

Attitudes of Adolescent Students in Thiruvananthapuram Towards Gender, Sexuality, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research tried to gather background information for developing a syllabus and curriculum for Life Skills Education for adolescent students. The research probed the levels of information, understanding, and attitudes of school-going adolescent students towards gender, sexuality, sexual and reproductive health, and rights of adolescents (GSSRHS).

The study took place in six schools in Trivandrum district in the state of Kerala. The study was participatory and included both quantitative and qualitative techniques to gather data from the field. As research tools, the researcher developed 30 handouts to facilitate the sessions as modules. The study was conducted as workshop sessions on different subjects. A total of 184 students participated in different workshop sessions. The study tried to find the present level of information, understanding, and attitudes of the students about the following areas:

- Gender and its social and cultural construction
- Changes during adolescence
- Sexuality
- Sexual and reproductive health
- Sex education
- Rights related to GSSRHS of adolescents

The study revealed strong gender discrimination in expectations from boys and girls, in work participation, and roles and responsibility in society. Adolescent students imbibed these differences and started to propagate them. It was difficult for them to have heterosexual friendships. Such friendships connoted sexual relationships. Both boys and girls faced a lot of restrictions on expressing their feelings. Girls suffered more from these restrictions. They were controlled in their mobility and relationships. This affected their personality and their freedom. Over-consciousness about marriage, virginity, and chastity, made the girls' lives miserable.

The girls were mostly unaware about the sexual and reproductive organs of boys, but boys were more aware about the female body. All the boys were aware of pornographic material and admitted seeing it. The girls were not aware about such material.

The gendered conditioning the adolescents received at home continued in their schools, society, in religious forums, etc.—wherever they interacted as part of their self-formation. It shaped their relationships, their understanding of the body, sexuality, acceptable behaviour, the kind of work they could do, the amount of freedom they could possess, etc. This shaped their personality, understanding, attitudes, and their self esteem.

Society has a lot of expectations in terms of the behaviour of “good boys” and “good girls,” which the students were forced to live up to. The attributes (according to the respondents) that society expects in men are strength (both mental and physical), being powerful, being independent, being the breadwinner for the family, being a protector, etc. Women are expected to be loving, caring, servile, dependent on men, weak, etc. The adolescents were conditioned by these stereotyped roles. They thought in the same ways as their parents or society think.

Boys had more access to and the freedom to acquire different kinds of information, including pornographic material. Boys and girls were aware about general health, STDs and about HIV/AIDS, but girls were not aware about masturbation. The main sources of restrictions were parents, teachers, relatives, etc. Mothers were closer to their children. Both boys and girls were restrained from being intimate with their own bodies. Both boys and girls said they would not allow anybody to touch their body. The majority of boys legitimised inappropriate sexual behaviour, such as disturbing girls by passing comments and teasing them.

The adolescent period, which is one of the most significant periods in the life of an individual, the time when each individual formulates his or her thinking patterns, is when youngsters imbibe the value system of society. The values that predominates in society influence their life and they start developing an understanding of their personalities, feel the pressures of expectations from society, adopt their roles and responsibilities in society, home and schools, in man-woman relationships, and develop their sexuality. The amount of energy they acquire and replenish during this time is part of the beauty of adolescence.

This life stage would be facilitated if adolescents were properly oriented and influenced. This has to occur through understanding different adolescent personalities and adopting various skills to enable them to face various situations in life. This should include a vision of a society based on gender equality and the basic rights of each individual.