

RESEARCH NOTE

Issues Regarding Adolescents Sexual and Reproductive Health in Sarawak: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

Adolescents' sexual and reproductive health is a commonly discussed topic in public health research. In Sarawak, similar challenges have been faced in other parts of the world which are, lack of access to accurate and comprehensive information about safe sex, contraception access and usage, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) whereby the adolescents will commit a risky sexual activity that affects their physical, mental and their socio-economic status. The Ministry of Women, Early Childhood and Community Wellbeing Development has stated that the cases of teenage pregnancy are rising in recent years as adolescents are engaging in risky sexual behaviour. Such cases occur due to adolescents experiencing sexual novelty during their growth and development period. Misconception about sex also contributes to risky sexual activity among adolescents as the source of information about sex they obtain is from media and pornography. Efforts have been made to enhance the knowledge of sexual and reproductive health among adolescents in Sarawak including school-based sex education and community outreach initiatives. However, there are still many efforts to be achieved to ensure that adolescents have access to the information and resources they need to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health.

Keywords: *Adolescent, Community Health, Sexual and Reproductive Health, Public Health*

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual and reproductive health, abbreviately known as SRH refers to a knowledge of understanding the physical and emotional presence of sexuality which comprehends the ability to understand the consequences of unsafe sex like unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion, infections and diseases like HIV and AIDS, sexual coercion like rape, abuse and other inappropriate sexual behaviours (Abdurahman et al., 2022). Adolescents, according to the World Health Organization defines as persons aged 10 to 19 years old, and it is an important stage to instil a substantial basis for their physical, mental and psychosocial health (World Health Organization, 2023).

Adolescents in their development stage are experiencing sexual novelty which leads them into making less-than-ideal decisions and actions, resulting in risky sexual activity that leads to injuries and other risks (Casey et al., 2008). Sivagurunathan (2015) describes that sexual experimentation of adolescents are one of the transitional phases for them as they are experiencing growth and development in terms of physical, cognitive, psychological behaviour and their social change. In the recent study also reported that most adolescents become active sexually in their transitional period and it pose them in a risk of SRH problems (Fekadu Wakasa et al., 2021).

In Malaysia, the issue of sexual and reproductive health is a commonly discussed topic in parliament and public health research. The former Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, Rina Harun who spoke in Parliament in December 2021 stated that there were 10,000 pregnant teenagers on average receive care at government health facilities each year, wherein the case linked to 830 teen pregnancies per month, with 35 per cent of them being unmarried (CodeBlue, 2021). To curb such problem, the ministry has develop a strategic plan, known as Dasar dan Pelan Tindakan Kesihatan Reproduksi dan Sosial (PEKERTI) which aims to empowering sexual and reproductive health issues, raising awareness, providing reproductive health education and establishing a loving, responsible and resilient society to all parties including women, family, and children (Kementerian Pembangunan Wanita Keluarga Dan Masyarakat, 2021).

There are 1,623 cases of teenage pregnancy were reported in Sarawak on the year of 2021 (Malay Mail, 2022). Kapit Division records the highest number of adolescent pregnancy in Sarawak, followed by Sri Aman and Sarikei Divisions (Cheng, 2021). Dato Sri Fatimah Abdullah, the Sarawak's Minister of Welfare, Community Well-being, Women, Family and Childhood Development expressed her concerns about such situations occurred due to family-related problems, poverty, exposure to social media content, opting out of formal education, and lack of religious knowledge are the factors that contributing to high teenage pregnancy rates in Sarawak (Kawi, 2021).

LIMITATIONS OF SRH STUDIES

Adolescents are at risk to various health and social problems, including engaging sexual activity without ample knowledge and skills to protect themselves which definitely at risk of unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortions, acquiring infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS (World Health Organization, 2022a). Babies born to adolescents in the early marriage and childbirth are facing higher neonatal and infant mortality rates, which developing higher number of maternal mortality and morbidity (Adedokun et al., 2017). Adolescent pregnancy affects physical and mental health which resulting on social problems where most of the young mothers are expelled from school due to pregnancy at a young age where it can affect their socio-economic status in the future (World Health Organization, 2022b).

Sex education is part of SRH knowledge and it is a learning experience that intends to enable the voluntary behaviour among adolescents which could benefit their sexual health. SRH knowledge is essential among adolescents and it should focus on the content of delivery; for example, by practising abstinence (no sex before marriage) or a thorough instructions which explains the using of contraception and practising safe sex that have been explain by the teachers at school, parents at home, health professionals, or community educators (Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021). As the modern age of internet emerges, it is found that adolescents are advancing in exploring sexual knowledge on the internet which leads to the misconception of sex as adolescents are learning from it via pornography and electronic media (Chou et al., 2020). In terms of the coverage and access of SRH knowledge, it is quite limited in the lower-middle income countries as reported by Salam et al. (2016). However, the situation could be happened in Malaysia and Sarawak especially as the access of SRH knowledge via conventional methods of face-to-face teaching is quite limited due to the accessibility of certain areas and lack of professional personnel to deliver the knowledge.

