

## Knowledge of personal and sexual development amongst 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 their circumstances and needs is still relatively new. In this study, twenty four focus group discussions were conducted to explore young peoples' experiences of gaining knowledge of personal and sexual development. Young women typically gained information from a limited number of sources within the home, while young men accessed a wide variety of information sources outside the home. Gaining information was frequently event-based, whereby specific events (i.e. puberty, marriage) trigger information provision to young people, however often too late to be educative. Overall, young people were critical of the quality of information they received, which often led to confusion and stress in understanding sexual development. Findings highlight a gap in formal systems of information provision. 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 need to be identified.

### Résumé

Le Pakistan dispose de l'une des plus grandes cohortes de jeunes de son histoire. Pourtant, les recherches sur les conditions de vie et les besoins de ces jeunes sont encore relativement récentes.

Dans cette étude, vingt-quatre groupes-focus ont été réalisés pour explorer les expériences des jeunes dans l'acquisition de connaissances sur leur développement personnel et sexuel. Comme cela se produit souvent, les jeunes femmes ont obtenu des informations à partir d'un nombre limité de sources disponibles au sein de leurs foyers, alors que les jeunes hommes ont eu accès à une grande variété de sources d'information en dehors de chez eux.

L'obtention d'informations était souvent basée sur des événements, dans la mesure où des événements spécifiques (e.g la puberté, le mariage) déclenchent une transmission d'informations vers les jeunes, cependant souvent trop tardive pour pouvoir être éducative.

Dans l'ensemble, les jeunes ont été critiques sur la qualité de l'information qu'ils recevaient, celle-ci ayant souvent causé une certaine confusion et du stress dans leur démarche de compréhension du développement sexuel.

Les résultats de l'étude révèlent l'écart entre les systèmes formels de mise à disposition d'informations. Bien que les jeunes aient mis en avant les mérites de la distribution d'information à l'école, la faible fréquentation scolaire des filles et les taux élevés d'abandon de leurs études, soulignent la nécessité d'identifier d'autres mécanismes de transmission d'informations aux jeunes femmes pakistanaises.

### Resumen

Aunque Pakistán posee una de las cohortes más numerosas de jóvenes en su historia, los estudios sobre sus circunstancias y necesidades son relativamente nuevos. Para este estudio se llevaron a cabo veinticuatro grupos de discusión con el objetivo de analizar cómo se las arreglan los jóvenes para adquirir conocimientos con respecto al desarrollo personal y sexual. Las chicas normalmente se informaban a partir de un número limitado de fuentes dentro del ambiente familiar y los chicos accedían a toda una serie de fuentes de información fuera del hogar. El modo de adquirir información con frecuencia dependía de las circunstancias, por ejemplo de acontecimientos especiales (la pubertad o el matrimonio) que motivan las condiciones para adquirir información en la gente joven, que no obstante llega demasiado tarde para ser educativo. En general, los jóvenes eran muy críticos con la calidad de información que recibían porque, a menudo, provocaba confusiones y estrés a la hora de entender el desarrollo sexual. Los resultados destacan un vacío en los sistemas formales de información. Aunque los jóvenes destacaron los méritos de la información recibida en los colegios, la poca asistencia a la escuela y la alta tasa de chicas que abandonan los estudios demuestran que es necesario hallar otros mecanismos para llegar a las mujeres paquistaníes.

**Keywords:** *Young people, Pakistan, sexual development, sex education, information delivery*

### Introduction

Pakistan has one of the largest cohorts of young people in its history, with approximately 25 million young people aged 15 to 24 years (Government of Pakistan 2001). Yet research on young people is still relatively new and sexuality 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. Women's sexuality is tightly controlled by male elders (Khan 1998, 2000). Restrictions are 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 the sexual attitudes and behaviour of young people in Pakistan (Khan 2000). Many young people 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 compound to exacerbate ignorance on these matters (McCauley and Salter 1995, Bott and Jejeebhoy 2001). There also exists ambivalence about sex education, although this is beginning to change in the context 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 young people in Pakistan (Durrant, 2000, Pakistan Voluntary Health and Nutrition Association (PAVHNA) 2000, Sathar *et al.* 2003). However, existing studies offer only limited data on young people's knowledge of puberty and sexual development. In recent research, more boys than girls report discussing "bodily changes" of puberty with peers or family members; and more boys than girls report being aware of changes in the opposite sex during puberty (PAVHNA 2000). In addition, more boys than girls were aware of how a woman becomes pregnant.

