

**Knowledge of personal and sexual development among
young people in Pakistan.**

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Abstract

Pakistan has one of the largest cohorts of young people in its history, yet research on adolescents is still relatively new in Pakistan. This study conducted 24 focus group discussions to explore young peoples' experiences of gaining knowledge on personal and sexual development. One of the most striking findings is the gendered pattern of knowledge acquisition. Young women typically gain information from a limited number of sources within the home; while young men accessed a wide variety of information sources outside the home. These findings highlight the need for gender specific information dissemination programs to young people in Pakistan. Also prominent is the event-based nature of gaining information, whereby specific events (i.e. puberty, marriage) trigger information provision to young people, however often too late to be educative. Young people were critical of the quality of information they received, which often led to confusion and stress in understanding sexual development. These findings highlight a gap in formal, neutral information sources for young people in Pakistan on personal and sexual development. Although young people highlighted the merits of school-based information delivery, low school attendance and high drop-out rates amongst girls mean that alternative mechanisms of reaching young Pakistani women with sexuality information need to be identified.

Introduction

Pakistan has one of the largest cohorts of young people in its history, with approximately 25 million adolescents and young people aged 15 and 24 years (Government of Pakistan 2001). Yet research on adolescents is still relatively new in Pakistan and sexuality among adolescents is under-researched, primarily due to social taboos restricting open discussion of sexuality, particularly amongst unmarried youth (Khan 2000). In Pakistan, as in many south Asian societies, a high priority is placed on preserving the chastity of young women before marriage. Female sexuality is tightly controlled by male elders and is the foundation of many social norms and values (Khan 1998, Khan 2000). This is expressed most severely in restrictions placed on unmarried girls and seclusion norms (*purdah*) are common from puberty onwards (Bott and Jejeebhoy 2001). Since open discussion of sexuality is discouraged, little is known of sexual attitudes and behaviour of young people in Pakistan (Khan 2000). Many adolescents in south Asia are poorly informed about sexual issues, reproductive biology and health. Low levels of school attendance, lack of sex education and attitudes that prohibit discussion of sexual issues all confound to exacerbate ignorance on these matters (McCauley and Salter 1995, Bott and Jejeebhoy 2001). There also exists ambivalence within education systems in South Asia about sex education, although this is beginning to change in the wake of the AIDS epidemic. In Pakistan there exists no formal curriculum in schools for sex education (Khan 2000).

Only recently have studies been conducted on the lives of adolescents in Pakistan (Durrant, 2000, PAVHNA 2000, Sathar *et al* 2003), however, they provide only limited data on adolescent's knowledge of puberty and sexual development. PAVHNA (2000) highlights the greater awareness of puberty amongst boys than girls. More boys (90%) than girls (80%) had discussed 'bodily changes' of puberty with peers or family members; and more boys than girls were aware of changes in the opposite sex during puberty, for example, 70% of boys had heard of menstruation, while only 30% of girls had heard of 'wet dreams'. In addition, more boys (77%) than girls (66%) were aware of how a woman becomes pregnant. Sathar *et al*

(2003) show that girls were most likely to hear about puberty from their mother, sister or a friend; while the majority of males acquired information from their male peers. There is also a suggestion that the timing of information on puberty is inadequate, with the majority of girls and boys not informed about puberty before it occurs. Three quarters of girls and two thirds of boys felt that they should have information about puberty in advance (Sathar *et al* 2003).

Although these studies provide an important first glimpse into aspects of puberty in Pakistan, such quantitative surveys are unable to provide an understanding of the context of such knowledge acquisition, for example identifying young peoples' perceptions on the type, quality and timing of the information they received and on cultural barriers to gaining information. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine young peoples' experiences in gaining knowledge of personal and sexual development within the cultural context of Pakistan. The specific objectives are; to identify the *process* and *context* of knowledge acquisition on personal and sexual development, including timing, sources and topics of information; to identify young peoples' perceptions about the adequacy of information received and preferred modes of information delivery; and to identify key gender differences in the process of gaining such information.

Methodology

This study was conducted during 2002-2003 and used focus group discussions. Twenty-four focus group discussions were conducted, 12 male groups and 12 female groups, comprising a total of 192 participants. Participants were aged between 18-25 years and unmarried or recently married (< 2 years). The lower age limit of 18 was selected so that participants had passed through puberty. The study was conducted in two cities with differing socio-cultural characteristics in the Punjab province, Lahore and Faisalabad. Lahore is a major urban centre, with high levels of education and employment. In contrast, Faisalabad is a smaller industrial city, which employs many rural migrants from surrounding villages. Therefore, the socio-cultural composition of the population is somewhat reflective of nearby villages in terms of

attitudes, behaviour, cultural norms and traditions. These two cities were selected so to include different types of urban participants.

