

Adolescent sexual health in Moldova

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For a long time, the themes of sexual behaviour and sexual education have been 'forbidden fruits' in Moldova. Sexual education was not acceptable and even related scientific research could not be conducted. In Western European countries, sexual education for adolescents has become more or less part of general culture, but the introduction of such education in institutions in Moldova is completely new. In March-April 1996, a group of volunteers of the newly established Family Planning Association of Moldova conducted a survey on teenage attitudes on sexual relations, sexual education, and family planning. They interviewed a sample of 1,500 young people, aged 13-18, 63% of them girls and 37% boys. The interviews were carried out in schools and colleges in the capital of Moldova by teachers, psychologists and students of the State University. This article presents the main results of this survey.

Sexual behaviour of young Moldovans

Survey results indicate that pre-marital sexual relationships are now fairly common in Moldova and the age of sexual initiation seems to have decreased considerably in the past few years. At the same time, the general attitude towards pre-marital sex is becoming more liberal among adolescents. More than half (53%) of the young people interviewed think that the average age at first sexual intercourse is currently between 16 and 18 years of age and more than a third (34.9%) of them think that sexual relationships are started at a (much) younger age between 12 and 16.

When asked about their own sexual experience, the average age at first intercourse is considerably higher. Of those interviewed, 28.8% had had sexual contacts themselves, which indicates an average age of about 17 at first intercourse. When the data on opinions about sexual experience in their own age group are compared with those of younger people's own sexual experience, it seems likely that several of those interviewed think that their peers have more sexual experience than they have themselves. One explanation for this discrepancy might be that

you may not be entirely honest when answering questions on your own sexual experience. Another explanation could be that schools where the interviews were conducted were not representative. More than 30% of the boys and girls interviewed were at risk of unwanted pregnancy at their first contact, since they did not use a contraceptive method.

We also asked about the motivation to start a sexual relationship. Two-thirds (66%) said they had fallen in love, 29% mentioned "curiosity", 11% could not or would not resist their partner's insistence, and finally 3.7% were raped (only girls). Given the high percentage of youngsters who indicated that they didn't want to have sex, it is not surprising that 6% said they had health problems after their first intercourse. Only 60% of those interviewed were convinced that they had sufficient knowledge about modern methods of contraception and prevention of STD/HIV. The incidence of STDs and HIV transmission has grown significantly in Moldova, and the general attitude of the population towards modern contraception seems to be very negative, with only 12% of women using IUDs and 1-2% using hormonal contraception.

Attitudes towards sexuality and abortion

Attitudes towards sexuality in general and towards pre-marital sex in particular have undergone significant changes in the past few years. Once a taboo subject, images and ideas on sexuality are apparent in almost every aspect of popular culture and daily life. It is present in the form of pornographic video tapes (largely illegal), in cinemas, on television, and also in pornographic literature. But, sexuality is still not included in official educational programmes.

We asked respondents what they knew about pre-marital sexual contacts. Most of them (59.9%) were of the opinion that these contacts were permissible. Only 19.3% of respondents felt that it should not be allowed, and 20.8% didn't have a clear opinion. The main reasons given for not accepting pre-marital sexual contacts were fear of unwanted pregnancy, prevention of STDs and protection of virginity for religious reasons. The attitudes of the girls were clearly more traditional than those of the boys. Boys tend to agree with the double standard that they may have sex before marriage but that girls may not. Some of the girls do not accept this attitude, saying "If it is permissible for boys, then why not for us?"

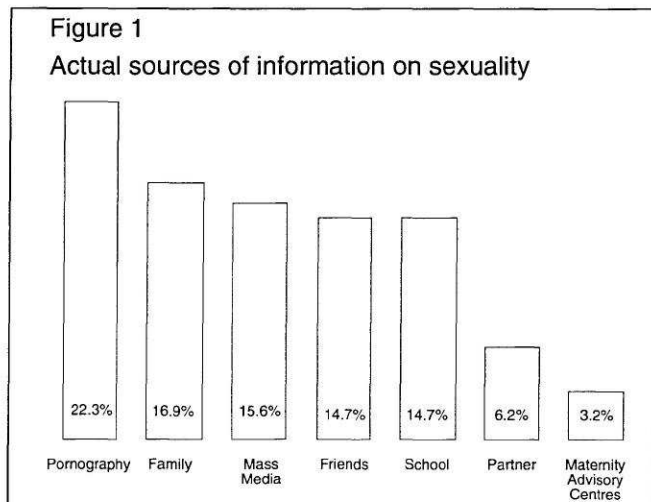
The changing attitude towards pre-marital sexual relations and the increase in sexual contacts of young people result in increasing numbers of pre-marital pregnancies and abortions among ever younger girls. The mean number of abortions per woman during her lifetime (total abortion rate) is 2.5. For a long time, abortion has been used as a method of family planning in Moldova. The respondents were asked what they would do in the

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case of an unwanted pregnancy and 30% of them answered that they would have an abortion.

