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Reproductive and Sexual Health among Youth in Rural Andhra Pradesh: Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices

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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Reproductive health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and process (United Nations, 2004). Reproductive health, therefore implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex and that they have the capability to reproductive and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so. The basic elements of reproductive health are responsible reproductive and sexual behaviour, practice of widely available family planning services, effective control of Reproductive Tract Infections (RTIs) including Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), prevention and management of infertility, elimination of unsafe abortion, prevention and treatment of malignancies of reproductive organs (WHO, 1994). Youth are particularly vulnerable because of their lack of information and access to relevant services in most countries. The population classified as "youth" between ages 15 and 24, is estimated to be one billion and it constitutes nearly 18 per cent of world population, about 14 per cent of the population in the more developed regions and 19 per cent of the population in the less developed regions (United Nations, 2004). While in India, the youth population (15-24 years) was 185 million in 2001, constituting 19 percent and reached to 240 million in 2011.

Entry into reproductive life is a key transition in a person’s life and the choices and behaviour patterns acquired during this early stage will typically shape the subsequent life course (United Nations, 1998). Moreover, youth is a period during which the prospects for a healthy reproductive life can not be compromised. Major risk factors in youth include premature entry into sexual relationships, multiple partners, high-risk sexual behaviour and lack of basic health information and service. Young people are society's potential for growth and development. They are the parents, workers and leaders of tomorrow. Meeting the reproductive health needs of today's young adults requires more than solving problems. It also requires investing in the potential of young people and helping them to prevent and solve problems for themselves. However, the current and upcoming generations of young people face important challenges and the size, health and prosperity of the world’s future population will partly depend on the success of meeting their educational and reproductive health needs. The sexual and reproductive health needs of youth are not yet adequately addressed under many primary health care systems and many youth do not have access to information and services to protect their health and make choice freely and responsibly (United Nations, 1999). Reviewing the adolescent as well as youth sexual and reproductive behaviour, Jejeebhoy (1996) pointed out that Reproductive health in general and youth reproductive health needs in particular are poorly understood and ill served in India.

Youth males face reproductive health risks like Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), including AIDS with an increased risk of injury, illness and its complications. Moreover, male youth know little about reproductive health, have incorrect information about reproductive physiology, safe sex, fertility, contraception, have heard rumors or have received misleading information about reproductive and sexual health issues, many have negative attitudes about contraception and all these aspects are severe concerns of researchers and policy makers. Thus, meeting the reproductive health needs of youth requires not only providing services, but also creating awareness, changing attitudes, overcoming community opposition, building understanding and educating adults about their reproductive health needs.

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Most of the researches and services are directed towards women in their late twenties or older and women who have already completed child bearing. Youth especially males typically are left out of reproductive and family planning services. A variety of traditional, institutional, religious and political business and myths about sexuality have made it difficult to develop effective programmes that provide accurate reproductive and sexual health information to young people. In addition, many people believe that providing family planning services to youth lead to experimentation and promiscuity. Programs should give accurate information to young people that provide a basis for making responsible decisions. Successful programs should reach out to youth in their own school environment, recreation centers and work sites.

There is pressing need to conduct research focusing on reproductive and sexual health issues of youth especially in the rural areas since many girls and boys have less knowledge, attitudes and not exposed to systematic instructions in life skills, reproductive and sexual health matters. Since most of youth will marry and began family life in their teens, the need for providing reproductive and sexual health knowledge to them cannot be ignored. In the context of early marriages, teenage pregnancies prevalent in the community, where pre-marital sex, unsafe sex and looming threat of STD and HIV/AIDS, which is a major public health problem throughout the world and especially in the developing countries like India. However, youth reproductive and sex health issues and education need to be broached with more sensitively through the active support of the parents and the community.

The prevalence of sexual initiation before age 18 is relevant indicator of reproductive and sexual health, because psychological and emotional immaturity is often associated with risk-taking behaviour. Young people are not empowered with life skills that would enable them to act on their knowledge, increase decision-making in sexual encounter and encourage responsible behaviour. Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), especially Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), pose major threats to youth. Thus, keeping above reproductive and sexual health concerns of youth, the present study therefore aimed to understand the status of reproductive and sexual health knowledge, attitudes and practices among youth in rural Andhra Pradesh.

