

Pakistani youth prefers peers for sexuality information

Young people in Pakistan have many questions about sex and sexuality but most are too shy or too scared to seek a health care provider. Boys turn to their friends, girls to their mothers or sisters. Neither is very keen to consult schoolteachers about sexual health information.

Especially young people between 14 and 17 years of age turn out to have a high and unmet need for information about their sexual and reproductive health. Young people (18-24) are found to be better able to find their way on the Internet and are more confident in seeking health care providers.

Gender differences at play

Both boys and girls prefer their own social circles for acquiring information about SRHR. Fathers say they would want to talk to their sons about issues of puberty and reproductive health, but in reality they hardly ever do. Boys prefer talking to their friends rather than their fathers with whom they feel too uncomfortable. Mothers discuss issues like menstruation and fertility with their daughters but some feel unable to do so. As one mother said: *“There are times when I cannot advise my children because of cultural values; as a result I invite other people to counsel them”*. Girls say they ask their mothers and sisters for advice or, if family relations are not so close, they turn to their friends.

Young LGBT people avoid talking to their parents about SRHR. They seek support from their (online) friends.

Mixed feelings about Internet

Young people, their parents and the health care providers all have mixed feelings about the usefulness and influence of the Internet, when it comes to SRH information. Since there is so much information online, it is hard for young people to know what is reliable and what is not. They are also scared that someone will trace their online behaviour. What they really would prefer is chatting or emailing with someone personally. Parents and health care providers are afraid that uncontrolled access to the Internet may make young people more eager to have sex, and also at a younger age.

Providers not always provide

Facts - ASK programme in Pakistan

Where? Lahore, Karachi and Quetta.

By whom?

ASK alliance in Pakistan:

- Rutgers WPF
- Rahnuma-Family Planning Association
- Madadgaar helpline
- Visionary Foundation
- HANDS
- PIDS
- KIND
- ITA
- Chanan Development Association

For whom?

Young people (10-24 years old) as well as LGBT youth

Scope of the research

33 focus group discussions (11 per district) with young men and women of different age groups (8-12 members per FGD); 120 in-depth interviews with formal and informal providers; assessment of printed hand-outs and folders; literature review.

There are many different providers: trained and untrained providers, conservative and liberal providers. Young people cannot be sure whom they will meet at the health facility. Health care providers generally believed they were accessible for young people, but research shows their accessibility is rather poor. For example, some health facilities are only open during school hours. Moreover, not all providers were able to keep confidentiality and others were unwilling to provide contraceptives to unmarried women. However, the ASK-trained providers were found to be more aware of young people's rights and needs, and less judgemental.

Recommendations

- Make better use of the potential of peer-to-peer education, as peers tend to be the most important source for disseminating information.
- Ensure sexuality education in school also offers tools on how to use the Internet in a responsible and informed way for searching information about sexuality.
- Train more health care providers on how to make young people feel safe and comfortable in their presence, by not being judgmental and keeping confidentiality at all times. Include sensitisation on the needs of LGBT youth.