Apart from that, there is a limitation when discussing this issue between parents and adolescents as it is deemed as taboo and contradicts with the customs and beliefs (Abd Hamid & Ismail, 2016). This poses a researcher a question: if discussing about sex is forbidden, how do we promote the knowledge of SRH that brings benefit for adolescents?

RECOMMENDATION

A study by Salam et al. (2016) recommends that social communication, counselling, and contraceptive access are successfully increase the knowledge of SRH among adolescents also helps in reduce unwanted pregnancy by having access of contraceptives. Germain et al. (2015) highlighted that women and adolescents from lower socio-economic groups that living in remote areas are far behind due to the inequalities in access of SRH services, education and information. In this modern and globalisation era, the advanced interventions could be integrated into various fields due to the ease of access of information via internet which allows every people across the globe to obtain knowledge. Mobile software applications known as "mobile apps" are made specifically for smartphones or other mobile devices. Mobile apps functions to process data and offer services like sharing the user's location, sending messages, and delivering content, some mobile apps need internet access (Tracy, 2012).

The establishment of mobile health, or "mHealth" advocates the usage of electronics in medicine and public health (Dicianno et al., 2015). The use of mobile devices in healthcare settings has enhanced the creation of medical software programmes, particularly mobile apps. Such platforms would provide opportunities to increase access to point-of-care tools that help deliver knowledge, which would be beneficial to healthcare professionals and providers in a variety of ways (Ventola, 2014). Mobile application technology can be used to engage and connect with adolescent populations as it is a potential facilitators among young people in accessing information and service of sexual and reproductive health in the low- and middle-income countries (Feroz et al., 2021). By providing such information towards adolescents, it would lead to the tendency of delaying the initiation of sexual intercourse, less sexual partners, fewer experiences of unprotected sex, and have the knowledge of contraceptives which helps the adolescents to empowering their sexuality in a positive manner which lead them to improve their performance academically, lessen the risk of social problems like substance abuse, suicide, and sexual coercions (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).

Therefore, the study of adolescents' sexual and reproductive health in Sarawak should investigate the sociodemographic characteristics, to compare the effective interventions in delivering sexual and reproductive health knowledge among adolescents in Sarawak. The study should investigate the behavioural change on adolescents after receiving knowledge on sexual and reproductive health. The parent-child relationship might link the adolescents' sexual and reproductive health behaviour in the study.

OUTCOMES AND POSSIBLE SIGNIFICANCE

The study of adolescents' sexual and reproductive health would give a unique opportunity in finding a new way in implementing and promoting the knowledge of SRH via mobile app as an appropriate media in highlighting SRH issues, health care access and services. The outcome of this kind of study will be additional benefits towards the knowledge on SRH among adolescents which will be valuable experience to the participants that involved in the study, stakeholders such as Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, health care providers, policymakers, and legislators.

The community in Sarawak and Malaysia will gain insight from this study's input into public health knowledge, particularly regarding adolescents' SRH. It is noted that several studies on adolescents' SRH issues that had been conducted in Malaysia had mixed results. This kind of study would be a unique and timely approach to this digital age. Apart from that, this kind of study will help the readers or future researchers of this field to understand how this mHealth app works in Malaysia based on the user's experience and its usability.

The suggestions from the results of this kind of study will offer a valuable guidance to health care institutions on developing a suitable module and implementing a mobile application in a sustainable manner. There are several possibilities and significance in this kind of study:

- The study will demonstrate the effectiveness of SRH interventions in enhancing the knowledge, attitude, intention, and positive sexual behaviour among adolescents.
- The study will enhance the relationship between parents and adolescents because of communication about sexual and reproductive health.
- There might be a behavioural change towards adolescents based on the frequency of communication with parents and peers, and visitation of health care facilities.
- The sexual and reproductive health mobile apps are an ideal learning tool for adolescents due to its convenience and usability.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, adolescents' knowledge and issues on sexual and reproductive health in Sarawak are a complex and multifaceted problem. Lack of access to accurate information, cultural and societal norms, and limited sex education in schools all contribute to the challenges faced by adolescents in Sarawak. The consequences of these challenges can include early sexual debut, unintended pregnancies, and STIs. While efforts are being made to improve adolescents' sexual and reproductive health in Sarawak, there is still much work to be done. Ensuring that adolescents have access to comprehensive sex education and resources is crucial to addressing these issues and promoting positive sexual and reproductive health outcomes for this population.

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