Sathar *et al.* (2003) report 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 evidence that the timing of information on puberty is inadequate, with the majority of girls and boys being uninformed 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 offer insight into aspects of puberty in Pakistan, they provide little information on the context of such knowledge acquisition, for example identifying young peoples' perceptions of the type, quality and timing of the information they receive and cultural barriers to gaining information. The aim of this study, therefore, was to examine young peoples' experiences in gaining knowledge of personal and sexual development within the cultural context of Pakistan. Specific objectives were 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. 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 study was conducted in two cities in Punjab province with differing socio-cultural characteristics—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.

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 tenth house, until eight to ten 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. 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.

Group discussions were conducted within the local neighbourhood, usually in a school, meeting hall or hotel. They were moderated by trained bilingual researchers whose characteristics matched those of the participants in terms of age and gender. Group discussions were conducted in the language preferred by participants; most were conducted in Punjabi, others in Urdu. 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. 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 were also compared between subgroups of the target population (i.e., gender, city, socio-economic status), to identify variations in behaviour or attitudes.

## Results

The results are presented by the two broad areas of discussion: the process of gaining information on personal and sexual development, and information provision and preferred modes of information delivery on these topics. Figure 1 summarizes 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 differ by gender. These differences are described below.

### *Knowledge and sources of information*

Many young women reported that they received little or no information about puberty until they had reached menarche. Some young women gained awareness about menstruation from observing older sisters with sanitary pads or reported that they avoided prayers at certain times (i.e., during menses), and others had heard about menses from older school peers. For most young women, however, menarche was a trigger for family members to provide information about menstruation or for girls to seek information about it.

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, but other family members within the home such as older sisters and sisters-in-law also provided information. Young women stated that their mothers were often shy to provide information on menses and personal development and it was common for them to deflect the responsibility of briefing their daughter to a friend, older sister or sister-in-law.

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)

Information received about personal development largely focussed on menstrual hygiene and neglected broader aspects of puberty, such as physical, emotional and biological