IMPORTANT OF YOUTH

Youth is an age when boys and girls undergo sudden physical, emotional and psychological changes and intensely aware of their sexuality. While passing through this phase of growing up many doubts and questions arises in their minds, giving rise to worries as well as anxieties and they do not know to whom to confide it. The messages they receive from peers, parents and media are at times conflicting, leads rise in anxiety and confusion. All these influence reproductive and sexual health issues of youth especially in rural areas. Therefore, an in depth primary study on knowledge, attitudes and practices of reproductive and sexual health matters is necessary and it will help to identify areas where intervention is required urgently. This study will help policy makers, programmers planners and educators to better understand, assess the needs of youth and develop an appropriate need based family welfare services, educational programmes and Information, Education and Communication materials related to sexual and reproductive health concerns of young people.

KNOWLEDGE ON REPRODUCTIVE AND SEXUAL HEALTH ASPECTS

The knowledge on reproductive and sexual health concerns is lowest among the youth in the younger age than their older age counterparts. Youth who belongs to Muslim community have less awareness on many reproductive and sexual health concerns. Unmarried rural youth were having less awareness on reproductive and sexual health concerns than the married youth. Youth of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe were having less awareness on reproductive and sexual health matters than the forward caste youths.

Illiterate youth were having less knowledge on reproductive and sexual health matters and it is
vice-versa among youth with higher education. Rural youth who studied in government institutions were having good knowledge on many aspects of reproductive and sexual health than the youth who attended private institutions. Occupational category of youth influences the knowledge of many reproductive and sexual health matters. Knowledge on reproductive and sexual health matters is significantly increasing with increase in the level of income of the respondents.

The least knowledge is noticed among the 'highly religious' youth than those who opined 'somewhat religious' and 'not at all religious' on many reproductive and sexual health matters. Youth who were living with father alone were having higher level of knowledge on reproductive and sexual health matters as compared to those who were living with mother alone and with both parents. Rural youth who had media exposure 'regularly' had good knowledge on reproductive and sexual health matters than youth who had 'occasional' and 'never' media exposure.

ATTITUDES ON REPRODUCTIVE AND SEXUAL HEALTH ASPECTS

Attitudes on reproductive health concerns will be lower among younger age youth than their older age counterparts. The mean scores of attitudes on reproductive health matters viz., female reproductive system, family planning matters, STD and HIV/AIDS and Sexual aspects by religion of the respondents are more or less similar. The marital status of the rural youth has no effect on attitudes of reproductive and sexual health matters. Forward caste rural youth have higher mean score of attitudes on reproductive and sexual health aspects as compared to youth who belongs to Backward Caste, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe.

Education level of rural youth is positively associated with the attitudes on reproductive and sexual health matters. Youth who studied in government institutions have higher mean score of attitudes on reproductive and sexual health matters as compared to those who studied in private institutions. With regard to occupational category, except the attitudes of youth on STD and HIV/AIDS, other variables have no influence. With an increase in the level of income, the mean score of attitudes are also increasing.

Religiosity of youth influences only on the attitudes on female reproductive system and family planning matters. Rural youth who were presently living with father alone have higher mean scores of attitudes on sexual aspects as compared to youth who were living with mother alone and with both father and mother. The youth who had 'regular' media exposure have higher mean score of attitudes on family planning matters as well as STD and HIV/AIDS issues as compared to youth who had 'occasional' as well as 'never' exposure to media.

PRACTICES ON REPRODUCTIVE AND SEXUAL HEALTH ASPECTS

The mean score of practices of reproductive and sexual health aspects is lower among the younger age youth as compared to older age youth. The reproductive and sexual health practices of youth are not significant in relation to their religious category. Rural married youth were having positive and healthy reproductive and sexual health practices in the study area. Caste has no influence on the practices of reproductive and sexual health concerns of youth. Lower the education level, lower the reproductive and sexual health practices and vice-versa was observed in the present study. Youth who studied in government institution were having better reproductive and sexual health practices than those youth who attended private institutions.

