

## Research Article

# An Exploratory Study of Sexual and Reproductive Health Knowledge, Information-Seeking Behaviour and Attitudes among Saudi Women: A Questionnaire Survey of University Students

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**Context:** In Saudi Arabia, women's Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) is an area commonly linked with morality, tradition and religion and is thus not solely about providing SRH education or services. Little is known about the attitudes of Saudi women in relation to sexual practices or norms.

**Objectives:** This exploratory study aimed to provide the basis for further research on the sexual attitudes of Saudi women. Female sexuality has not been examined previously and is highly pertinent to a cultural context in which sexual interactions are illegal prior to marriage.

**Methodology:** A cross-sectional questionnaire study using a translated and pre-tested questionnaire in 2013-14. The participants were female universities students from Riyadh city. Ethical approval was granted from Queen Mary University of London.

**Result:** Four of 13 universities agreed to participate (two states and two private). Three hundred and sixty-five students completed questionnaires; nearly 95% said that it was socially unacceptable for unmarried females to have sex, with most participants reporting it as very unacceptable, and these responses were closely echoed by respondents' personal opinions in favor of virginity until marriage and against premarital sex.

**Conclusion:** These findings indicate the limited understanding of sexual health understanding and practice in this group.

**Introduction**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a rapidly developing country with considerable economic and human resources and is considered one of the wealthiest Arab countries in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has a high rate of early marriages compared with other Arab countries. Saudi Arabia has no minimum legal age for marriage, and many girls are married as soon as they reach menarche, i.e., their first menstrual period (Shawky & Milaat, 2000). The rate of early teenage marriage, which is defined as marriage under the age of 16 years, was found to be approximately 27.2% in Jeddah [1]. This practice, which is widespread throughout most of the Arab world, is related to traditional beliefs. Families prefer to marry their daughters at an early age, with culture, traditional values, virginity and family honor being the main reasons [2].

This practice reflects how women's rights and freedoms are contingent upon religion, social rules and taboo. The concepts of chastity and sexual modesty have significant implications for gender roles. Researchers [3] state that these fundamental principles are primarily associated with women and comprise the central constructs of both ever-important family honor and religious obligation. Modesty is a concept that is significantly emphasized in the Holy Quran for adoption by women and to a lesser extent by men, as

women are held responsible for *fitnah* (temptation). This attitude has long been held in the Middle East, which takes current religious significance from interpretations of Islamic theology.

Further, Islam is considered the principle religion of the majority of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries, including Saudi Arabia, and shapes and influences individuals socially, traditionally and in their practice. Based on Islamic rules, sexual conduct should only be practiced within marriage; thus, any sexual practice outside of this legal frame is not allowed and is considered adultery. Adultery is penalized, which shapes some sexual behavior [4]. Abdul-Aziz (2009) conducted a study among Egyptian and Jordanian women living in Qatar. Interestingly, 74.4% of Egyptian women and 54.6% of Jordanian women were knowledgeable of and familiar with masturbation, despite it being against Islamic teaching. Further, in Turkey, [5] found that 86.8% of university students agreed that it was important for a young girl to be a virgin prior to marriage but that 77.1% thought that young men should have sex prior to marriage. Similarly, in Turkey, [6] reported that 6.2% of students had had sex 'without intercourse' and none with intercourse. It is unclear what this means, but it may refer to penetration or oral sex. One student also reported having masturbated, and six students did not know the meaning of the word.

Thus, identifying the perceptions and attitudes of Saudi female students regards issues related to sexuality and gender has been interesting. The present study seeks to explore the sexual attitudes of young Saudi women and their view on sexuality. This study is unique in that no previous studies conducted in Saudi Arabia have focused directly on women's sexual attitudes. This study is part of larger study on female SRH in Saudi Arabia.

## Methods

The study was conducted in Riyadh city from 2013-2014. Riyadh is the capital of Saudi Arabia and is located in the center of the country. The empirical data presented here are part of a larger project conducted over 6 months. The data were collected through a self-administered anonymous questionnaire.

Participants were drawn from a sampling of the 13 universities that admit female students, including 8 private and 5 state universities. Of these 13 universities, only four (2 private and 2 state) permitted data collection.

### Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Queen Mary University of London Research Ethics Committee (reference QMREC2012/54). Students were informed verbally and through the information sheet provided to them that they could choose to not participate and that their anonymously completed questionnaires would be kept confidential; thus, anonymity was assured. Students were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The names of the universities were also kept confidential.

### Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 21.0 statistical software. Attitude scores are presented as means and were calculated from the questions related to sexuality and gender. Participants responded via a 4-point Likert scale. Some questions were reverse-coded, such as "Girls should remain a virgin until marriage." The responses in the dataset were as follows: 1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = disagree; and 4 = strongly disagree. For reverse coding, 4 represented strongly agree, and 1 represented strongly disagrees. T-tests and F-tests were used for the attitude score because it is a quantitative variable and is expressed as means and standard deviations.

