

REVIEW ARTICLE

Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health in India-Trends, Challenges, and Infertility Factors: A Review

Preeti Srivastava, Mubarik Hussain*, Rajesh K. Yadav

Department of Zoology, S.S. Jain Subodh P.G. (Autonomous) College, Jaipur

*Corresponding author: Email- mubarikh1985@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Adolescent sexual reproductive health (ASRH) is a significant public health concern in India, crucial for both individual well-being and national development. This review examines prevalent trends, persistent challenges, and factors contributing to infertility among Indian adolescents. Drawing from extensive literature and empirical evidence, the analysis sheds light on the complex landscape of ASRH issues, including early pregnancies, limited contraceptive access, cultural barriers, and prevalent early marriages. Additionally, it explores emerging ASRH dynamics such as increased smartphone usage and the impact of social media on sexual behaviors. Special attention is given to potential causes of infertility, including sexually transmitted infections (STIs), untreated reproductive tract infections (RTIs), and unsafe abortion practices. The review concludes with actionable recommendations for policy interventions, community-driven initiatives, and healthcare strategies aimed at addressing multifaceted challenges and safeguarding the sexual reproductive health rights of adolescents in India.

Keywords: Adolescent, Sexual Reproductive Health, Infertility, Policy Interventions, STIs, menstrual hygiene

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescent sexual reproductive health (ASRH) is a critical concern in contemporary India, given its impact on individual well-being and national development. With approximately 253 million adolescents aged 10-19 years in 2024 [1], addressing ASRH issues is imperative amid evolving socio-cultural norms, technological advancements, and persistent challenges. This introduction provides an up-to-date overview of prevalent trends, challenges, and emerging issues in ASRH among Indian adolescents, drawing from recent data and empirical evidence. In modern Indian society, discussions on reproductive health often face taboos and stigmas, particularly concerning sexual health topics. These cultural sensitivities hinder open dialogue and access to accurate information, disproportionately affecting adolescents' understanding and access to essential reproductive health services [2]. The complexities of ASRH manifest in various challenges faced by adolescents, including early pregnancies driven by factors such as inadequate access to comprehensive sexuality education, cultural norms, and early marriages [3]. This limits access to critical reproductive health services and perpetuates intergenerational cycles of poverty and ill-health. Emerging trends like increased digital connectivity via smartphones and social media have reshaped ASRH dynamics, offering avenues for accessing reproductive health information while posing challenges such as misinformation dissemination and engagement in risky online behaviors [4]. Additionally, issues like cyber bullying and online exploitation compound challenges faced by adolescents navigating their sexual and reproductive health in the digital age. Infertility among adolescents is influenced by factors like sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and untreated reproductive tract infections (RTIs). Recent data highlights STIs' significant contribution to infertility rates among Indian adolescents, underscoring the need for robust prevention and treatment strategies for both genders [5]. This review aims to comprehensively analyze ASRH issues among Indian adolescents nowadays, synthesizing recent data and empirical evidence to inform evidence-based interventions and policy reforms safeguarding adolescents' sexual reproductive health rights.

Demographic Status

Population Distribution

India boasts a diverse population, with approximately 253 million adolescents aged 10-19 years, constituting roughly 20% of the total population [6]. This demographic group exhibits significant socio-economic and cultural variations across regions.

Urban-Rural Disparities

Disparities persist in healthcare access between urban and rural areas. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-21, reports better healthcare access for urban adolescents compared to rural counterparts [8]. However, both settings lack comprehensive sexuality education, impacting ASRH outcomes.

Gender Dynamics

Gender inequalities shape ASRH outcomes, with girls facing greater vulnerabilities in accessing reproductive health services and information compared to boys [8]. Early marriage and gender-based violence persist, perpetuating ASRH disparities.

Socio-Economic Status

Socio-economic disparities affect ASRH service access. Adolescents from lower socio-economic backgrounds encounter barriers like financial constraints and limited education, hindering informed reproductive health decisions [9].

Education Levels

Education influences ASRH knowledge and behaviors. NFHS-5 data reveals that higher education levels correlate with comprehensive HIV/AIDS knowledge and contraception access [8], though disparities persist, especially among marginalized communities.

Digital Divide

The digital gap worsens disparities in ASRH information access. While digital platforms offer reproductive health information opportunities, access remains unequal [10], particularly for rural and marginalized adolescents, hindering their access to reliable ASRH information online.

