



Original Article

## **Sex myths prevalence and gender discrepancies among college-going students in Bangalore, Karnataka, South India**

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### **Abstract**

Sex-myths could impact sexual wellness. Hence, the present study explores the prevalence and describes gender disparities in sex myths among 230 male and female college students recruited using convenient and purposive sampling. After using Sex Myth Scale, Descriptive statistics and Independent sample t-test were applied. The most prevalent sexual myth among males was, 'Most men lose their sexual drive around the age of 50' (26.9 percent); among females was, 'Woman ejaculates like a man when she experiences orgasm'(44.78 percent). When considering gender-specific myth responses, females were more prevalent than male students. Results showed substantial gender difference ( $p < 0.01$ ). Overall, sex myth scores (including items score related to both gender) was high among male compared to their counterparts. This study indicates the need to develop a culturally sensitive and effective educational program to eradicate myths related to sex.

### **Keywords:**

Sex myths, Gender, Prevalence, Sexuality, Sexual health

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### **Introduction**

Having an in-depth understanding of sex and sexuality is a core component of sexual health. Sex myths are preconceived notions or assumptions regarding sex without any scientific evidence to support them. Sexuality is a basic instinct, and the ideas or fantasies among humans regarding sexual acts start at a very early age. In Indian households,

discussion on sex is almost non-existent, and neither does the Indian education system imbibe enough knowledge among students regarding sexual health and the bodily changes that every adolescent goes through during their transition phase. The lack of conversation around sexual health prohibits the adolescent population from receiving relevant and accurate knowledge. Although the abundance of technological resources on sex and sexual health are easily accessible, the reliability and validity of the content are questionable. Despite increased resources about sex, there still exists a taboo when it comes to having open communication about desires, fears, safety measures, and so on, which could contribute to unclear knowledge about sexual health.<sup>[2]</sup> Due to the lack of awareness in sex and sexual health, the curiosity and excitement to understand the concept could lead to increased assumptions and myths.

One of the prevalent sex myths could be that men are mostly drawn toward women's physical appearance.<sup>[3]</sup> Murray, in her research, talks about how emotional connection and romantic presence is more important than just the looks alone. Physical appearance is important, but she argues through the findings on how it is not the only component that attracts men toward women.<sup>[4]</sup> Sex myths do not have to be similar among men and women. It can vary between partners as well. Several factors, such as their upbringing in their family environment, interpersonal interactions with their friends, and the availability of resources for them to equip about sexual health, play a role.<sup>[5]</sup> One study reported that women were uninformed and men were misinformed about sex and sexual health.<sup>[6]</sup> Even though there is comparatively increased awareness and openness about sex recently, there still exists a significant level of misconceptions and myths regarding sex.<sup>[5]</sup> A recent study aimed to understand the sex myths' level among

women and how it affects their sexual satisfaction. The study reported the sexual myth belief rates to be very high and how it gives space for anxiety in sexual health, decreasing the satisfaction/pleasure level of sex.<sup>[7]</sup> A recent Indian study aimed to identify adolescents' attitudes towards sex education and sex myths. The study attempts to highlight the importance of sex education. Its findings suggest a difference between male and female adolescents in the prevalence of sex myths.<sup>[8]</sup> An Indian pilot study on the need assessment of sex education among University students reported that 95% of the samples were in support of including sex education since the information on sex and sexual health was not adequate.<sup>[9]</sup>

Previous research that have been conducted on sex myths does talk about the prevalence among men and women and how it could impact their satisfaction and relationships. However, there is a need for more Indian research on this subject since the country is hugely different in terms of culture, tradition, religion, and so on, which could be the contributing factors behind the levels and kinds of sex myths among men and women. Also, few other studies opined that though there is comparatively increased awareness and openness about sex in recent times, there still exists a significant level of misconceptions and myths regarding sex. Hence, this study aims to understand the prevalence of sex myths among male and female college-going students in Bangalore, Karnataka. The study further tries to identify the gender differences, if any, in the prevalence of sex myths.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study adapted the definition proposed by the World Health Organization (2006), where sexual health is defined as,

“A state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of

disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respective approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled".<sup>[1]</sup>

Sexuality is defined as, a central aspect of being human throughout life encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors.<sup>[1]</sup>

The term sex is often used to mean sexual activity.<sup>[1]</sup> Aker et al., stated that sexual myths are exaggerated, incorrect and unscientific ideas on sexuality that people believe to be true.<sup>[6]</sup>

For the present study, we incur from this definition that sex myths are the myths related to sexual activity. Sathyanarayana Rao et al., states in his study that sex education is a wide curriculum that tries to develop a solid basis for lifetime sexual health through learning about one's identity, relationships, and intimacy.<sup>[10]</sup>

### Statement of the problem

Sex and sexuality are basic human instincts. Sexual health is, therefore, a crucial component of overall human health and development. Assumptions and preconceived notions concerning sex and sexuality lead to sex myths. These myths related to sex might be a potential cause for low self-esteem, marital

dissatisfaction, barrier to exploring sexual acts, and so on. The present study attempts to understand the prevalence of sex myths among college-going students and assesses gender disparities among male and female participants. The study also implies the need for sex education in educational institutions.

