, they lacked the basic information on the subject of human reproductive system, family planning and venereal disease.

The findings on the desired number of children by the study group indicates that family planning education has not reached this target population and/or has had no affect on their attitudes.

On the basis of the findings of this and other studies and the available literatures, a family life and sex education programme at high school level should be included in the high school curriculum in Iranian system of education.

### INTRODUCTION

There is growing interest among health professionals regarding the study of health behaviour of individuals, families and communities for application of preventive measures and utilization of health services. The study of cognition and attitudes towards family life and sex,

particularly among the young population, is one of the important areas of health behaviour.

From the bio-physiological point of view, the basic fact of maturation and development of youth is universal in all societies, irrespective of their socio-cultural condition. However, physical growth and development of teenagers, occurs earlier now than half a century ago. Consequently, the sexual maturity of youth is also more likely to be achieved earlier in contemporary societies than was previously the case.<sup>1</sup>

From a socio-cultural perspective, however, adolescents' sexual and family life behaviour is learned behaviour, influenced usually by belief systems, the value of orientations of family as a social group, and society. Therefore, such a behaviour may be different for each human group, and what was accepted in one social setting and one time may be irrelevant to another place and another time.

As Bannerman and Burton have pointed out:

“Social and technological changes which have taken place with increasing speed during the last century, such as emancipation of women, the general increase of literacy and levels of education, the technology of birth control, and mass communication, have eroded the foundations on which sex behaviour was based and presented in most societies, a situation in which the material facts are in conflict with social customs and philosophy.”<sup>2</sup>

The interest and emergence of family life education and sex education as seen in some developed societies in recent years is a social recognition of the problem.

Within a broad perspective the main objective of family life and sex education, is to assist people, particularly youth, in having successful family and sexual lives, therefore. The concept of sexual health is broad and contains various aspects of psycho-social beliefs and behaviour and bio-psychological facts.

In short, sexual questions are always partly social questions, and during socio-cultural and economic development and change, sex education becomes an important preoccupation of social learning.

On the basis of the above discussion, the main objective of this study was to investigate the knowledge and attitudes of college students to human reproduction, desired family size, and venereal diseases, and to obtain their suggestions for a sex education programme.

## STUDY DESIGN

This exploratory study was carried out in the female dormitories of Teheran University during 1977. A total of 700 students studying

towards a baccalaureate degree in various fields of study. From this population, those students majoring in biology, medicine and related sciences were excluded, as the curricula in these fields were thought to be more likely to contain some theoretical views relevant to the subject under investigation, while the content of other fields may lack such coverage.

Using random sampling, 350 students were selected and a questionnaire (after a pre-test and necessary changes were made for increasing the reliability of the data) was administered.

The questionnaire contained three sets of questions: socio-demographic; knowledge and attitudes regarding family life, human reproduction, and venereal diseases; and finally some questions to obtain suggestions for future sex education programmes.

## FINDINGS

### A. Socio-demographic information of the study group:

The average age of women who were in the study was 22.3 years, ranging between 19–25 years of age. Only 14 students were more than 25 years of age and close to 39% of them stated that they currently have a boyfriend.

The study group came from various provinces to Teheran. In terms of the urban-rural distribution of their permanent place of residence: 58% came to Teheran from various central cities of ostan; 36% from small cities; and the remaining 6% from rural areas.

The majority of the students (56.3%) majored in high school in natural sciences, 28% in literature, 13.7% in mathematics, and the remaining 2% in other fields.

Data on the level of literacy and educational achievement of the students' parents revealed that: 9.4% of their fathers and 28% of their mothers were either illiterate or could write or read only. Over 16% of their fathers had primary schooling; nearly 49% had secondary schooling, and 17.4% had college education. Comparative data for the students' mothers respectively was 31.1%, 34.2% and 2.3%.

### B. Cognition

For descriptive purposes cognition is defined as the knowledge one has obtained about some phenomena or some person.<sup>3</sup> Operationally, in this study, the cognition of the study group regarding reproductive systems and venereal diseases was measured by the following questions:

- What days are the most fertile period in a woman's monthly cycle?
- What are some ways and means of preventing a pregnancy?
- Did you receive any health information regarding maturity (puberty) before it actually happened? If yes, from whom

did you receive such information?

How are venereal diseases (e.g. gonorrhoea and syphilis) transmitted to another person? How can these diseases be prevented?

Less than half of the students (49.7%) responded correctly to the question "What days are the most fertile period in a woman's cycle?" The analysis was extended to find the relationship between the major field of study in high school and current knowledge. This was based on the assumption that the content of a natural sciences curricula could contain some information about the physiology of the human reproductive system, while the curricula of other fields of study would usually lack such information.

The data showed that the proportion of students with a natural science major and correct knowledge about the subject was less than when compared with those students that had mathematics as a major field (54.3%) in comparison with nearly 60.0%). The  $X^2$  test showed the differences to be significant (Table 2).

Over 60% of the study group had knowledge about one of the ways or means of preventing a pregnancy. The most frequent answers respectively were: pill, I.U.D., condom, etc.

Nearly 75% of the students acknowledged that they had received some health information before reaching maturity. The majority of respondents stated that it was their mother who had provided them with such information.

Data showed that there was a relationship between mothers' educational background and the students' knowledge about maturity. That is, 80% of those respondents who had received some information before maturity, had mothers with at least a high school education. This finding was significant at the  $P < 0.001$  level. As the proportion of those students with mothers who had a college education was very small, the findings from this group would not be meaningful (Table 1).

