

## Review Article

# Unravelling the psychological aspects of attitudes towards women's sexual health: An evidence-based review

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### Abstract

The sexuality issue of humans is one of the unresolved issues and the subject of fierce taboos and disputes across the years. It is one of the important and complex field of study and subject to a big part of political and societal pressure. Leading entities like the World Health Organization and the organisations related to sexual health in the world have considered well-being and sexual health as human rights and one of the important universal goals to pursue in order to boost the quality of life associated with health. According to the World Health Organisation issues like HIV and other sexually transmitted conditions, violence against women, sexual dysfunction, unintended pregnancies, and risky abortions comes under the sexual and reproductive health which disregarding inequality and discrimination among gender across culture and different Societies. The current article focuses on the different psychological dimensions of sexual health and how sex education and sexual health differ in terms of attitude across different cultures from Western perspective to South Asian countries like India, Pakistan, etc. A total of 25 studies were included, following the preferred reporting item for systematic review. The research papers included in this review are both qualitative and quantitative. Researcher used different search strategies and search engine for research paper like Google scholar, PubMed etc. In this study, for reviewing different studies researcher used the

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PRISMA model 2020. Different inclusion and exclusion criteria were used by research, like the inclusion of papers which were published only in the English language and published after 1990. The findings of these studies show that human sexual health includes valuable aspects associated with close companionship, pleasure, voluntary sexual intimacy, and functioning of sexuality. Sexual health is not always related with reproductive issues, problems related to sexuality, violence in sexual nature and infections related to sexuality.

## Introduction

The concepts of sexual activity, reproductive rights, and healthcare are astonishingly discounted and marginalised in South Asian policy discourse, as well as in India. India has one of the largest populations of youth in the world. Due to culturally and patriarchally enforced constraints and subjugation surrounding their sexuality and reproductive biological functions, young female adults face additional significant problems.

In India, 14 percent of pregnancies among females under the age of 20 are unplanned. Additionally, more than 34 percent of teenage married girls claim to have experienced physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. Unsafe abortion practices contribute to fifty percent of maternal fatalities among female's teens aged fifteen to nineteen. Given these statistics, it is crucial to mainstream and raise knowledge regarding sexual and reproductive health.

Health representing symbol or indicator do not present a positive picture of Northeast India, particularly Assam. Assam has the highest maternal mortality rate (MMR) in India. According to a report by the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO), Meghalaya ranks third in terms of HIV epidemic prevalence in the nation, following Mizoram (1.19%) and Nagaland (0.82%). Meghalaya itself has a high HIV epidemic rate of 0.76 percent. These states are all situated in northeastern India. The statistics highlight the importance of research efforts aimed at assessing the region's awareness of sexual and reproductive health. The health and well-being of Asian women are significantly at risk due to the significantly elevated prevalence of HIV among them.<sup>[1]</sup> Women living with HIV are facing more stereotypes and prejudice in Asian countries and these problems impact their psychological well-being and their standard of living negatively.<sup>[2,3]</sup>

Patients with HIV are found to be more prone to different physical illnesses because the virus affects their immune systems badly. In the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, 2021, approx. 2.2 million HIV-positive registered in which females account for over half of all new infections. These sexually contagious infections and diseases produce a substantial health risk to women residing in Asia, and these may cause infertility among

women. It has also been reported that Asian women are particularly more prone to infectious diseases like gonorrhoea, chlamydia, and hepatitis B which may raise their risk of HIV infection and problem of infertility. Oral, anal, and vaginal sex are among the sexual activities that transmit the majority of STIs/STDs, including HIV.<sup>[4]</sup>

In this review paper, an attempt has been made to examine the attitudes towards sexual health in South Asian countries, with a specific emphasis on India among both genders, males and females. The study also explores the various causes of sexual health issues considered taboo in Indian society, as well as prevalent sexual diseases. Existing reviews typically concentrate on specific groups of women, such as transgender individuals, female sex workers, or exclusively female samples. However, in this study, the researcher examines the perspectives of both men and women.