Participant selection involved identifying clusters within each city which were of high or low socio-economic status. Within these clusters participants were recruited from households using systematic random sampling of every 10th house, until 8-10 participants were recruited for each group. Eligible participants were identified using a screening questionnaire to determine the age and marital status of young people in the household. Given the restrictions placed on the mobility of young women in Pakistani society and the sensitive nature of the discussion topics, careful attention needed to be given to the recruitment of participants. Male and female recruiters were used, who had the endorsement of local community leaders. Recruiters were accompanied by a familiar local resident who also accompanied participants to the group venue. During household recruitment, consent for participation was sought from the young person themselves and also from the appropriate guardian (parent or elder) or spouse. Participants were informed about confidentiality of the discussion and consent requested to tape-record the discussion. The group discussions were conducted within the local neighbourhood, usually in a school, meeting hall or hotel. The discussions were moderated by trained bi-lingual researchers whose characteristics matched those of the participants in terms of age and gender. Group discussion was conducted in the language preferred by participants; most were conducted in Punjabi, others in Urdu. The discussion questions covered a range of topics, including; young peoples' social activities, general health issues; knowledge of personal and sexual development issues; sources, timing and adequacy of information and preferred modes of information delivery. Each group discussion was tape recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated into English.

Data analysis involved coding the textual data by themes raised by participants and entering the coded data into the ATLAS-Ti (v. 4.2) software package. The textual data were then analysed using *thematic analysis*, which involves identifying issues, experiences and

processes from group discussions; and analysing these across the whole data set to build a comprehensive picture of collective experience. Themes are also compared between subgroups of the target population (i.e. gender, city, socio-economic status), to identify variations in behaviour or attitudes. Verbatim quotations from respondents are used to illustrate key issues or patterns of behaviour. The quotations are notated by FG1, FG2 etc to identify the different focus groups and by R1, R2 etc to identify the responses of different respondents (speakers) in the group; I denotes the interviewer.

Results

The results are presented by the two broad areas of discussion; a) the process of gaining information on personal and sexual development, and b) information provision and preferred modes of information delivery on these topics. Figure 1 summarises the process of knowledge acquisition found in this study, whereby information is received at key events in young peoples' lives. Although the key events are similar for both young men and women the information sources and type of information received differs by gender. These differences are described below.

1. Knowledge and Sources of Information

a) Knowledge of personal development

Personal development refers to the physical and emotional changes during puberty, including, physical development, menarche and wet dreams. Focus group participants were asked how young people gain information about personal development issues, their information sources, and the type and depth of the information received.

Many young women reported that they received little or no information about puberty until they had reached menarche. Some young women had awareness about menstruation from observing older sisters with sanitary pads or that they avoided prayers at certain times (i.e. during menses), and others heard about menses from older school peers. For most young

women, however, menarche represented a significant gateway to first knowledge of personal development. Menarche was a trigger for family members to provide information about menstruation or for girls to seek information about it. The quotations below are typical of young women's experiences of menarche.

When my menses started I did not know what has happened to me. I cried so much. My mother was not at home. When she came back, I told her I was going to die as I never knew what the real problem was. Mother told me to feel relax, there is nothing to worry about. (FG9 married women Faisalabad)

When it (menses) started with me the first time I was taking a bath, I did not know about it. My mother was washing clothes, when I threw my clothes down she came and told me to come out and briefed me all about it. I felt very strange but I also felt good, she was so caring. She asked me to take a tablet, eat egg, the pain also started. (FG3 married women Lahore).

Believe me I did not know (about menses), I was in 9th or 10th class, my elder sister already had these but I didn't know about that. I went to mama and told her and she told me it was not a problem and after seeing her face expression I also relaxed. (FG17 unmarried women Faisalabad)

Mothers were the most common source of information about menses for young women; but other family members within the home (i.e. older sister, sister-in-law) also provided information. Young women stated that mothers were often shy in providing information on menses and personal development and it was common for mothers to deflect the responsibility of briefing their daughter to a friend, older sister or sister-in-law. Young women also felt that mothers themselves may be ignorant about the biology of menses and therefore were unable to impart this information to their daughters. These issues are highlighted below.