The need for sexual education

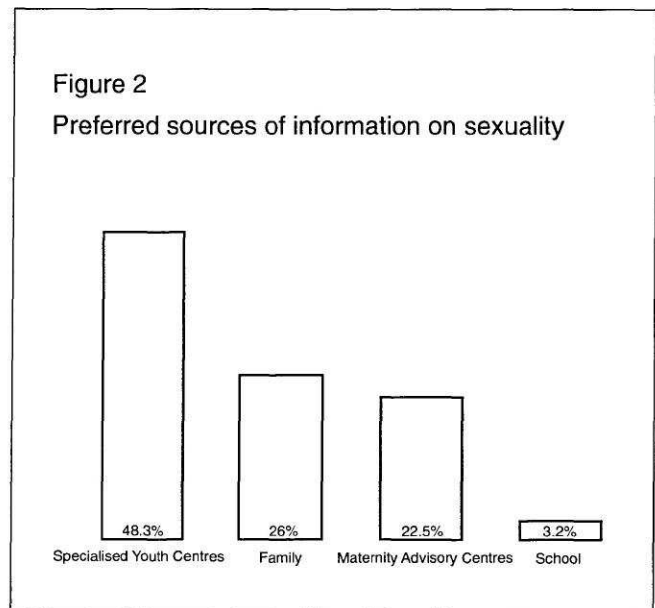
The current trend of increasing sexual activity among young people necessitates proper sexual education. In our survey, we asked several questions on this subject. The first question deals with current sources of information about sexuality. (See Figure 1)



The role of the family in passing information about sexuality has increased from 9% in 1993 to 16.9% in 1996. The relatively important role of schools in this respect reflects a significant change. In 1993, only 1% of young people had learned about sexuality in school, but this survey indicates it is now 14.7%. Indeed, the subject of reproductive health has been introduced in several schools in the past few years by doctors who have started to give lectures and training courses in schools. However, the level of knowledge about sexuality among students remains low, indicated by an increasing number of unwanted pregnancies and STDs among young women.

To the question "What is your opinion on the introduction of a course on relationships between men and women for teenagers?", almost 90% said this was a good idea and only 3% did not. This clearly shows that there is a need for sexual education in schools. The purpose of such education should be to promote a satisfactory sex life or, in other words, promotion of sexual health as defined by the World Health Organisation: "The integration of somatic, emotional, intellectual and social aspects of sexual being in a way that is positively enriching, and that enhances personality, communication and love".

Surprisingly, when asked about preferred sources of information about sexuality, very few respondents mentioned school. Most of them like to obtain this information anonymously through specialised youth centres, the family and maternity advisory centres. (See Figure 2)



The low preference of the school as a source of information on sexuality is probably related to the fact that until now, there has been hardly any sexual education in schools. Students evidently would appreciate access to such education, but while it is not available they will seek out other sources of information. The preference for specialised youth centres is related to a felt need for confidentiality and the wish to get specific information on modern contraceptive methods for the prevention of unwanted pregnancies and information on the prevention of STDs and HIV. Young people think that in such centres they can obtain this type of specific information (late period, broken condom, or emotional problems with relationships) on an individual basis.

Conclusions

The results of our survey show that young people in Moldova are very much in need of sexual and reproductive health education and services. It is clear that young people are very interested in questions related to intimate relationships and sexuality and that they tend to start sexual relationships at a young age. These findings will be useful for the development of a sexual education strategy.

For most adolescents, pornographic videos and literature are the most important source of information about sexuality. This is alarming since these films and magazines provide virtually no positive education and often portray distorted images of sexual relationships. Young people must have access to sound information about sexuality. Information obtained at this stage in life is also essential, because it shapes opinions and attitudes that persist in adult life. The results of the survey also indicate that special educational programmes in schools would be highly appreciated. Besides this, there is also a need for specialised youth information and counselling centres. Such centres should be attractive for young people, and responsive to their needs, in particular, the need for confidential information and treatment.