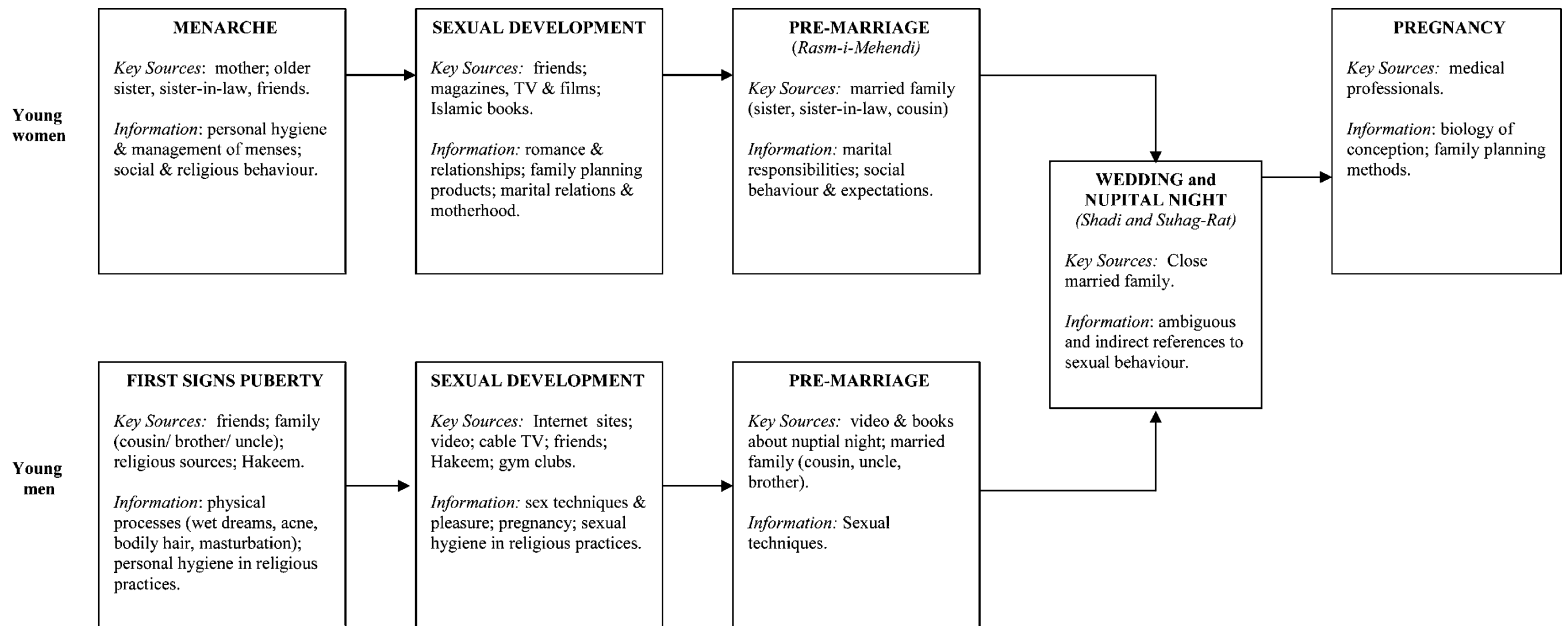


Figure 1. Process of knowledge acquisition on personal and sexual development.

changes. In addition, emphasis was placed on instructing young women in expected social and religious behaviour after menarche. For example, family members instructed 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 were told to avoid some religious practices during menstruation (i.e., reciting the Holy Koran, prayer, fasting at Ramadan). However, the reasons for these new exclusions were not made explicit.

R4 The girl is told she has to keep wearing the dupatta and care about shame. “You have got 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. This was partly reflective of boys’ greater freedom of movement and social exposure outside the home. Information sources identified included friends and family members, religious sources, *hakeems* and the media. Friends were the most commonly reported sources of information about puberty, acne, body hair growth, “wet dreams”, masturbation and the physical development of girls. However, young men recognised that information from friends could be incomplete or inaccurate.

R6 When it is all learned 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 such as cousins, uncles or brothers who provided advice on personal hygiene and hair removal in a religious context.

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 such matters with their sons due to socio-cultural taboos; this contrasts with young women who mostly received this information from their mothers. Fathers also expected boys to learn about such from sources outside the home or instructed a cousin or uncle to provide advice about personal development issues, in much the same way as mothers deflected the discussion with daughters.

Ours is an Islamic country. 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)

Young men reported receiving some information from *madrassas* (Islamic schools), *moulvis* (religious leaders) and religious books. The information gained from these sources was more detailed than other sources, but largely focussed on personal hygiene in relation to religious practices. Some information was received about menses, but only in relation to cultural/religious practice, for example, refraining from sex during a woman's period. Young men felt that the information imparted from religious sources was fragmented and provided little understanding of the processes of puberty.

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. Young men recognised, however, that *hakeems* could be a source of misinformation about sexual processes, (e.g., wet dreams were promoted as a disease requiring a cure) and they often played with common misunderstandings about sexual processes in order to sell their products.

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.

Young people highlighted strong socio-cultural taboos in discussing sexual issues, particularly with parents or amongst those who are unmarried. Participants reported that society expected that young people would learn about sexual relations automatically after their marriage.

Young women identified friends and the media as the most prominent sources of information on sexual development (see Figure 1). 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 also 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. The only source of more detailed information about sexual relations came from married friends who shared their own experiences. Much of the information provided, however, was suggestive rather than educative about sexual

development. Some women reported having received no information on sexual relations prior to their marriage. These were typically women who explained that there had been no cable television when they were younger, and hence they had no exposure to films with suggestive sexual scenes. These women had learned 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 accessed by women and included electronic media (such as sexually explicit Internet sites, CDs, videos and cable TV) and print media (such as pornographic books and magazines). A second important source of information about sexual behaviour was 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.

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)

### *Information provision*

Marriage is an event which may trigger family members to provide information about sexual relations to young people. Often family members other than parents will provide such information immediately prior to marriage. The type of information provided differed by gender (Figure 1). Most young women reported that as girls they had received no detailed information about sexual relations, but that they were briefed on these issues by 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 together one to two days prior to the wedding. The information received at this time was often focussed on the responsibilities of being a wife, mother and daughter-in-law, and little was said about sexual relations. As a result, many women still felt naïve about sexual relations.

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)

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 was 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.

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 in the street for only 20 or 30 rupees. (FG19 married male Faisalabad)

The wedding day provided another opportunity for young people to be briefed about sexual relations by close family members (Figure 1). However, young people felt that the 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 wedding night and the provision of incomplete information simply created fear about the event. Young men felt that their knowledge of sexual behaviour prior to marriage lacked depth, and so 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.

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)

Overall, young people in this study felt that the information they received about personal and sexual development was inadequate in a number of respects. 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.