When I reached home I went to the toilet to see what had happened, in the meantime my friend told my mother what had happened. My mother was so embarrassed she asked her if she knew about it (menses), when my friend said yes, my mother told her to educate me on that...My mother never discussed it. (FG5 married women Lahore)

Educated mothers easily brief us, the uneducated mothers don't have this knowledge and so they feel shy discussing it with their daughters. She will say no, discuss it with some friends. Educated mothers can educate their daughters in a better way. Since my mother is uneducated, she felt shy and told my sister to brief me about it. (FG15 unmarried women Lahore)

Young women stated that the information received about personal development largely focussed on menstrual hygiene; and neglected broader aspects of puberty, such as physical, emotional and biological changes. In addition, great emphasis was placed on instructing young women about expected social and religious behaviour after menarche. For example, family members instruct young women to preserve their modesty by wearing a *dupatta* (headscarf), avoiding male company and remaining accompanied while outside the home. In addition, young women are informed to avoid some religious practices during menstruation (i.e. reciting the Holy Koran, prayer, fasting at Ramadan). However, the reasons for these new exclusions are not made explicit to young women, for example;

R4 The girl is told she has to keep wearing the dupatta and care about shame. "You have gotten older", she is repeatedly told, "don't move around alone, keep in mind there are male members at home and sit carefully." R2 We have to be careful while sitting and standing as the dupatta will fall down...loose shirts and not tight blouses, not showing anything, are the common dress of that age. (FG3 married women, Lahore)

R4 We are instructed not to play outside, don't go outside. We feel that now we are different, we are mature. Don't go to the market alone...do not to sit with a boy or any male cousins, and we know that we are older (grown up) now. R2 No one tells us about it exactly. *I Do they tell about changes which make it risky for you to sit with boys?* R7 They would only say that now you are older you are no more a child. (FG2 unmarried women Lahore)

Young men reported a greater variety of sources from which they gained information about personal development than did young women; this is partly reflective of boys' greater freedom of movement and social exposure outside the home. The information sources identified by young men included; friends and family members; religious sources; hakeems and the media. Friends were the most commonly reported source of information about the experiences of puberty, especially regarding acne, bodily hair growth, 'wet dreams', masturbation and physical development of girls. However, young men recognised that information from friends could be incomplete or inaccurate. For example; *R6 When it is all learnt from friends then there is a negative effect. R4 From friends it is all blind information, friends also don't know the facts. Everyone just tells his own experiences.* (FG19 married men Faisalabad). Information was also received from family members, in particular a cousin, uncle or brother. These family members typically provided advice on personal hygiene and hair removal in a religious context after observing boys growth of bodily hair, for example; *When I was at home and I roam around without a shirt. Then my parents saw me, that my hairs under the arms are too long. Then one of my uncles told me that these are against the teaching of Islam and should be shaved. But if I did not go without a shirt then nobody would know about it.* (FG1 unmarried men Lahore). Young men reported that the majority of fathers were unlikely to discuss personal development issues with their sons due to socio-cultural taboos; this contrasts with young women who mostly received this information from their mothers. In addition, young men stated that fathers expect boys to learn about such issues from sources outside the home or they instructed a cousin or uncle to provide advice about

personal development issues, in the same way as mothers deflect the discussion with daughters. These issues are illustrated below.

Ours is an Islamic country, the parents can't tell you that you have become an adult and this will happen with you. (FG8 unmarried men AB Lahore)

R1 An elder brother or father will hesitate... R2 Yes it may be that a father tells the boy's cousin to go and educate his child about such and such. If the father doesn't tell it himself he does make arrangements. (FG23 married men CD Faisalabad)

I think that 80% of people cannot share with their father due to embarrassment, respect and fear. Parents generally guide about cleanliness, hygiene, keeping in mind the Islamic point of view and Islamic teachings. (FG6 married male AB Lahore)

Young men received some personal development information from *madrassas* (Islamic schools), *moulvis* (religious leaders) and religious books. The information received from these sources was more detailed than other sources, but largely focussed on personal hygiene in relation to religious practices (i.e. hair removal, washing after 'wet dream'). Some information was received about menses, but only in relation to cultural / religious practices (e.g. refraining from sex during a woman's menses). Young men felt that the information imparted from religious sources was fragmented and provided no understanding of the process of puberty. For example;