Early Marriage and Reproductive Health Outcomes:

Early marriage significantly affects reproductive health outcomes, particularly for girls. Research shows that early-married girls face increased risks of early and unplanned pregnancies, leading to higher maternal and child health risks [11]. These pregnancies are associated with elevated maternal mortality, obstetric complications, and adverse birth outcomes like low birth weight and preterm birth [12]. Early marriage also restricts girls' educational and economic opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and gender inequality [13]. Lack of access to comprehensive sexuality education and reproductive health services further exposes them to STIs and RTIs, contributing to unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions [15].

Infertility Risks

Early marriage and sexual activity heighten infertility risks, especially for girls. Research indicates that unprotected sexual activity can lead to STIs and RTIs, major contributors to infertility [16]. STIs like chlamydia and gonorrhea can cause pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), resulting in reproductive organ damage, including fallopian tube scarring. Untreated RTIs, such as bacterial vaginosis and trichomoniasis, also impair reproductive health and increase infertility risks [17, 19].

Psychosocial Impact

Early marriage and infertility profoundly affect adolescents' psychosocial well-being. Girls experiencing infertility may face stigma, social isolation, and marital discord, impacting mental health [18]. The inability to conceive may trigger feelings of inadequacy, depression, and low self-esteem, worsening the emotional toll of early marriage and sexual activity [19,20].

Policy and Programmatic Responses

Addressing early marriage and its impact on reproductive health requires comprehensive policies and programs. Efforts should prioritize gender equality, delaying marriage, and enhancing adolescents' access to sexual and reproductive health services. Comprehensive sexuality education, covering contraception, STI prevention, and infertility awareness, empowers adolescents to make informed reproductive health decisions [21].

Factors Contributing to Risky Reproductive Health:

Nutritional Deficiencies

Inadequate nutrition significantly influences risky reproductive health behaviors among adolescents [22]. Poor dietary habits and deficiencies in nutrients like iron, folate, and calcium can disrupt hormone regulation, menstrual function, and fertility [23]. Addressing these deficiencies through balanced diets and supplementation is crucial for optimal reproductive health.

Socioeconomic Disparities

Socioeconomic factors such as poverty, limited education, and unemployment contribute to risky reproductive health behaviors [24]. Adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds often lack access to nutritious food, healthcare, and comprehensive sexuality education, heightening vulnerability to adverse reproductive health outcomes [25]. Reducing socioeconomic disparities is vital for equitable resource access and minimizing reproductive health inequalities.

Gender Inequality

Gender disparities and power imbalances affect adolescent reproductive health behaviors [26]. Discriminatory norms may restrict girls' autonomy in reproductive decision-making and healthcare access, leading to disparities in outcomes [27]. Promoting gender equity and empowering adolescents of all genders is crucial for addressing reproductive health disparities and fostering positive behaviors.

Limited Access to Reproductive Health Services

Inadequate access to youth-friendly reproductive health services impedes addressing risky behaviors [28]. Geographic barriers, costs, stigma, and confidentiality concerns deter adolescents from seeking care promptly, leading to delays in addressing reproductive health issues [29]. Enhancing healthcare systems and youth-friendly services is essential for equitable access to reproductive healthcare.

Stigma and Discrimination

Stigma around sexuality and sexual orientation hinders adolescents from seeking reproductive health services [30]. Discriminatory attitudes, especially towards marginalized groups, obstruct access to inclusive care, exacerbating reproductive health disparities [31]. Combating stigma is crucial for creating supportive environments that enable adolescents to access the care they need.

Addressing these factors and promoting nutritional well-being can mitigate reproductive health risks, fostering positive behaviors and outcomes among adolescents.

Status of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and Their Impact on Infertility among Adolescents**Prevalence of STIs among Adolescents**

STIs like chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, and human papillomavirus (HPV) are prevalent among adolescents worldwide, with India facing a growing burden, largely due to undiagnosed and untreated infections [32]. Factors such as limited access to reproductive health services and inadequate sexuality education contribute to STI spread [33].

Impact of STIs on Infertility

Untreated STIs can lead to serious reproductive health complications, including infertility. For instance, chlamydia and gonorrhea can cause pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) in females, resulting in reproductive organ scarring, including fallopian tube damage [34,36]. In males, these STIs can lead to complications affecting sperm production and fertility [35].

Barriers to STI Testing and Treatment

Despite the risks, adolescents face barriers in accessing testing and treatment services due to stigma, confidentiality concerns, and lack of awareness [36]. Limited access to youth-friendly services further delays diagnosis and treatment [37].

Prevention Strategies

Preventing STIs and associated infertility requires comprehensive approaches, including promoting condom use, regular testing, and treatment, and integrating STI education into school curricula and community programs [38,41]. Empowering adolescents with knowledge about prevention and encouraging open communication about sexual health are crucial [39, 40].