## Women and sexual health

The majority of research on female sexual health has concentrated on sexual functioning, frequently ignoring other important factors like gender roles, sexual behaviours, attitudes, and the prevention of unintended pregnancies, sexual assault, and other sexual and reproductive infections or diseases. Due to this emphasis and assessment methodology, the FSFI is the most widely used measurement tool for assessing women's sexual functioning.<sup>[5]</sup> Accordingly, multidimensional constructs to study sexual health of female must be covered by standardised, validated scales for the accurate evaluation of women's sexuality.

## Purpose of study

The study aimed to review the literature related to sexual health, behaviour, and diseases to investigate the attitudes of both genders toward sex education in contemporary society. Sexual beliefs, desires, and guilt are significantly influenced by their ethnicity and culture<sup>[6]</sup> and Asian culture, in particular, tends to exhibit sexual conservatism, which may explain involvement in risky sexual behaviours and reluctance to seek help regarding sexual health. This cultural context also contributes to negative attitudes toward sex, sexual health, and sexual orientation.<sup>[6]</sup> Therefore, it is essential to examine sexual health knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours among different genders in South Asian countries across various socioeconomic statuses.

## Method

### Search strategy

An established review process was employed to evaluate published empirical and theoretical research. Research publications were identified by searching databases such as Elsevier, PMC Database, Wiley and Sons, Springer, and Google Scholar, among others. Studies were identified using keywords such as “sexual health” and “attitude”. “After conducting a thorough evaluation of the literature, relevant research conducted globally since 2010 was selected for inclusion in the review.

### Inclusion criteria

The review focuses on research regarding attitudes and sexual health, encompassing studies conducted on both adult and adolescent participants, with the age range from 13 to 44. After

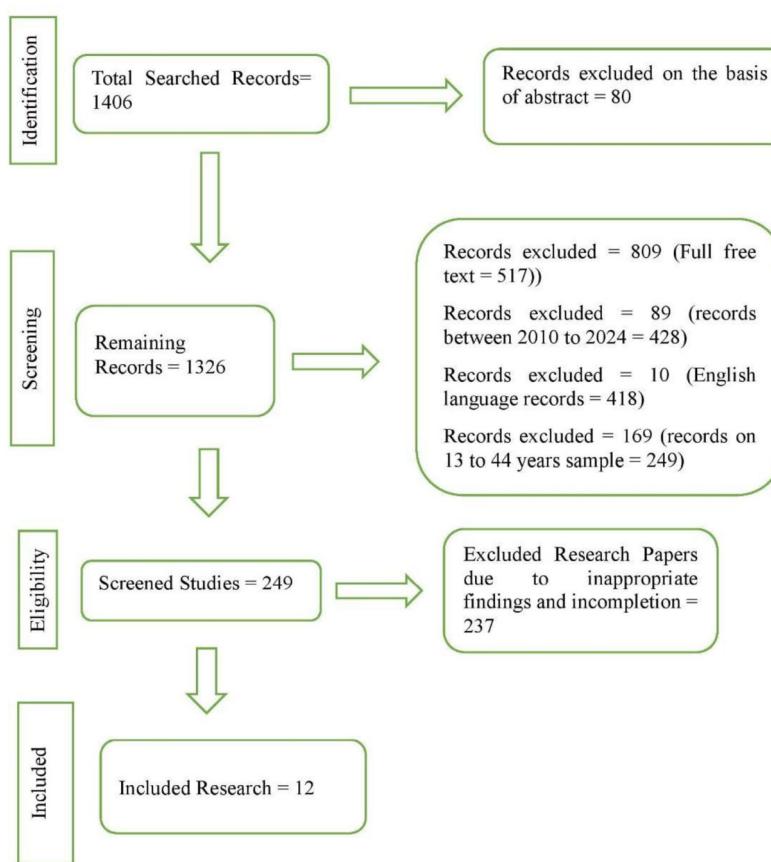
an extensive literature search, 1406 studies on sexual health and attitude were identified for review. Only studies meeting the inclusion criteria were considered, which included those discussing both attitude and sexual health variables. The inclusion criteria specified that studies must be publicly accessible and open access, published in reputed national and international journals. This review comprises twenty-five (25) studies that met these criteria. Among these, 12 were sourced from the Pubmed database, six from Google Scholar, and seven from other reputable journals (including UGC Care listed Journals, Web of Science, etc.).

## Results

The selection of research from the database has been presented in the flow chart given below.

