

# Knowledge and attitudes of teenage students in relation to sexual issues

Mervat Al-Ginedy,<sup>1</sup> Nasr M. El-Sayed<sup>2</sup> and Ahmed A. Darwish<sup>3</sup>

معارف الطلبة المراهقين ومواقفهم فيما يتعلق بالمسائل الجنسية  
مرفت الجنيدى ونصر محمد السيد وأحمد علي درويش

**خلاصة :** أجريت مقابلات مع 1186 طالباً مصرياً في عواصم محافظات المنوفية والبحيرة وبني سويف فيما بين تشرين الأول/أكتوبر وكانون الأول/ديسمبر 1993 لمعرفة مستوى معارفهم ومواقفهم فيما يتعلق بالحياة الجنسية البشرية. وشملت عينة الدراسة 620 طالباً بالإضافة إلى 566 طالبة بالمدارس الإعدادية والثانوية، وكانت أعمارهم تتراوح بين 13 و20 سنة. وأسفرت النتائج عن وجود افتقار عام لمعرفة الأمور الجنسية. ويوصي الباحثون بتنفيذ برنامج غير رسمي لتحسين معارف المراهقين حول المسائل الجنسية وتصويب ما لديهم من مفاهيم خاطئة.

**ABSTRACT** A total of 1186 Egyptian students from the governorate capital cities of Menoufia, Beheira and Beni Sueif were interviewed between October and December 1993 to determine their knowledge of and attitudes towards human sexuality. The sample comprised 620 male and 566 female students aged 13–20 years (preparatory and secondary schools). The results indicated that there was a general lack of knowledge of sexual issues. An informal programme is recommended to improve adolescents' knowledge of sexual matters and correct misconceptions.

## Connaissances et attitudes des étudiants adolescents concernant la sexualité

**RESUME** Au total, 1186 étudiants égyptiens ont été interrogés entre octobre et décembre 1993 afin de déterminer leurs connaissances et attitudes vis-à-vis de la sexualité dans les villes chefs-lieux de trois gouvernorats: Menoufia, Beheira et Beni Sueif. L'échantillon consistait de 620 étudiants et de 566 étudiantes âgés de 13 à 20 ans (écoles préparatoires et secondaires). Les résultats ont montré qu'il y avait un manque général de connaissances sur la sexualité. Un programme informel est recommandé pour améliorer les connaissances des adolescents sur les questions sexuelles et corriger les idées fausses dans ce domaine.

<sup>1</sup>UNICEF Consultant, Cairo, Egypt.

<sup>2</sup>National AIDS Programme Manager; <sup>3</sup>Officer-in-charge, Health Education, National AIDS Programme, Cairo, Egypt.

Received: 22/09/96; accepted: 24/10/96

## Introduction

Sexuality is a fundamental quality of human life [1] and a phenomenon that spans the entire life cycle [2]. Sexual curiosity problems in adolescence are commonly encountered [3]. Many adolescents and young adults are at risk of infection from human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) because of ignorance about reproductive health and human sexuality. In Egypt, adolescents lack support and guidance in relation to sexuality; they do not have enough and/or correct knowledge on this issue. Studies indicate that misinformation and lack of information simply increase sexual confusion and vulnerability [4,5]. Adolescents need to learn to be comfortable with themselves and the opposite sex, how to deal with the intense sexual feelings they may experience and to relate in a healthy way to other people [6].

## Methodology

The study combined qualitative and quantitative methods in an exploratory design. A total of 1186 students (620 males and 566 females) aged 13-20 years in three governorates (Menoufiya, Beheira and Beni Suef) were interviewed between October and December 1993. There were two structured interview schedules; one for male and one for female students. The interview schedule consisted of two parts. The first part included questions related to demographic characteristics. The second part was designed to:

- elicit the knowledge of adolescents in relation to sexuality;
- study feelings, behaviour, beliefs and attitudes to sexual issues using a reaction scale.

The scoring system was developed by a panel of experts in the field of education psychology and psychiatry. The data were analysed by the Statistical and Computer Centre of the High Institute of Public Health, Alexandria University, using percentage distribution and the chi-squared test.

The knowledge scoring was rated as zero, 1% to < 50% (low score), 50% to < 75% (moderate score) and 75% or above (high score). The attitude scoring was rated as 1% to < 50% (negative attitude), 50% to < 75% (moderately positive attitude) and 75% or above (highly positive attitude).

## Results

With regard to the anatomy of the reproductive system (Table 1), 53% of male students and 76% of female students scored zero. This percentage increased to 60% for males and 96% for females who scored zero in relation to knowledge of the reproductive system of the opposite sex. In relation to knowledge related to puberty and maturation, 55% of males had low scores, while 42% females had moderate scores. The scores of knowledge related to sexual development were either zero (40% for males and 36% for females) or high (37% for males and 41% for females). As regards sexual development of the opposite sex, 75% of the females and 44% of the males scored zero.