The reproductive and sexual health practices vary by their level of occupation. Lower the income level, lower the reproductive and sexual health practices and vice-versa was noticed from the findings in the study area. The level of religiosity of youth has no influence on reproductive and sexual health practices. Youth who were currently living with father alone were having better reproductive and sexual health practices in comparison to those who live with mother alone and with both father and mother. Youth who had 'regular' media exposure had positive reproductive and sexual health practices than youth who had 'occasional' as well as 'not at all' media exposure.
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NGO'S IN INDIA: THE CHALLENGES OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT
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ABSTRACT

"Gender equality and Women's empowerment are widely recognized as the key components of the social and economic development of a country. Development of gender planning implies taking account of the fact that women and men play different roles especially in the third world and therefore have different needs and provide both the conceptual frame work and the methodological tools for incorporating gender into the planning of their socio-economic programmes. At the policy level in India the changes are visible with the advent of the United Nations decade for women (1975-85). Greater stress is placed on the economic and social development of women and a greater understanding of the plight of low income women. With welfare oriented family centered programmes which assumed motherhood as the most important or rather the only role for women the shift is towards diversity approaches emphasizing the productive role of the women. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyses the attitude and actions towards empowerment of women by the government and non-governmental organizations in India.

KEYWORDS: NGO, MDG, SEWA, Gender ideology, Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality and women’s empowerment are widely recognized as the key components of the social and economic development of a country. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG) promotes gender equality and empowerment of women as one of their seven goals. There is a broad consensus that the achievement of the MDG’s rests on the realization of the equitable society where women are empowered and enjoy equal rights. Acknowledging the significance of women empowerment, the Ministry of Rural Development of India (GOI) has stated that women’s empowerment is critical to ensuring the socio-economic development of

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communities. Non-governmental organizations are the non-profit voluntary groups established at local, national and international level.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are playing an important role in the promotion of gender equity and the empowerment of women in the society over the past few decades. The most salient role of NGO is to provide women with the opportunity to participate in the development process. NGO's play an important role in mobilizing women through advocacy work, offering them counseling and training for capacity building and generating awareness about their rights and entitlements etc. catering to women's basic needs of health, education and water and promoting their rights in order to address the underlying causes of deprivations on their owns. NGO’s have proven to be effective in empowering women. For example, Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in Gujarat contributed to promoting the livelihoods of poor women through various interventions in the areas of health care, child care, legal services, vocational and entrepreneurship training, insurance, housing among others. The Indian government also recognizes the effective functioning of NGO’s. The National policy for the empowerment of Women (2001) advocates the involvement of NGO’s in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and review of all policies and programmes affecting women.

Voluntary Effort and Women Empowerment in India

In serving the cause of poor and women, voluntary organizations are considered to be superior to the government for certain obvious reasons. The members of a voluntary organization are willing to spend time, energy and even money for an activity which they think is good. This motivation and commitment make them work more sincerely for the cause when compared to government officials. The above argument does not mean that all voluntary organizations are committed and sincere and all government departments are not so. There are exceptions in both. But by and large voluntary organizations are better placed when compared to the government in the dissemination of developmental efforts. The second advantage enjoyed by voluntary organizations is flexibility in operations. Revisions and modifications in the light of experience are possible. Thus there is feedback and learning through experience. The limited size of operations ensures efficiency and immediate accountability to the target group. Moreover a new society needs a new value system. The voluntary organizations are best suited to carry out
this task. The poor, the deprived and women who accept sufferings as their fate should be made to fight against exploitative forces and challenge the existing order. 'Awareness building' or 'Conscientisation' as Paulo Freire would call it becomes imperative. Since any change in the 'status quo' would invite retaliation from the rich only an impartial autonomous body could do it. Hence voluntary organizations are best suited for this task.

International voluntary organizations normally have some common programmes which they may take up at national, state and local levels within their broad framework. Among the national voluntary organizations we have quite a bit of variety. While majority voluntary organizations concentrate on action oriented programmes, a few organize people and fight our issues without directly working for the welfare of the masses. Their strategies are slogan raising carrying out processes resorting to hunger strike and move the media government court etc to solve the issue at hand. There are certain organizations which merely train social workers or carry out research and training for meeting the personnel requirements of voluntary organizations. Some organizations are formed consisting of specialists from various branches of knowledge who organize seminars, workshops and help grass root workers academics administrators etc to come together to a common platform and share their experiences and sort out issues. Among the action oriented once again we find two groups viz those started and supported by enlightened outsiders (top down) and those started by the members of the target group themselves (grass root masses) to find solutions to their problems without any outside interference (bottom-up). In the case of certain organizations though initially leadership is provided by 'outsiders' they become 'insiders' in due course.