If we ask a moulvi he will tell, but the moulvi remains in the circle of Islam. He will explain these things according to the Islamic code of life. (FG1 unmarried men Lahore)

When I attended the madrassa...the standard of cleanliness of the body was such that the hair on the body was cut at least once a week, and there used to be discussions

about the issues and hence the children would learn what is required of them...
(FG23 married men Faisalabad)

There are small booklets available in the market that guide about these processes, for example if this thing (wet dream) happens, you have to take a shower in order to keep yourself clean. These booklets give details of everything and guide about personal hygiene in the light of Islamic teachings. (FG12 unmarried men Faisalabad)

It is also clearly communicated in Islam and in our “Holy Book” that during the menstruation period you don’t go close to a woman. (FG11 married men Faisalabad)

Hakeems (herbal clinics) were identified as another source of information on personal development, either by seeing posters or through consulting a *hakeem*. Young men recognised that *hakeems* are a major source of misinformation about sexual processes, (e.g. wet dreams were promoted as a disease requiring a cure) and they often manipulate common misunderstandings about sexual processes to sell their products. For example; *One friend had a wet dream. We went to a hakeem and he said “Oh wet dream is no problem. You just get one month's medicine and it will be okay. I have cured patients who have wet dreams.”* (FG6 married men AB Lahore). Finally, young men also gained an awareness of menstruation from media advertisements of sanitary products for women.

[figure 1 about here]

b) Knowledge of sexual development

Sexual development referred to sexual behaviour, conception and pregnancy. Young people were asked about the sources and type of information received on sexual development, and the context of information provision. Figure 1 highlights the absence of family members as a source of information between puberty and marriage.

Young people highlighted the socio-cultural taboos in discussing sexual issues, particularly with parents or amongst those who are unmarried. While mothers played a central role in providing information about personal development to young women; parents do not play a role in imparting information on sexual development to their children. Participants reported that society expects young people will learn about sexual relations automatically after their marriage.

Pakistani environment is such that you have to have respect for a father, elder brother. You can't talk with them on these topics. We have the opportunity to talk to friends and there are many other ways, so we do not discuss with a father or elder brother. (FG19 married male Faisalabad)

If you talk to your elders about it they would snub you. They would not clarify. If you ask an elder sister she would say - never ask such things. If she herself told us, that's okay but we cannot ask her. (FG2 unmarried woman Lahore)

Family members are therefore not a source of information on sexual development for young people. Young women identified friends and the media as the most prominent sources of information on sexual development. Films and cable television were cited as sources where young women observed romance and kissing; advertisements for contraceptive products; and documentaries which featured pregnancy, child delivery and breastfeeding. Magazines and newspapers provided some information about relationships and personal/ sexual health. In addition, Islamic books contained some information about marital relations and motherhood. Science classes at secondary school provided information about animal biology, but not human development or reproduction. However, the only source of more detailed information about sexual relations was from married friends who shared their own experiences. Much of the information was suggestive rather than educative about sexual development. Some

women reported having no information on sexual relations prior to their marriage. These were typically married women who explained that there was no cable television during their adolescence; hence they had no exposure to films with suggestive sexual scenes. These women learnt about sexual relations from their husband.

Young men also reported friends and the media as prominent sources of information about sexual development. However, the media accessed by young men was different to that for women and included; electronic media (such as pornographic internet sites, CDs, videos and cable TV) and print media (such as pornographic books and magazines). The second source of information about sexual behaviour was from friends, especially married friends. The topics discussed included; pleasure and sexual techniques; masturbation, wet dreams and bodily hygiene; pregnancy, contraception and women's bodies. Other less prominent sources of information include *hakeems*, television adverts and radio discussions about contraception. Examples of these sources are shown below.

Usually video is available in every home. Video films (porn) are easily available, rent is very low 10-20 rupees per 24 hours. Those who do not have a video can hire the video as well. Video films also circulate amongst friends. Friends see these films in groups. (FG22 unmarried male Faisalabad)

One source is the internet... It's one of the major forces regarding this kind of information - films and pornography. People are not using the internet for the sake of information...rather they see sexy films and sights to get pleasure. (FG10 unmarried male Faisalabad)

The shops with cheap, sexy books have every kind of information with photographs and illustration. Similarly, when we see drama, suddenly an advertisement of *Sathi* or *Hamdam* (condoms) appears. Though we feel embarrassed at the same time everyone gets to know about these. (FG22 unmarried men Faisalabad)

