Adolescent reproductive health in Coimbatore
Clara Correnti, Geraldina Mottini, Sarah Nicoller, Clémente Wehrli, Salomée Zuber

Introduction
India has the largest population of adolescents; 1 in 5 citizens is a teenager. Adolescence constitutes an important transition into adulthood: healthy behaviours during this vulnerable period are crucial for preventing health issues in adulthood. (1,2,3) Our research was conducted in collaboration with the Shanti Ashram, a primary care and communitarian health center in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. Through the center’s documentation, we identified the topic of reproductive health (RH) primarily defined by menstruations, formal learning through schools, health professionals and PH departments. Culture has still a big impact on RH: existence of myths on menstruations, taboos surrounding sexuality.

What are the reproductive health issues?
• STIs: HPV, hepatitis, mostly HIV (mainly reported by PH and primary care professionals)
• High-risk behaviours: unprotected sex (reported by PH professionals)
• Child marriage and early pregnancy leading to school dropouts
• Gender gap: vulnerability linked to the female status
• Sexual abuse

What are the needs of adolescents in reproductive health?
• Education
  • Hygiene and good nutrition regarding menstruations.
  • Formal learning through schools, health professionals and PH departments.
  • Awareness on high-risk behaviours, STIs and sexual abuse.
  • Empowerment of girls through self-confidence, gender equity and life skills to prevent child marriage, unwanted pregnancies and school dropouts.
  • Monitoring, vaccines and contraceptives (reported by primary care and PH professionals).
  • Positive environment through guidance, trust, availability and safety of the adults.

Methods
• Literature review
• Descriptive qualitative research
• 3 weeks interdisciplinary (nursing and medical students) fieldwork
• Semi-structured interviews based on an interview guide
• 4 interviews required Tamil-English translation

In addition:
• 10 informal discussions with the population and professionals
• Participation in a 2-day interdisciplinary workshop on adolescents’ health, proving this topic is seen as a priority

Results
What are the elements included in adolescent reproductive health?

• RH primarily defined by menstruations.
• Regarding boys, the aspects related to puberty were barely addressed.
• Sexual intercourse was hardly ever mentioned, but physical attraction and sexual urges were.
• Culture has still a big impact on RH: existence of myths on menstruations, taboos surrounding sexuality.

Discussion
Education on menstruations is a prevalent priority regarding reproductive health education. Programs are shaped accordingly and address the topic only to girls. The concept of empowerment also focuses on girls, whereas it tries to counter issues that concern both sexes. Thus, the concept of gender gap shows a contradiction: girls are socially disadvantaged while boys are put aside in reproductive health education. In the future, boys and girls should have equal access to reproductive health education and be included in the same programs. Furthermore, the focus of reproductive health prevention should broaden and cover all existing issues, which are largely linked to sexuality, a topic that is not addressed enough.

Based on our results, we see that further research on adolescents and more insight on methodology is needed, in order to practice evidence-based prevention. For this, adolescents need to be included in the process of building programs. Conducting focus groups, for example, could highlight their own needs and views on the topic of reproductive health. Prevention work should continue to be interdisciplinary in order to insure cohesion and uniform messages of education. This could be attained through interdisciplinary training programs.

Conclusion
• RH is a priority in adolescents’ health and adolescents’ needs reflect important issues.
• Prevention programs must be adapted to the specific needs and adolescents’ functioning.
• Means and structures are present and make Coimbatore equipped to tackle remaining challenges.