Menstrual Hygiene Practices among Adolescents in India (2019-22)

Menstrual hygiene is crucial for women's reproductive health. A study analyzed menstrual hygiene practices among adolescent and young women aged 15 to 24 in India using data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) Rounds 4 and 5 (2015-16 and 2019-21, respectively). The percentage of those using hygienic methods increased from 58% in NFHS-4 to 78% in NFHS-5, with urban areas showing higher usage (90%) than rural areas (73%). Education plays a significant role, as those with 12 or more years of schooling are twice as likely to use hygienic methods. Socioeconomic status also influences practices, with those in the highest wealth quintile exhibiting 95% usage compared to 54% in the lowest quintile. While progress is evident, rural-urban, educational, and socioeconomic disparities persist [48, 49].

Table1: Common STDs and Their Effects on Reproductive Health and Infertility:

STD	Significant Effects on Reproductive Health and Infertility
Chlamydia	Can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), which may cause scarring and infertility in females [42]
Gonorrhea	Can result in PID, leading to fallopian tube damage and infertility in females [43]
Syphilis	In pregnant women, can cause congenital syphilis in newborns, leading to stillbirth or infant death[44]
Human Papillomavirus (HPV)	Can lead to cervical cancer in females, potentially impacting fertility [45]
Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV)	Can cause genital herpes, which may lead to painful genital ulcers and affect fertility [46]
HIV/AIDS	While HIV itself does not directly cause infertility, it can lead to secondary infections or conditions that may affect reproductive health [47]

Percentage of Teenage Girls Beginning Childbearing by Background Characteristics (2019-22)

Teenage childbearing poses health challenges for adolescent girls and their offspring. According to NFHS-5 (2019-22), 8% of girls aged 15 to 19 in India have begun childbearing, indicating a significant burden. Rural girls have double the prevalence (8%) compared to urban counterparts (4%), underscoring regional disparities in reproductive health services. Education is a critical factor, as girls with no schooling are over four times as likely (18%) to begin childbearing compared to those with 12 or more years of schooling (4%). Socioeconomic status also plays a role, with girls from the poorest quintile five times more likely (10%) to begin childbearing compared to the richest quintile (2%), reflecting disparities in access to reproductive health information and services [48-49].

Policy Recommendations to Address Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health (ASRH)

Comprehensive Implementation of ASRH Education

Integrate evidence-based ASRH education into the national curriculum, ensuring age-appropriate content delivery and teacher training. Comprehensive ASRH education equips adolescents with accurate information and skills to make informed decisions, reducing risky behaviors and promoting positive reproductive health outcomes [50].

Strengthening Community Engagement and Youth-Friendly Services

Establish community-based ASRH programs with youth-friendly health services, including counseling and access to contraceptives, tailored to the needs of adolescents. Increased access to youth-friendly services fosters trust, encourages help-seeking behavior, and reduces barriers to accessing reproductive health care, ultimately improving health outcomes [51].

Gender-Responsive Interventions

Implement gender-transformative programs targeting both boys and girls to challenge harmful gender norms and promote gender equality in sexual and reproductive decision-making. Addressing gender inequalities empowers adolescents to negotiate safer sexual practices, resist peer pressure, and make autonomous choices, leading to improved SRH outcomes [52].

Enhanced Access to Contraceptive Services

Ensure universal access to a wide range of contraceptive methods through both facility-based and community-based distribution channels, prioritizing confidentiality and affordability. Access to contraception reduces unintended pregnancies, maternal mortality, and unsafe abortions among adolescents, contributing to better reproductive health and well-being [53].

Scaling Up School Health Programs

Scale up school-based health programs to provide holistic ASRH services, including regular health check-ups, counseling sessions, and referrals to specialized care when needed. School-based health programs offer a convenient platform to reach a large population of adolescents, promote healthy behaviors, and address emerging SRH issues [54-56].

These policy recommendations aim to address the multifaceted challenges faced by adolescents in accessing sexual and reproductive health services and information, ultimately improving their health outcomes and well-being.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, prioritizing adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) is paramount for cultivating a healthy society. Through investments in comprehensive sexuality education, enhanced access to youth-friendly reproductive health services, and promotion of gender equality, we can empower adolescents to

make informed decisions and lead healthier lives. Addressing ASRH issues not only benefits adolescents individually but also contribute to the overall well-being and prosperity of society. Policymakers, healthcare providers, educators, and communities must collaborate to create an environment that supports the sexual and reproductive health rights of adolescents. By working together, we can foster a culture that values and prioritizes ASRH, thereby paving the way for a healthier future for all.

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