2. Information Provision

a) Information prior to marriage

Marriage is an event which may trigger family members to provide information about sexual relations to young people. Often close family members, except parents, will provide such information just prior to marriage. The type and sources of information differ by gender, as summarised in figure 1. Most young women reported that they had no detailed information about sexual relations prior to their marriage; but that they were briefed on these issues from an older sister, sister-in-law, married cousin or aunt when the marriage was imminent. Some were provided with information at the time of their engagement or, more commonly, on henna day (*rasm-i-mehendi*) when women gather one to two days prior to the wedding. The information received at this time is often focussed on marital relations (i.e. responsibilities of a wife, mother and daughter-in-law), little is told about sexual relations. As a result many women still felt naïve about sexual relations before their marriage. For example;

Yes, in many homes they tell this (sexual relations) to the boys and girls to be married. They brief a little bit about it to both of them, usually the elders of home. It is told a day or two before the marriage. (FG2 unmarried woman Lahore)

Mothers and sisters don't tell but when friends gather before marriage they do inform, but it's not in detail. This thing will happen, that will happen. But the detailed information about nature of relations is not available. (FG15 unmarried woman Lahore)

About a mother's role we are told, but regarding the sexual role it is never told. In our society it is difficult for anyone to tell such a thing. (FG3 married woman Lahore)

In contrast, young men felt they had already gained some knowledge about sexual behaviour prior to marriage from their exposure to pornographic media. When marriage is imminent it

was felt to be socially acceptable for young men to seek information about sexual relations and to be provided with advice from family members. Young men therefore reported intentionally seeking information about sexual behaviour from married friends, books and videos prior to their marriage. In addition, a married cousin or uncle will typically brief young men about sexual relations prior to the wedding night. For example;

They don't ask at young ages because they know that family members will stop them from such acts. But now they are about to marry they can ask, and come to know before marriage. (FG22 unmarried male Faisalabad)

Cheap novels, you find novels like *Suhag ki pehli raat* (nuptial night) and *Shadi key bad kaya ho ga* (what happens after marriage) etc. These kinds of books are sold on the footpath for only 20 or 30 rupees. (FG19 married male Faisalabad)

The wedding day represented another opportunity for young people to be briefed about sexual relations by close family members (figure 1). However, young people felt that information provided on the wedding day was often ambiguous, indirect and lacked sufficient detail to fully understand sexual relations. Young women, in particular, remained confused about what was going to happen on the nuptial night and the provision of incomplete information simply instilled fear about the event. Young men felt that their knowledge of sexual behaviour prior to marriage lacked depth, and so men felt nervous about their sexual performance. By the time of the nuptial night young people, especially young women, experienced enormous fears, confusion and apprehensions about imminent sexual relations. Examples of this are shown below.

When I got married, no one told me anything. They only said "Don't get scared". Whatever husband asks or does, you don't get scared. We will be alone in a room and it will be a new thing. But this "don't get scared" is not enough. We remain worried, what is it from whom we don't have to be scared? (FG3 married woman Lahore)

I was married in summer, my sister in law told me. It was the night of *barat* (marriage). She told me the whole story about after marriage... believe me I had such a high temperature and that in heat of summer, I had two blankets on me. My father would say "What happened to her she was all right?" How could I say they have made me afraid of all of this (sex)? (FG5 married woman Lahore)

I think everyone is a little confused. I think that 80% or 90% are confused. How will I perform, because he has no knowledge and guidance. (FG6 married man AB Lahore)

There is a boy in our mohallah (street) who got married and did not know anything about it (sex). The girl's mother told the girl you have to tell him what to do. We don't know what happened, the boy became unconscious. There were hot words in their home, what did she do to our child... There is so much confusion on the marriage day. What is to be done and how. He did not know that is why. (FG21 married male AB Lahore)

b) Inadequacies of information provision

Overall, young people in this study felt that the information they received about personal and sexual development was inadequate in a number of areas. First, they highlighted the lack of formal sources of information. Young women felt that information they received was fragmented and incomplete; while young men felt that information sources were unreliable, such as from friends, media and *hakeems*, and often provided only sexual pleasure not educative information. For example;

Nobody educated us, we have learnt it on our own from friends. No one educates (about sex) in our country. Here the person learns a little information from society and friends and spends his life based on that knowledge. (FG21 married men AB Lahore)

If we take it in a negative sense (pornography), there is more than enough. But if we talk about training, information, protective behaviour, in then this is not at all adequate. (FG11 married male Faisalabad)

Second, information received from parents and family members was often ambiguous and superficial and so provided no detailed understanding of puberty or sexual relations.