The flow chart represents the selection of the studies.

**Figure 1: Identification of studies via Pubmed Database**



According to one study, adolescents' perceptions and knowledge of their sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) in the Lahore district of Pakistan are found to be significant barriers to their access to and exercise of these rights. A mixed methods approach was used in the research, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. A household survey comprising 600 respondents, including teenagers between the ages of 15 to 19, their parents, and carers, was carried out for the quantitative component.

The study highlighted the significance of a rights-based approach by revealing a bare level of knowledge regarding Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (ASRHR) among adolescents and their parents/caregivers in the Lahore district. The creation of targeted policies and educational initiatives to support healthy behaviours is desperately needed. The findings of the study suggest awareness and push the neighbouring state as well as other communities by collaborating with different NGOs and GOs for the rights of sexual health. This may require creating a virtual knowledge centre, organising debate competitions, including sexual health rights topics into the academic curriculum and setting up sessions of orientation for the community and health care professionals.<sup>[7]</sup>

More enquiry into the priorities for (SRH) and the informational requirements of adolescents and children residing in the areas of Gilgit Baltistan (G.B) intended to fill these gaps. In one cross-sectional survey, medical professionals, and teenagers participated, it was found that teenagers in G.B. have satisfied their SRH needs. The findings of the study show that they are interested in learning about STIs, SRH, HIV and other sexual abuse. Most of the participants of the study said that problems in receiving SRH services include things like their age, fear of being judged or problems of stigma and fear of how society views sex.<sup>[8]</sup>

Sex education plays a crucial role in dispelling the stigma surrounding sexual health, as evidenced by research conducted in 2012.<sup>[9]</sup> Their study revealed that education and services related to sexual health for young individuals are not enough in terms of both quantity and quality in Pakistan and other Asian countries. They advocated for the implementation of education in academic institution should be curriculum-based.

In their study, a cross-sectional method was employed in urban and semi-urban districts of Sindh, Pakistan, involving a sample of 200 individuals aged between 15 to 25 years. The findings indicated low levels of knowledge among young people and their dissatisfaction with the available sexual health services, which hinder the effectiveness of current reproductive health services in the world.

Interestingly, the study found that the primary sources of knowledge on sexual health were perceived to be media and the internet. Participants recommended formalising this knowledge through academia, emphasising the importance of integrating comprehensive sex education into academic curricula.<sup>[10]</sup> In one of the studies, it has been found that the role of media in shaping attitudes towards sexual health and disease. The findings revealed that exposure to various forms of pornographic content via the internet, mass media and a preference for Western/Asian movies/videos were significant influences on individuals' perceptions.

The primary outcome measures that were looked at in the study were sex-related behaviours, sexual permissiveness prior to marriage, and sex-related knowledge. Multiple linear regression analyses were used to evaluate the effects of each of these media contexts, in addition to influences from family, peers, and schools, on sex-related knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours. The study findings focused on the influential role of mass media and the messages it conveys in shaping sex-related knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours among unmarried Asian adolescents and young adults. The findings of the study underscored the importance of considering media exposure in future research and intervention programs aimed at improving reproductive health outcomes.<sup>[11]</sup>

Another study shows that 52 per cent of participants had correct knowledge of the legal statutes related to sexual reproductive rights issues like abortion and maternity leave duration. Additionally, 49 percent of participants were found aware of the legitimacy of homosexuality in India, while 44 percent of the participants provided genuine responses to queries about sexual health and menstrual hygiene. Importantly, 87 percent of students stated support for the inclusion of sex education in academics and encouraged the free

supply of menstrual hygiene products in schools and higher educational institutions.<sup>[12]</sup>

Another study points out that un-conservative viewpoints were linked to advanced age, masculine sex, enrolment in non-science fields, discomfort at home and religious background. Findings also revealed that incomplete knowledge of sex and misconceptions related to sexuality is prevalent among these population. Researchers suggested that a detailed sex education programme offered in schools that may improve sexual health could minimise these gaps in sexual attitude and knowledge. These programs may play an important role in promoting better sexual health information and fostering healthier attitudes towards sexuality among adolescents and children.<sup>[13]</sup>