The reported source of health information for the study group were: mothers 40%; friends and neighbours 27%; sisters 16%; teachers 10%; and finally 6% from the mass media.

Data on the cognition of the study group for the question "How are venereal diseases (gonorrhoea and syphilis) transmitted to another person?" showed that unfortunately, over half of these college students did not know how these diseases can be transmitted, although the name of these diseases "bemari amizeshi" reflects the mode of transmission. Table 3 shows that 46% of the respondents stated the correct answer to the above question for gonorrhoea, and only 37.4% for syphilis.

### C. Attitude:

Attitude is defined as the feeling one has towards a person, situation, or object.<sup>4</sup> In this study, attitudes of the study group are measured through the following questions:

In your opinion, what is the ideal age of marriage for a girl?

In your opinion, what is the best way of selecting your future husband?

In your opinion, is it necessary that parents supervise their daughter during the engagement period?

How many children will you wish to have?

In your opinion, is it necessary to establish a family life and sex education programme? If your answer is positive, at what age should such a programme begin, and by whom?

Table 4 shows the response of the study group to the question "In your opinion, what is the best way of selecting your future husband?" While the majority (62%) stated "to be introduced and get to know the man that you will marry", nearly 15% preferred the traditional way of "Khastegari", through the man's family; 5.7% of the students selected the answer of proposal by girl to the man, and the remaining either did not know or did not answer.

The relationship between religiosity and the expressed way of the selection of a future husband was measured and found to be significant at  $P < 0.001$  level. For instance, the majority of the respondents who favoured Khastegari by the man's family as a way of selecting their future husband prayed three times a day regularly or frequently.

Over 61% of the students favoured the supervision of the parents during the engagement period of their daughter and the remaining 39% disagreed with such supervision.

The students' response to the question of "How many children will you wish to have?" was varied. While 3% did not wish to have any children and only 1% preferred to have one child, nearly 45% wanted two children, over 10% wished to have three, and 35% four children. The remaining 5% did not answer.

The majority (89%) of the study group responded positively to the necessity of a family life and sex education programme. 10% felt there was no need for such a programme, and the remaining 1% did not answer.

Over 33% of students believed that sex education should begin during childhood by the parents, and should then be continued by formal schooling. Nearly 39% felt that during puberty and/or after was the best period for beginning a programme, and the remaining 28 persons did not know and/or did not answer.

The majority of the students (43%) felt that parents should give sex education to their youngsters; 38% felt that it should be taught by teachers and the remaining 19% mentioned sisters, friends and neighbours.

On the question of the best source of sex education materials, the study group favoured the following sources: 44% available literature (books, journals, etc.); 34% T.V., 8% radio, and the remaining

14% did not know and/or did not answer.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

During the last few decades which have been concomitant with overall socio-economic development, it seems that some changes have taken place in the behavioural patterns of Iranian families. For example, young girls were allowed to continue their education away from their home town, in such a metropolitan city as Teheran.

However, on the basis of the findings of this study, the students lack the basic information on the reproductive system, family planning and venereal diseases. The findings from this study support the 1966 report of M. Soraya and others on the level of knowledge within a population of over 1000 biological science teachers at the national level in Iran.<sup>5</sup>

As the majority of the study group favoured family life education and sex education, and on the basis of the findings of this and other studies, such a programme is necessary in Iran.<sup>6</sup> The areas of knowledge considered necessary for a basic understanding of the subject are: sexual development (biological and physiological); the reproductive process; sexual dysfunction and disease; cultural aspects of sex; marriage and family (including family planning).

Teaching programmes in family and sex education require careful planning and some degree of repetition of material content, as the students move through school years.

The teacher or person dealing with the subject should be a person who inspires confidence in the students and who is able to deal with all types of relevant questions on the subject.

Table 1. Literacy and Educational Attainment of the study group's parents.

Parents Literacy and Educational Attainment	Father		Mother	
	No.	%	No.	%
Illiterate or can only read/ or write	33	9.43	97	27.71
Primary school	57	16.28	109	31.14
Secondary school	171	48.86	120	34.29
College education	61	17.43	8	2.28
Not known	28	8.00	16	4.57
Total	350	100.00	350	100.00

Table 2. Cognition of study group about most fertile period in woman's monthly cycle in relation to high school's field of study.

Field of Study	M.F.P.		Correct		Wrong		Not Answered		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Natural science	107	54.3	78	39.6	12	6.1	197	100.0		
Mathematics	28	59.6	13	27.6	6	12.8	47	100.0		
Literature	37	37.0	59	59.0	4	4.0	100	100.0		
Other field	2	33.3	2	33.3	2	33.4	6	100.0		
Total	174	49.7	152	43.4	24	6.9	350	100.0		

$P < 0.001$   
 $P < 0.005$



Table 4. Suggested ways of selecting future husband in relation to degree of religiosity of the study group

N = 350

W.S.F.H. *Religiosity	Khastegari by man's family	Be introduced and get to know him	Proposed by girls	Do not know	Did not answer	Total
	No. %	No. %	No. %	No. %	No. %	No. %
Pray regularly	27 19.5	73 52.5	11 7.9	26 18.7	2 1.4	139 100.0
Pray sometimes	8 7.7	83 80.6	4 3.9	7 6.8	1 1.0	103 100.0
Do not pray	17 15.7	61 56.5	5 4.6	21 19.5	4 3.7	108 100.0
Total	52 14.9	217 62.0	20 5.7	54 15.4	7 2.0	350 100.0

W.S.F.H. = Ways of selecting future husband

\*Religiosity is in terms of praying (Namaz)

P < 0.001