The information needs more detail and depth. The information is vague and indirect, we assume in our mind it means this or that. The information should be explained to us properly. (FG2 unmarried woman Lahore)

My mother did not tell me other details as to how many days it (menses) will last. My mother didn't share with me all of it, then I had to go to my cousin. R8 No one even knows the reasons for periods, does anyone here know? (FG17 unmarried women Faisalabad)

Third, the type of information given is largely about personal hygiene or expected socio-cultural behaviour after puberty. Little information is provided on the biological processes related to sexual behaviour such as menses, conception, pregnancy and childbirth. For some women this information remained unclear until after their first pregnancy when they learnt about these processes from medical professionals; while some men never fully understood these biological processes. In addition, little is known about personal and sexual development of the opposite sex.

How the child is born this we don't know even after marriage, the woman may know it but we are sitting outside (during delivery). How the child is made, how it's born, these are medical questions. (FG 21 married man Lahore)

Girls start having periods, and we didn't know about what happens to boys until our husbands told us... Obviously we can't have this information through our father, brothers and cousins. (FG13 married women Faisalabad)

Yes we know about pregnancy, but how it happens, the process etc that was not known...that is not in our knowledge. We have this impression that while kissing pregnancy occurs. (FG5 married woman Lahore)

Finally, young women, in particular, felt that information provided by family members was given too late (i.e. just prior to marriage) and too suddenly, without the opportunity for a gradual understanding of sexual processes.

c) Preferred modes of information delivery

Young people were asked whether there was a need to receive information about personal and sexual development and the preferred modes of receiving such information. Many participants felt that there is a strong need for educative information from reliable sources; this was evident in all discussion groups, regardless of socio-economic background, location or gender. Three issues related to the preferred modes of information delivery were raised by participants, a) timing of information delivery, b) school-based delivery and c) community-based delivery of information.

The timing of information delivery on personal and sexual development was a critical point raised by participants. Young people highlighted that information is only given at certain events, such as menarche or the nuptial night, and this meant it was often provided too late. Young people preferred that information on personal development should be provided during puberty and before adolescents experience the physical changes, so as to prepare them for this process; and that information on sexual behaviour should be provided well ahead of marriage to avoid the undue anxiety, stress and fear on the wedding night. The quotations show the issues of timing of information delivery.

By the time he reaches college he already has gone through it, it is too late. It's important to educate him at the time when the changes are taking place...in the age of

9th the changes are already there in a child, be it a girl or boy. (FG21 married males Lahore).

If a girl knows about it beforehand then on the golden night (nuptial night) she will not keep running around...if she does not know she will weep and run around. But if she knows she will be mentally ready for the (sexual) union. (FG3 married woman Lahore)

d) School-based information

Young people identified the absence of any formal instruction on personal and sexual development and raised the issue of formal classes in schools. While school biology classes describe animal reproduction, human sexual development is not included. Furthermore only science pupils will have exposure to these topics. School-based information delivery was seen as particularly appropriate for girls as it would receive fewer objections from parents or society if the information was delivered in an educational setting; while if girls were seen to seek such information individually they may get a bad reputation. The demand for school based sexual development education was raised in every group discussion. For example;

There should be lectures available to students. Regular training should be in schools... All the children should be made to sit and listen to a lecture on it. They should be guided that you have reached this stage that you should know about these things. (FG21 married male Lahore)

For girls it should be in school and colleges. That is the best way, you are going for education, and parents will have no objection. (FG18 unmarried woman Faisalabad).

R4 College is the best source. There should be a class for it. R2 It should be in schools also. All girls of our age group certainly need it. (FG2 unmarried women Lahore)

Young people highlighted the benefits in providing personal and sexual development through the school curriculum. They stated that providing school-based instruction would mean;

- all school pupils would receive the information within regular education.
- less reliance on informal and unreliable sources (e.g. friends, media).
- an alternative to discussing such issues with parents.
- a formal, structured system of education.
- information is provided at appropriate stages of personal development.
- information is provided in a step-by-step manner in regular classes.
- an interactive format to address questions.
- positive and negative aspects of sexual processes and practices (e.g. nocturnal emission, masturbation) can be presented within a socio-cultural context.
- information can easily be imparted in single sex Government schools.
- information is regulated and delivered within the context of Islamic teaching.