The programs should cover areas like adolescence, puberty, and common issues related to adolescent health. By updating teachers with knowledge about adolescent health and common problems, they can effectively assist adolescents and prevent further complications related to health and sexuality. Further, the study emphasise that the major population relies on mass media to update their knowledge horizon. This underscores the potential for leveraging mass media platforms to circulate accurate information about reproductive and sexual health, further enhancing awareness and understanding among the wider population.<sup>[14]</sup>

One study has found that In Indian society, the subject of sex education, referred to as family life education (FLE), has resulted in much dispute. The crucial role of sex education becomes more widely recognised as HIV/AIDS, RTIs/STIs, and teenage pregnancies rise in frequency. However, different facets of Indian society have always had differing opinions about the implementation of sex education in schools. Their research revealed a significant difference between the percentage of young people who thought sex education was pertinent and those who experienced it, highlighting substantial unmet needs for FLE. Moreover, youth who received FLE demonstrated greater awareness of Reproductive wellness concerns in contrast to individuals who did not. Regardless of age or gender, the majority of Indian youth said they were in favour of FLE being implemented in schools, ideally beginning with the eighth grade. The problem now lies in developing a pro cultural FLE curriculum that is welcome by all

segments of society. Studies that include teacher samples can provide valuable insights into their attitudes towards sexual health, contributing to a holistic understanding of the issue.<sup>[15]</sup>

In one of the qualitative study in which 35 school teachers included to explore their perceptions of sexual health education. The study utilised a pre-tested, semi-structured, self-administered questionnaire. The results showed that the majority of teachers expressed a desire for formal training on the topic and acknowledged the need for a sexual health curriculum in their educational institutions. Although they were comfortable answering questions from students, lack of training and cultural differences were noted as obstacles to execution. The study highlighted the importance of training teachers to be well-informed and skilful in delivering sexual health education, as well as updating school curricula to incorporate comprehensive sexual health education. Adolescence is a crucial stage of development marked by significant changes in various aspects of life. Therefore, it is essential to include studies that focus on adolescents as their sample population.<sup>[16]</sup>

One study which focuses on investigating the attitudes of adolescent students towards sex education. The findings revealed that adolescent students generally held positive attitudes towards sexuality education, with females exhibiting more positive attitudes than males. Learners perceived sex education programs as valuable, particularly in providing information about their bodies and promoting self-respect. The study recommended that parents support adolescents in applying the knowledge acquired from sex education, fostering the formation of positive peer groups, encouraging societal support for practising teachings of sexuality education and presenting values and morals that adolescents can emulate as guidance on sexuality issues. These recommendations underscore the importance of a comprehensive approach to sexuality education that involves various stakeholders, including parents, peers, and society as a whole.<sup>[17]</sup>

### **Studies related to women's sexual health**

The goal of the study was to compile the most recent research on women's understanding, comprehension, and perception of STDs and other sexually transmitted infections in Asia through a scoping review. Applying the PRISMA

scoping approach, papers published between 2018 and 2022 were extracted from four databases. The research revealed consistently low levels of knowledge and awareness across Asia, particularly among female commercial sex workers and those with lower education. Male domination and education emerged as significant factors influencing health behaviour. Another study focused on school-going adolescents in the urban area of Chennai, conducted by Queen Nesan, Siva, Chrism, and Timsi (2021), aimed to understand and evaluate their knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of sex education. The analysis revealed that females exhibited better knowledge of sex education compared to males, and there was a lack of sex education among students with lower standards. The study emphasised the need for more awareness programs in schools to help students understand the importance of sex education.<sup>[18]</sup>

Additionally, a study aimed to understand the attitudes, behaviour, and sources of influence on sexual knowledge among college-going youth. The results indicated that students had poor knowledge about sexuality despite having liberal perspectives on sexuality. Their primary sources of knowledge on sexual health topics were the internet, radio, newspapers, and social circles, as sexual education is still considered a taboo topic in familial settings. This reliance on friends and electronic media highlights the need for more open discussions about sexual health within families and educational institutions.<sup>[19]</sup>