Some NGOs keep the goal of achieving mobility i.e. they assist one particular target group and once the target group 'takes-off' and becomes self reliant the voluntary organizations move on to other groups. Thus they are ever dynamic in socio-spatial terms. Some organizations are purely service oriented. But their number is coming down since many now-a-days concentrate on development programmes for the poor. But there are not many voluntary organizations which involve the target group in decision making. They are rather working for the poor type than 'working with the poor' type. Voluntary organizations may or may not take up all kinds of activities such as activities which promote social welfare activities which induce social reform activities which provide economic self sufficiency and activities for the

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promotion of social mobility. Whether each organization carries out all the above activities or specializes only on a few depends on factors such as the ideology and philosophy of the agency, founder location of the agency, availability of funds and its image among the public.

Role of NGO’s in Women’s Empowerment

Opportunities for women to work outside the family system and greater aspirations in life consequent of the expansion of their mental horizon due to education have opened up a new vista for activities for women. This is in social and community organizations of late, the number of women’s organizations has registered a sharp increase all over the country, partly due to the encouragement given by government through extension programmes but mostly out of women’s desire to give expression to their personality. Women’s organizations are working in a variety of fields like Balwadis, health care and nutrition, training and skill development and for availing government’s income generation and welfare programmes. These are indications not only of new opportunities available for women in modern times but also of women’s ability and willingness to play positive and creative roles in society. Mahila Mandals which were further to the preserves of women form affluent have now become mass and grass roots based. But their critical role in the development of women has not been properly understood. Their potential for the success of government’s mass oriented programmes also has not been fully tapped non fully appreciated.

In this context, the organization of the NGO Forum at the Beijing International Women’s Conference [November 1995] with participation by thousands of NGO’s from different parts of the world deserves to be specially mentioned and appreciated as this is a recognition by the United Nations Organization of the pivotal role that these organizations could play in the empowerment of women. Since Women’s organizations told out great promise for the empowerment of women and for enhancing their status, there is need for sincere efforts at organizing Mahila Mandals throughout the country. These efforts should come not only from government but also from Women who are dedicated to the cause of women. To organize women from heterogeneous background and low aspirations into purposeful, goal oriented and active group to maintain their unity and to sustain their motivation are no mean tasks. To convert them into aggressive agencies of gender equality and gender justice will

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be no more herculean task. Because of the marginal status which is the lot of many of the existing women's organizations the decisions taken by them will be also reduced to marginality by the surrounding forces. The task here is not only to enable them to take critical decisions and to enlarge the area of decision making and improve the quality of the decisions but equally important to get these decisions accepted by those concerned.

**Functioning of NGOs: An Overview of Observations**

There are organizations which were started on a very small scale but grew up to unmanageable size taking up multiple activities to earn national level recognition and fame. Unfortunately many among them have failed to develop second line leadership and thus are slowly fading away. A few have failed to keep their size within manageable limits and hence have become inefficient units losing grip over their activities. It has been found from the history of voluntary organizations in India that any organization which functions on the basis of a specific ideological framework finds it difficult to promote second line leadership since the second and subsequent generation of leaders hardly agrees on the ideology of the pioneers. They feel that the ideology does not suit the changing times.

Another weakness that afflicts many voluntary organizations in India is their inability to move from micro projects to macro projects. Many voluntary organizations are successful in carrying out small projects. As the needs of development of a local community cannot be compartmentalized and the growth of one unit depends on the presence and growth of other allied complementary units an integrated approach is a must which most voluntary organizations are unable to establish. Institution building is an important function in which many voluntary organizations have failed miserably. This refers to continuous articulation of the philosophy vision and mission of the organization among the members especially the volunteers. The rules and regulations and the system of functioning should be institutionalized. The democratic character of an institution can be kept up only by institutionalizing the execution strategies and programmes.

It is also true that in the case of external interventionists (the educated elite working among the poor) the volunteers are unable to get rid of their paternalistic superior attitude. They always want the target group to lie dependent and
subservient. They fail to appreciate the point that the target group is capable of taking over the tasks and performing well. It is also felt that Paulo Freire's 'conscientisation' has been more misunderstood than understood. Voluntary organizations simply fail to acknowledge that the target group has problem solving skills. They continue to supply pre-packaged information on problem solving methods and behaviour (Krishnakumar and Ross Kidal 1981). Thus many voluntary organizations do not know when to enter and why to enter and at what stage to withdraw. (Pandy & Siva Mohan 1990)