In discussing the appropriate personnel to deliver personal and sexual development information, young women stated that regular teachers would be appropriate as they were trusted and familiar persons. However, young men preferred a separate team of educators as familiarity with teachers would cause embarrassment. In addition, young men reported that when teachers have attempted to impart information about sexual development, even that of animals, pupils often ridicule them. For example;

R7 Sometimes there is hesitation with a teacher...if some teachers discuss it they became famous that so and so talks about sex, it is taken as a negative thing. We have names for such teachers, so and so is very sexy. R2 The teachers don't take a risk, if he does, he will become famous. One teacher became famous in Faisalabad as sexy, though he merely taught from the chapter about the union of egg and sperm. (FG19 married men Faisalabad)

R4 Very few teachers do tell, teachers who are liberal minded, they tell in detail. I do remember one of our teachers told us about menses. R5 Some teachers discuss the anatomy of human being in the chapters of science related to the frog! R2 But there is hardly one teacher of such kind in a school who tells you... (FG22 unmarried men Faisalabad)

e) Community-based information

Participants also highlighted the need to provide personal and sexual development information to young people who do not attend school. A range of strategies were suggested to target young men in the community or at their workplaces. For example, providing information through community based institutions (e.g. scout gatherings), pamphlets, peer education and workplace meetings, especially for young male labourers. Young men felt that it was important to involve religious scholars in such community endeavours, particularly to overcome anticipated objections from these sources, for example; *R8 In fact this education should be given to unmarried youth...no one else is doing this. There are NGOs which could do so, they should visit every street and Mohallah and educate 4 or 5 boys who could tell others. R3 The moulvis would treat those NGOs in such a way that they cannot survive. R6 Religious scholars should be given this task, the people listen to them, they should be motivated. There is hold of religion in our lives, if these scholars convey it, then it would be a different thing.* (FG19 married men Faisalabad)

In contrast, there were mixed feelings about community-based information provision for women. Some felt that women would risk negative consequences of attending a centre to discuss sexual issues. Others felt that information could be passed in community groups with parental endorsement if parents were involved in the process. These issues are expressed below;

When such institution or training centres are made and the girls go there, how would those girls be looked at, our society is such if the girls go for such training there will be remarks passed at her. It is best at schools, a period allotted... (FG6 married male Lahore)

I think that our elders would not like it. When we go home and discuss it they (parents) would say oh you went for this kind of discussion, they will not like it. But it is useful for us... (FG2 unmarried woman Lahore)

First give classes for them (parents), to educate them about these kind of issues and change their attitude and later on for their children. If they themselves don't know about the importance of such issues, then how would they allow their children to go to such centres? (FG3 married woman Lahore)

Discussion

This study provides a greater understanding of the context in which young people gain information about personal and sexual development. While the results of this study cannot be generalised to all young people in Pakistan, such contextual information provides valuable new information on the process of knowledge acquisition and the issues of young people. Although the group discussions were stratified by socio-economic status, city, marital status and gender, few patterns in knowledge acquisition were evident by any strata aside from gender. The key findings of this research are discussed below.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this study is the gendered pattern of knowledge acquisition. The differences in mobility of young men and women are reflected in their patterns of knowledge acquisition. Young women typically gain information from a limited number of sources within the home, extended family and media. In contrast young men accessed a wide variety of information sources outside the home. In addition, the type of

information gained differs by gender; young men were more likely to be exposed to sexually explicit pornographic media while women receive vague and superficial sexual information from family members. A second prominent finding of this study is the context in which personal and sexual development information is received by young people. Figure 1 highlights the event-based nature of information delivery, whereby specific events trigger family members to provide information, often too late to be educative. Furthermore, between these events young people are left to seek information independently, which often leads to a haphazard and fragmented knowledge of personal and sexual development by the time of marriage. These findings highlight the gap in formal, neutral information sources for young people on personal and sexual development. The strong gender differences have critically important implications for any program of information dissemination to young people in Pakistan. Such programs will need to be gender specific to target young women in the home or familial environment, while young men can be accessed in through social and community networks.