## Results

In total, 462 questionnaires were distributed to students at the four study sites, and 365 completed questionnaires were received, resulting in a total response rate of 89%.

### Demographic characteristics

The mean age of respondents was 22.5 years (SD = 3.9 years), with a range of 18 to 39 years. Approximately one-third of respondents attended private universities, and two-thirds attended public universities, reflecting the general situation in Saudi Arabia.

Most respondents (90%) were studying for undergraduate degrees and were single (83.6%).

### Religious and cultural devotion

All respondents stated that they were Muslim. However, as shown

in Table 1, only one-fifth described themselves as 'religious,' and very few described themselves as 'highly religious.' More than two-thirds considered themselves 'somewhat religious,' and 8.5% reported that they were 'not at all religious.' When asked how traditional they considered themselves, the respondents provided broadly similar answers, with nearly two-thirds reporting 'somewhat traditional.' These data reflect the strong influence of religion on Saudi culture and society.

### Attitudes toward premarital sex and sexual relationships

We next asked the Saudi female students about their perceptions of social norms regarding sexuality and gender and their own views on these topics, bearing in mind their sensitivity within Saudi culture and the restrictions applied to women in terms of socialization with males. Table 2 reports the responses to 14 questions and statements about the social acceptability of premarital sex, relationships and virginity.

Participants were first asked how socially acceptable they believed it was for young unmarried people to socialize with the opposite sex and for unmarried girls to have boyfriends. In both cases, less than one-third viewed these actions as socially acceptable, whereas more than one-third replied that it was very unacceptable. Unsurprisingly, social judgements against physical contact were stronger; a quarter reported that physical contact was socially unacceptable, and two-thirds reported that it was very unacceptable for unmarried females to engage in physical intimacy, with even stronger negative responses on the social acceptability of having sex.

The second section of the table shows responses to items concerning the participants' own opinions of the acceptability of premarital relationships and contact. The overall pattern was broad agreement with the reported social norms; however, these personal opinions were held somewhat less strongly. For example, respondents were slightly more likely to agree that it was personally acceptable for young people to socialize with the opposite sex and for girls to have boyfriends compared with these actions being socially acceptable, with those who disagreed being less likely to strongly disagree. Personal judgements of physical intimacy were very much distant from perceptions of the social unacceptability of touching, kissing or hugging the opposite sex and were evenly distributed between those who agreed and disagreed. A possible explanation is offered at the end of this section. On questions of moral equality, respondents were generally unwilling to grant males more sexual freedom than females; thus, responses concerning unmarried boys having girlfriends were nearly identical to those regarding unmarried girls having boyfriends, and there was strong rejection to the proposition that it was acceptable for boys to have sex prior to marriage but not girls. On direct questions concerning premarital intercourse, personal opinions were very much in line with perceived social norms. Nearly 79.7% of respondents reported that it was socially unacceptable for unmarried females to have sex, with most reporting it very unacceptable and these responses were closely echoed by respondents' personal opinions in favor of virginity until marriage and against premarital sex, even if contraception is used.

Responses to one item were somewhat divergent; when asked whether it was "wrong for unmarried boys and girls to have sexual intercourse, even if they love each other," one-third disagreed,

whereas more than half strongly agreed. The large discrepancy in responses to this question and responses to the suggestion that it was “acceptable for boys and girls to have sex prior to marriage if they use methods to prevent pregnancy” requires explanation. Perhaps the word ‘love’ biased respondents towards a tolerant view or the double negative in saying that one disagreed that something was wrong explains the inconsistency. This second explanation might also apply to the apparent relative personal tolerance of physical intimacy, which as noted above, contrasted with its perceived social unacceptability.

## Discussion

Sexual topics are considered taboo in Saudi culture and are commonly ignored and not discussed in public. Sexual relationships are also assumed to not occur in Saudi society. Our study revealed that most students considered themselves somewhat religious. Thus, many students tolerate and some even accept premarital sexual relations. Our data do not reflect a dramatic incidence of premarital sexual practice among this age group, as approximately 80% of participants reported being against un-married females having sex, which may be due to the conservative Saudi community, which emphasizes chastity and modesty, and the illegality of premarital sexual relations.

Our findings suggest that the socially and personally held belief that young females should not engage in any sexual activity prior to marriage should be considered when designing sexual education programs.

We conclude that lack of accurate information on sexual practice and risky sexual behavior among this age group are major threats to female sexual health in Saudi Arabia and that this population is thus more vulnerable to sexual transmitted infections, un-wanted pregnancy, and illegal abortion.

## Limitation and Decommendation

Our findings should be interpreted carefully considering the culture and religion in Saudi society. Additionally, the questionnaire did not attempt to identify premarital sexual practice or experience among female university students due to the reasons mention above. This constraining factor limited the information gathered from female students. This study was based in one city among university students; thus, the results have limited generalizability.

More studies are recommended to obtain better information on Saudi women sexual attitudes and practices throughout Saudi Arabia.

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