Another important drawback which affects many voluntary organizations is lack of funds. For many the budgets are so small that there is no provision for technical personnel. Consultancy services are also out of reach for such voluntary organizations in view of their cost. In these days when voluntary service has become highly specialized there is a dire need for the creation of an appropriate agency to provide guidance, monitor the projects and provide counseling services and arrange financial and technical assistance to needy voluntary organizations which are groping in the dark. Some organizations which are starved of foreign funds face the problem of extinction with the tapering off of funds. This is mainly so because they have not allotted even a single rupee for projects which would generate funds for future existence and growth. They have also not taken adequate efforts to mobilize the required assets and finances locally. This lack of planning and long term vision has adversely affected the growth of many voluntary organizations. In the recent past unemployment has forced the youth to start voluntary organizations. Such organizations lack dedication and true spirit of volunteerism. Such organizations have hardly obtained public confidence.

There is also a feeling that none of the voluntary organizations has a nationwide net work to reach out to every state block and village in the country. Moreover majority voluntary organizations serve the urban poor and those who work in the rural area are not many. (Malcolm S. Adiseshiah) Voluntary organizations are deliberately staying away from the current socio political environment is another important criticism leveled against them. 'A major weakness of the voluntary groups in India is that they all live in the shell they have built around them cutting off all interactions with the socio political environment. I do not know whether that's an inherent weakness of the Volga's or is deliberately done. But it's a fact that in so doing the
perspective is lost, the inter-connections and ramifications get blurred and the whole issue is obfuscated (Bhattacharjee 1985).

The extreme view on the functioning of voluntary organizations runs as follows. Voluntary agencies which manage without government funds and have built upon independent base of popular support manage to remain autonomous. But they are very few in number. Majority voluntary organizations are dependent on government funds and are nothing but extensions of government bureaucracy. Some are controlled by rural oligarchy and the local politicians the government funds funneled to them being misappropriated by them. A true voluntary sector does not exist. Another area in which many voluntary organizations have failed is with regard to transformation of the society. These voluntary organizations have to necessarily function within the politico-legal - patriarchal structure existing in the state. This limits the scope of their activity. Unable to antagonize the government they work out the programmes for the upliftment of the poor within the existing framework. The internal contradictions in a system especially the stronghold of the existing power groups are not confronted (Nitin De 1979). Thus to the extent they concentrate on 'soft tasks' they do not on 'hard tasks'. (1990)

Gender Ideology and voluntary Action

Gender sensitive approach implies that the triple burden of women and the absence of community support systems are kept in mind in employment planning for women. But unfortunately to the extent these organizations show interest in solving the practical needs of women to the same extent they do not evince interest in attending to their strategic interests. Practical needs are linked to women's condition. They are readily identified since they are related to food and water, the health and education of their children and increased income. Fulfilling such needs is a short term process but unfortunately these projects aimed at fulfillment of practical needs of women by and large preserve and reinforce traditional relations between men and women. Strategic interests for women on the other hand arise from their subordinate (disadvantaged) position in society. Strategic interests are long term oriented and related to Improving women's position. They are less obvious and less readily identified by women. Even if identified and options are well known practical needs and family survival are always the first priorities. However strategic interests readily
find expression in women's gatherings and debated—a few examples of which are the
desire for reduced vulnerability to violence and exploitation, more economic security,
independence, options and opportunities, increased political power more humanistic
and just development processes etc. The poverty alleviation programmes while
readily identify the practical needs of women hardly understand and appreciate the
strategic interests of women.

But some of the noteworthy features which have really helped women to join the
mainstream are as follows:

- Acquisition of new confidence new skills new contacts managerial skills and
team spirit;
- Reduced vulnerability to violence and exploitation more economic security
and collective strength experienced in group/co-operative undertakings;
- Articulation of ideas and problems in Madar Sangam meetings.

Thus even in the absence of deliberate policy planning women's strategic
interests have been touched upon. Since money is an important indicator of status
with more money women would also gain status is the underlying belief of income
generation programmes. Thus a humble beginning has been made in the direction of
economic empowerment of women. In spite of lack of clear cut gender ideology these
organizations do have gender perception if not fully at least partially in their
activities.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion it should be pointed out that the ultimate success of
government and NGO action depends on how the changes introduced by them are
internalized by the local community. If they can successfully change rural society's
values and norms and make men to view women as equal partners in development
then that should be regarded as the peak of success of NGO and government action.

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