Although there were gender differences in the process of gaining information, young men and women were equally critical of the quality of information they received, which often led to confusion and stress in understanding sexual development and relations. Much information was focussed either on social and religious behaviour, personal hygiene or was sexually explicit rather than educative. Therefore, there exists a gap in knowledge on the biological, emotional and physical changes during puberty and the process of sexual development which links puberty, fertility, conception and pregnancy. Information was also provided too late to enable a gradual understanding of sexual development and lacked sufficient detail to fully understand sexual relations. Any program of sexual education would need to consider the balance of socio-cultural information with fundamental reproductive biology, giving prominence to the latter. In addition the timing of such information delivery would be critical.

Young people in this study highlighted the benefits of school-based provision of personal and sexual development information. It was felt that those attending schools would benefit from a reliable, neutral and regulated source of information, which was delivered at appropriate ages. Delivery within the Government's school curricula was also less likely to receive criticism from parents or society and was seen as an effective way to inform young women. In addition the curriculum could be designed to reflect the socio-cultural context of Pakistan; while providing the biological aspects of puberty currently absent from any other source. However, a number of issues were raised that have importance for the delivery of sexual education curricula in schools; in particular whether the classes would be provided by regular school teachers or outsiders; these preferences differed by gender, suggesting different modes of delivery may be appropriate for young men and women. Classes also need to be placed in the curriculum so that all pupils receive the information not only those in science electives. Furthermore the single sex delivery of classes is critical, and can be achieved through the single sex composition of Government schools in Pakistan.

Although the merits of school-based information delivery were highlighted, this strategy may have little impact on young women due to their low levels of school attendance and high drop out during adolescence (Sathar *et al* 2003). Many young women are engaged in activities within the home and are not linked to any social institutions; they therefore remain out of reach of many social programs. Accessing these young women with personal and sexual development information is of critical importance and remains a particular challenge. Mothers are shown to play an important role in imparting information about personal development to adolescent girls; however their discomfort in discussing these issues often meant they deflected the role to other family members. Parental embarrassment in discussing sexual issues, including menstruation, with adolescent children is not uncommon in Asia (Bott and Jejeebhoy 2001). Parental concerns for the chastity of daughters often dominates parental relationships with adolescent girls; and parents fear that discussing sexual issues with adolescents will imply approval for pre-marital activity (Bott and Jejeebhoy 2001).

Supporting mothers in the provision of information may be one strategy to inform young women. One issue, however, is the low education level of women in Pakistan, which may mean that mothers themselves do not have adequate vocabulary and knowledge to discuss the biological aspects of puberty. This implies that mothers may require some education as well as support and encouragement on ways to discuss these issues with daughters. However, even with such support the socio-cultural norms which discourage discussion of sexual issues may remain. A further alternative to inform young women on personal and sexual development is through community based initiatives, such as community centres, meetings or within activities of youth clubs (i.e. girl guides, red crescent youth societies). Certain NGOs have enormous potential to provide reproductive information within the community, as they have access to a broad spectrum of youth and currently provide information on health and nutrition (Khan 2000). However, the constrained mobility of women and the negative community perceptions of girls attending centres to discuss sexual issues may impact the effectiveness of community strategies. Any strategy to access young women needs to recognise that their activities are often controlled by others (i.e. parents, community leaders) and including these gatekeepers in community based initiatives may be the most effective way to receive endorsement for the attendance of young women.

Conclusion

Adolescents are generally recognised to have sexual and reproductive health needs that differ from those of adults; however, these are still poorly understood and under researched in Pakistan. Although many NGOs are eager to develop programs for adolescents, there exists only a limited evidence base from which to develop programs and policies targeted at young people (Sathar *et al* 2003). This study provides a greater understanding of how young people acquire knowledge of personal and sexual development in a context that discourages the open discussion of such issues. The most prominent finding remains the strong gender differences in information acquisition, and the need to develop gender specific information delivery strategies to most effectively inform young people on sexual development issues. Strategies to

inform young women need to explore home and community-based initiatives in addition to delivery within schools. While the majority of young men will be reached by school-based initiatives, out of school males should not be ignored.

Any initiative to provide information on personal and sexual development to young people in Pakistan is unlikely to be successful without the involvement of a range of gatekeepers. In particular little is known of the views of parents, teachers, religious leaders or community organisations on the acceptance of sexual education or on appropriate modes of delivery of this information. Further in-depth research is required to identify the views and issues of these various stakeholders. Future policy and program initiatives that are based on an appropriate understanding of young peoples' requirements and include the concerns of various gatekeepers will be vital.

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Figure 1: Process of Knowledge Acquisition on Personal and Sexual Development.