With regard to knowledge of masturbation (Table 2), the majority in both sexes scored zero (52% for males and 94% for females). The same was true for knowledge about homosexuality (55% for males and 76% for females). Table 3 shows the knowledge of the students about acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). Only 5% of males and 10% of females scored zero,

**Table 1 Knowledge about sexual development, anatomy of the reproductive system and adolescent maturation by sex of the student**

Variable	Male		Female		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
<i>Sexual development</i>					
Zero	246	40	204	36	450
Low	115	19	80	14	195
Moderate	31	5	51	9	82
High	228	37	231	41	459
<i>Anatomy of reproductive system</i>					
Zero	331	53	428	76	759
Low	59	10	17	3	76
Moderate	16	3	26	5	42
High	214	35	95	17	309
<i>Sexual development of other sex</i>					
Zero	273	44	425	75	698
Low	92	15	11	2	103
Moderate	16	3	3	1	19
High	239	39	127	22	366
<i>Anatomy of reproductive system of other sex</i>					
Zero	370	60	542	96	912
Low	33	5	10	2	43
Moderate	17	3	4	1	21
High	200	32	10	2	210
<i>Maturation and puberty</i>					
Zero	121	20	149	26	270
Low	338	55	175	31	513
Moderate	161	26	235	42	396
High	0	0	7	1	7
Total	620	100	566	100	1186

while 20% of males and 14% of females had high scores. Table 3 also illustrates the students' knowledge about gonorrhoea and syphilis; 91% of males and 96% of females scored zero on knowledge of gonorrhoea, and 94% of males and 98% of females scored zero with regard to syphilis.

**Table 2 Knowledge about wet dreams, masturbation and homosexuality by sex of the student**

Variable	Male		Female		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
<i>Wet dream</i>					
Zero	238	38	513	91	751
Low	46	7	27	5	73
Moderate	210	34	16	3	226
High	126	20	10	2	136
<i>Masturbation</i>					
Zero	321	52	534	94	855
Low	74	12	13	2	87
Moderate	66	11	15	3	81
High	159	26	4	1	163
<i>Homosexuality</i>					
Zero	342	55	428	76	770
Low	65	10	112	20	177
Moderate	127	20	19	3	146
High	86	14	7	1	93

Adolescents' reactions and beliefs about masturbation are shown in Table 4. The majority of males (62%) thought it was sinful whereas only 3% of females considered it so. The majority of females (94%) and 25% of males said that they did not know. Most of the students (59% males and 64% females) had a moderately positive attitude towards sex education (Table 5). Among the sample studied, 49% of males and 66% of females said they did not know of any risks associated with homosexuality, while 37% of males and 27% of females thought that homosexuality causes AIDS (Table 6).

## Discussion

Sex education is an essential part of healthy life, and an important relation exists between sexual ignorance and quality of life [4].

Table 3 Knowledge about venereal diseases and AIDS by sex of the student

Variable	Male		Female		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
<i>AIDS</i>					
Zero	34	5	59	10	93
Low	182	29	201	36	383
Moderate	283	46	228	40	511
High	121	20	78	14	199
<i>Gonorrhoea</i>					
Zero	567	91	546	96	1113
Low	25	4	20	4	45
Moderate	9	1	0	0	9
High	19	3	0	0	19
<i>Syphilis</i>					
Zero	583	94	557	98	1140
Low	12	2	8	1	20
Moderate	9	1	1	0	10
High	16	3	0	0	16

Table 4 Beliefs about masturbation by sex of the student

Variable	Male		Female		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
Sinful	393	62	17	3	400
Not sinful	59	10	7	1	66
Varies with situation	20	3	8	1	28
Don't know	158	25	534	94	692

Table 5 Attitude to sex education by sex of the student

Variable	Male		Female		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
Negative	65	10	135	24	200
Moderately positive	367	59	364	64	731
Highly positive	188	30	67	12	255

Table 6 Beliefs about homosexuality by sex of the student

Variable	Male		Female		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
<i>Which partner is exposed to danger?</i>					
Active person	97	16	35	6	132
Passive person	154	25	108	19	262
Both	70	11	18	3	88
Don't know	299	48	405	72	704
<i>Risks associated with homosexuality</i>					
AIDS	232	37	151	27	383
Other risks	85	14	42	7	127
Don't know	303	49	373	66	676

The results of the study revealed that male adolescents had some knowledge of sexual maturity and sexual behaviour while most of the female students lacked basic and essential knowledge on these matters. About 45%–60% of the males had some knowledge about wet dreams, masturbation and homosexuality, while most of the females did not have any knowledge, and this could be attributed to cultural factors.

It was also noted that the vast majority of both males and females knew about AIDS. This probably reflects the mass media interest in this subject. On the other hand, the vast majority of them knew nothing about other sexually transmitted diseases. This highlights the need for education in this area and the role mass media and school seminars can play.

The results also showed a significant difference between male and female students' attitude towards sex education. This is a reflection of the culture where sex is a taboo subject, particularly for females, and is not discussed. However, the attitude of females seemed to be more positive and

this may be due to their eagerness to understand and know about sex.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The study reflects the general lack of knowledge of Egyptian adolescents regarding sexuality. In general, males had a more

positive attitude toward sex education than females.

An informal programme should be designed to raise adolescent students' awareness of sexuality and improve their knowledge and correct their misconceptions about the issue. The recommended programme should be organized by school teachers of biology and religion and school nurses.

## References

1. Anderson D. *Toward a more effective policy response to AIDS*. Belgium, International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, 1994.
2. Bearinger LH. Study group report on the impact of television on adolescent views of sexuality. *Journal of adolescent health care*, 1990, 1:71-5.
3. Coles R, Stokes G. *Sex and the American teenager*. New York, Harper and Row Co., 1985.
4. Friedman HL. *Changing patterns of adolescent sexual behaviour psychiatry*, 5th ed. Daltimore, Williams and Wilkins Company, 1992.
5. Grant L, Demetriou E. Adolescent sexuality. *Pediatric clinics of North America*, 1988, 35(6):1271-89.
6. Fouad N, Khalil H. Sexuality, perceptions and misconceptions among university students. *Bulletin of the First International Scientific Nursing Congress on Women's Health*, 1990:215-27.