Nobody educated us, we have learned 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, then this is not at all adequate. (FG11 married male Faisalabad)

Second, the information received from parents and family members was often ambiguous and superficial and provided little 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 was largely about personal hygiene or expected socio-cultural behaviour after puberty. Little information was provided on the biological processes related to sexual behaviour such as menses, conception, pregnancy and childbirth. For some women, these matters had remained unclear until after their first pregnancy when they learned about these processes from medical professionals; while some men never fully understood these biological processes.

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.

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 educational information from reliable sources; this was evident in all discussion groups, regardless of socio-economic background, location or gender. Three themes relating to preferred modes of information delivery were raised in discussion—the timing of information delivery, school-based delivery and community-based delivery.

The timing of information delivery was a critical point raised by participants. Young people mentioned that information was 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 before physical changes occur, so as to prepare them for this process; and that information on sexual behaviour should be provided well ahead of marriage to avoid undue anxiety, stress and fear on the wedding night.

By the time a man 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)

The potential value of school based sexual development education was raised in every group discussion.

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)

While school biology classes described animal reproduction, human sexual development was not included. Furthermore, only science pupils had exposure to these topics. School-based information delivery was seen as particularly appropriate for girls as there would be fewer objections from parents if information was delivered in an educational setting. If girls were seen to seek such information individually they may get a bad reputation.

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).

Young people highlighted some of the benefits of providing teaching on personal and sexual development within the school curriculum. These included less reliance on informal and unreliable sources (e.g., friends, media), education providing an alternative to discussing such issues with parents, classes provide interactive opportunities to ask questions, positive and negative aspects of sexual processes and practices (e.g., nocturnal emission, masturbation) could be presented within a socio-cultural context, and information could be regulated and delivered within the context of Islamic teaching.

In discussing who might best 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 prior familiarity with teachers would cause them embarrassment. In addition, young men reported that when teachers attempted to impart information about sexual development, pupils often ridiculed 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)

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, for example, providing information through community based institutions (e.g., scout groups), 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.

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 four or five 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, the provision of community-based information for women was less acceptable.

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)

## Discussion

Overall, this study provides greater understanding of the context in which young people in Pakistan gain information about personal and sexual development. While its results cannot easily be generalized, such contextual information provides valuable new information on the process of knowledge acquisition and key issues for young people.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this study is the gendered pattern of knowledge acquisition. Differences in mobility of young men and women are reflected in their patterns of knowledge acquisition. Young women typically gained 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 differed by gender; young men were more likely to be exposed to sexually explicit pornographic media while women received vague and superficial sexual information from family members.

A second finding from this study relates to the context in which personal and sexual development information is received. 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. 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.

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. Much information was focussed 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 processes of sexual development that link 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.

Young people in this study highlighted the benefits of school-based provision of personal and sexual development information. Delivery within the Government approved school curriculum was less likely to receive criticism from parents or society and was seen as an effective way to inform young women, in particular. In addition, the curriculum could be designed to reflect the socio-cultural context of Pakistan. However, a number of issues were raised that have importance for the delivery of sexual education curricula in schools—in particular whether the classes should be provided by regular school teachers or outsiders. These preferences differed by gender, suggesting that different modes of delivery may be

appropriate for young men and women. Single-sex delivery of information was also seen as critical. Classes also need to be located centrally within the curriculum so that all pupils receive relevant information not only those taking science electives.

Although the merits of school-based information delivery were highlighted, the adoption of such a strategy may have little impact on young women due to their low levels of school attendance and high drop out rate (Sathar *et al.* 2003). Many young women are engaged in activities within the home and are not linked in to any other social institution. They therefore remain out of reach of many educational and social programmes. Accessing these young women is of critical importance and remains a major challenge. Mothers play an important role in imparting information about personal development to girls. However, their discomfort in discussing these issues often meant they passed on the role to other family members. Parental concerns for the chastity of daughters often dominated parental relationships with girls, and parents feared that discussing sexual issues with adolescents will imply approval of pre-marital activity (Bott and Jejeebhoy 2001). Supporting mothers in the provision of information may be one way of informing young women. However, mothers themselves may not have adequate vocabulary and knowledge to discuss sexual issues. 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.

An alternative might be to inform young women about personal and sexual development 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 potential to provide sexual and reproductive health 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 negatively on the effectiveness of community strategies. Any strategy to access young women needs to recognise that their activities are often controlled by others and including parents and community leaders in community-based initiatives may be the most effective way to receive endorsement for the attendance of young women.

Any effort 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. Relatively little is known about the views of parents, teachers, religious leaders and community organizations concerning 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 different stakeholders. Future policy and programme initiatives based on an appropriate understanding of young peoples' needs and which address the concerns of various gatekeepers will be vital.

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