The findings of two systematic reviews indicated that education or intervention on sexual health had a positive impact on students, enriching their knowledge and attitudes toward sexual health. Researchers suggested conducting such interventions at various stages in schools, covering topics such as sexually transmitted infections, consent, and preventing unwanted pregnancies. They recommended scaling up school-based interventions in India to enhance adolescents' understanding of sexual and reproductive health. Secondly, another systematic review focused on peer education initiatives to support youth sexual and reproductive health awareness. This review utilised the PRISMA method to analyse 13 selected papers based on inclusion criteria. The review found that educational programs addressing topics such as menstruation, consent, sexually transmitted

infections, puberty, and contraception were beneficial in enhancing knowledge and attitudes. Although the impact varied across studies due to factors such as additional components, settings, delivery modes, and lecturers, one common theme emerged: the implemented programs had a positive impact on participants' knowledge. A study was conducted to investigate the attitudes, behaviours, and sexual knowledge of the selected sample, with a focus on understanding gender differences in perceptions of sexual knowledge. The results revealed conservative attitudes among females regarding sexual behaviour and attitude formation. Interestingly, students preferred online sources over family when seeking information about sexual health, and males demonstrated higher levels of sex-related knowledge. Despite relatively low levels of sexual knowledge, unplanned pregnancies were reported, highlighting the need to promote sex education in educational settings.<sup>[20]</sup>

To examine the role of parents in providing sexual education to their children in Malaysia study was conducted and found contrary to common misconceptions. The study found that the majority of Malaysian parents acknowledged the importance of sexual education and believed they could provide their children with healthy and effective sexual education based on their knowledge. This highlights the potential for programs where parents discuss the importance of sexual education with their children.<sup>[21]</sup>

Furthermore, a study has been conducted in which researchers involve school-going adolescents in 8th-10th standards to assess their knowledge about sexual and reproductive health. The investigation shows that the level of sexual awareness among adolescents was below par, with approximately 50 percent of participants believing in misconceptions such as girls being unclean during menstruation. Girls had less knowledge compared to boys regarding the proper functioning of male and female reproductive organs. The Internet and teachers were identified as the most general source of details, underscoring the importance of online services and schools in spreading awareness among students. The above-stated findings stress the requirement of complete sex education programs to address gaps in sexual knowledge among adolescents.<sup>[22]</sup>

A study was conducted on the knowledge and

attitudes about sex among medical interns in Gujarat. The findings of the study are as follows:

Most of the interns did not possess appropriate knowledge about masturbation. Most interns were aware that menstruation does not signify that girls are unclean or should be separated alone during the period apart from this. Most of the interns showed a positive and generous attitude towards sex education, reflecting a positive perception while other participants generally have conservative attitudes towards extramarital affairs and male participants revealed a more open attitude regarding sexual knowledge as compared to females.<sup>[23]</sup>

## Discussion

Sexual health and attitudes are complex and influenced by different factors such as Psychosocial and cultural aspects. In Indian society, discussion on sex are often discouraged in the family that lead to extensive ignorance and a lack of awareness among adolescents that may increase the misperceptions, prejudiced viewpoints, psychological issues, low self-worth, discomfort, and hazardous behaviours among individuals. It may also contribute to unsatisfactory interpersonal relationships due to misunderstandings or unrealistic expectations.

Hence, it is important to support open and complete discussions about sexual health and relationships in Indian society. Education and awareness programs may be helpful in dispelling myths, address misconceptions, and empower individuals to make informed decisions about their sexual health and well-being. Further, efforts must be made to create a supportive environment where individuals feel relaxed seeking information and support regarding sexual matters.

## Sexual knowledge

Ignorance related to sexual health and lack of awareness is a worldwide issue that is prevalently common in developing and underdeveloped nations. For the information-related sources majority of studies indicate that friends and peers are important in providing the sex-related information<sup>[24]</sup>, and this reliance on friends might be a factor in the ubiquity of sexual misperceptions because misinformation may spread quickly among peers. Studies carried out in this area in the past have reported similar findings.<sup>[25]</sup>

Further, it has been found that the internet and visual media have become major sources of information for youth, replacing many traditional sources suggests that these media platforms may play an important role in publicising accurate information and educating awareness among youth about sexual health.<sup>[26]</sup> The findings of the few studies highlight the lack of knowledge about reproductive physiology, the legal age of consent for sex in India, pregnancy and contraception, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and the services that are available for reproductive health, even in the face of numerous intervention programmes aimed at young people. Lack of understanding in these areas can result in high-risk behaviours and their related consequences, as well as major medicolegal complications.<sup>[13,26]</sup>

