

Sexuality Education through Media and Technology: Addressing Unmet Needs of Adolescents in Bangladesh

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Abstract : Breaking the shame' is a 3 year (2015-2018) qualitative implementation research project which investigates several aspects of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) issues for adolescents living in Bangladesh. Scope of learning SRHR issues for adolescents is limited here due to cultural and religious taboos. This study adds to the ongoing discussions around adolescent's SRHR needs and aims to, 1) understand the overall SRHR needs of urban and rural unmarried female and male adolescents and the challenges they face, 2) explore existing gaps in the content of SRHR curriculum and 3) finally, addresses some critical knowledge gaps by developing and implementing innovative SRHR educational materials. 18 in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 10 focus-group discussions (FGDs) with boys and 21 IDIs and 14 FGDs with girls of ages 13-19, from both urban and rural setting took place. Curriculum materials from two leading organizations, Unite for Body Rights (UBR) Alliance Bangladesh and BRAC Adolescent Development Program (ADP) were also reviewed, with discussions with 12 key program staff. This paper critically analyses the relevance of some of the SRHR topics that are covered, the challenges with existing pedagogic approaches and key sexuality issues that are not covered in the content, but are important for adolescents. Adolescents asked for content and guidance on a number of topics which remain missing from the core curriculum, such as emotional coping mechanisms particularly in relationships, bullying, impact of exposure to porn, and sexual performance anxiety. Other core areas of concern were effects of masturbation, condom use, sexual desire and orientation, which are mentioned in the content, but never discussed properly, resulting in confusion. Due to lack of open discussion around sexuality, porn becomes a source of information for the adolescents. For these reasons, several myths and misconceptions regarding SRHR issues like body, sexuality, agency, and gender roles still persist. The pedagogical approach is very didactic, and teachers felt uncomfortable to have discussions on certain SRHR topics due to cultural taboos or shame and stigma. Certain topics are favored- such as family planning, menstruation- and presented with an emphasis on biology and risk. Rigid formal teaching style, hierarchical power relations between students and most teachers discourage questions and frank conversations. Pedagogy approaches within classrooms play a critical role in the sharing of knowledge. The paper also describes the pilot approaches to implementing new content in SRHR curriculum. After a review of findings, three areas were selected as critically important, 1) myths and misconceptions 2) emotional management challenges, and 3) how to use condom, that have come up from adolescents. Technology centric educational materials such as web page based information platform and you tube videos are opted for which allow adolescents to bypass gatekeepers and learn facts and information from a legitimate educational site. In the era of social media, when information is always a click away, adolescents need sources that are reliable and not overwhelming. The research aims to ensure that adolescents learn and apply knowledge effectively, through creating the new materials and making it accessible to adolescents.

Keywords : adolescents, Bangladesh, media, sexuality education, unmet needs

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