Generally, addressing the gaps in knowledge and awareness about sexual health among adolescents and youth is essential to help healthier behaviours, prevent adverse outcomes, and improve overall reproductive and sexual health outcomes. Efforts should also be made to confirm that accurate and comprehensive sexual health education is accessible to youth through various channels, including schools, healthcare facilities, and digital platforms.<sup>[27,30]</sup>

## Sexual attitude

Sociocultural context frequently shapes attitudes towards sexuality. These attitudes, however, might differ greatly from conventional expectations.<sup>[26]</sup> There has been a shift in premarital romantic and/or sexual relationships from earlier conservative norms to a more liberal and “Western” perspective, with many young people today feeling more at ease with the idea.<sup>[27,29]</sup> The idea of “virginity until marriage”, which was formerly accepted as the standard in traditional Indian society, is gradually changing reflecting this change in mindset.<sup>[26,29]</sup>

## Sexual misconception

As with earlier studies<sup>[26-31]</sup>, the most prevalent sexual misunderstandings we discovered concerned the extent and age at which sexual activity should be initiated, as well as the retention and loss of semen on the body and mind. In response to these beliefs, people turn to a range of interventions<sup>[27-28]</sup>, some of which may be more detrimental than beneficial<sup>[30]</sup>. It was discovered that compared to other students, science students

had a smaller proportion of sexual misconceptions, likely due to their higher level of awareness. Contrary to previous findings, marriage did not appear to lessen the occurrence of fables.

### Sexual behaviour

As per previous reports, women initiated sexual relations at a later average age than men.<sup>[31]</sup> As would be expected, women were more likely than men to be celibate. The likelihood of having engaged in sexual activity increased with how restrictive the home environment was perceived to be, indicating that sexual behaviour is likely to be in defiance of the restrictive environment at home.

### Conclusion

Sexual Health is a topic of concern when it comes to South Asian countries because of its common misconception and taboo attached to the topic. However though in today's time, the scenario has shifted its paradigm and individuals have started to look from a wider perspective when it comes to discussing sexual and reproductive health, on the ground level a lot of work has yet to be done.

Knowledge about sexual and reproductive health contains dimensions like mensuration, conception, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual dysfunctions, and abortions. These dimensions are a crucial part of our lives to be discussed and being aware. Though being such an important topic to pay attention to, the literature to understand the dynamics of sexual health is not complimentary, especially when it comes to South Asian countries. Therefore, this review was done to add further to the literature and understand the various dimensions of sexual health.

For the review, 25 studies were included which included studies from different South Asian countries. The following conclusions can be made from the collected and reviewed articles:

- 1) The knowledge of sexual dimension, attitude, and behaviours towards the same is still not on the positive side of the scale. Individuals still do not think positively when it comes to discussing the topic of sex education.
- 2) The role of gender in knowledge about sexual health is not static. It varied as per the geographical and environmental conditions, but still, there is no fixed pattern observed to

find the reason. This needs more quantitative research studies to reach an acceptable conclusion.

- 3) Mensuration is still considered a taboo topic to be acknowledged positively by the male population. The idea that females going through mensuration are pure is still prevalent in some parts of India, which needs more awareness to be eradicated from its roots.
- 4) The major factor in gaining knowledge about sexual and reproductive health is online services rather than parents, which is distressing. When it comes to gathering information, youth find comfort in technology rather than their own family. This makes it easy, as online services often spread fake information.
- 5) This topic should be treated with seriousness, and parents should be made to attend campaigns and sexual education programs. This will help them open their mindset and let go of their taboo and negative perspectives.
- 6) The majority of the studies reviewed the importance of conducting education programs on sexual education. The programs were seen as effective on the individuals and they tend to also shift their perspective from negative to positive while enriching themselves with sexual health knowledge.

To conclude the review, it can be said that sexual health is still a theme that is not looked after with utmost care and sincerity. Due to this, our youth shifted their narrative and misled themselves by looking at internet sources. The lack of studies and programs also shows that such an important issue is still neglected in countries with the largest populations. The possible suggestion will include conducting more seminars, and programs to educate the population in the best way possible.

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