### Methods

#### Aims

To study and report the status of sex myths among college-going students.

#### Objectives

1. To describe the status of sex myths among male and female college-going students.
2. To identify the gender differences in the prevalence of sex myths among male and female college-going students.

#### Study design and Sampling

The current study used a descriptive research design and a survey method to collect data. The data is then further examined to spot patterns and trends associated with sex myths. In this context, 230 male and female college-going students were invited to participate in the study. A convenient and snowball sampling technique was used. All of them had enrolled either into graduate or post-graduate courses in a different college in Bangalore City, Karnataka, South India. The participants' ages range from 18 to 28 years old with a mean age of 21.07 (SD= 1.82). Only those who agreed to give consent after learning the objectives of the study stated in the form were ultimately taken into consideration.

#### Measures and procedure

All the participants who agreed to take part in this study responded to the Sociodemographic Sheet and Sex Myth Checklist.<sup>[11]</sup>

Participants' age, sex, place of residence, and information about their education, families, and romantic relationships were collected as sociodemographic data. The Sex Myth

Checklist evaluates myths about men, women, and items pertaining to both genders separately and comprises 23 extremely sensitive items connected to various facets of human sexuality. It's a forced-choice tool with a 'True-False' format. For every question with a 'True' response, a score of one is given, and for a 'False', a score of zero. The total score ranges from zero to 23. A high score is an indication of the presence of sex-related myths.

Data for the study was collected using Google Forms. The study's objectives were included before the demographic and sex myth statements in the Google Form and a statement regarding participant consent. Before attending to the statements, each participant had to express their consent. Only those who gave consent could view and respond to the statements. The form link was shared with few college students and further requested them to share it with their friends who have enrolled in graduate or postgraduate courses. A total of 246 college-going students responded to the questionnaire, of which 16 participants' data was removed since it was incomplete. Further data from 230 more people were taken into consideration for analysis.

### Statistical analysis

All the analysis was performed using IBM SPSS version 21. The prevalence of sexual myths among males, and females and of items common to both genders were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency and proportions. The mean and standard deviation for continuous variables were calculated. Furthermore, the difference between the male and female sex myth ratings was examined using an independent sampling t-test for which the overall score on the sex myths scale was considered.

### Results

Complete data were available for N=230 college-going students. As per the socio-demographic information of the participants (Table 1), 134 were male, and 96 were female. Considering the majority scores, it is observed that 190 respondents were graduate students, 83.48 percent of the respondents belong to the urban domicile, 30.43 percent received sex education, 86.09 percent are from nuclear family background, 67.83 percent of the respondents' relationship status is single, 70 percent are day scholars and 47.39 percent are from the science stream.

Sex myth about male students (Table 2) shows that the most prevalent (26.09 percent) sex myth related to males is 'Most men lose their sexual drive around the age of 50', followed by 'Blacks are sexually more potent than whites' (20.43 percent). The least believed sex myths among the respondents are 'Night discharge is an indication of sexual weakness' (10 percent) and 'The size of penis is directly proportionate to the body size of a man' (10 percent).

Among female students (Table 3) 'woman ejaculates like a man when she experiences orgasm' (44.78 percent) was the most prevalent sex myth, followed by 'sexual intercourse during pregnancy harms the health of a woman (29.13 percent)'. The least prevalent (12.17 percent) sex myth is that 'Absence of hymen is proof that a woman is not a virgin'.

Response to the sex myth statements related to both gender (Table 4) revealed that college students (24.35 percent) believe that 'conception occurs when both man and woman experience simultaneous climax during sexual intercourse', 20.43 percent believe that 'sterilization/vasectomy inhibits sexual drive in men/women'. The sex myth that 'To enjoy the best health, one should avoid sex' is believed by the least number (2.61 percent) of respondents.

**Table 1: Sociodemographic details of the study participants**

Variables		N	Per cent
Gender	Male	134	58.26
	Female	96	41.73
Education	Graduate Students	190	82.61
	Post Graduate Students	40	17.39
Stream	Arts	67	29.13
	Commerce	54	23.48
	Science	109	47.39
Type of Scholar	Day Scholar	161	70.00
	Residential Scholar	69	30.00
Domicile	Rural	38	16.52
	Urban	192	83.48
Family Type	Nuclear	198	86.09
	Joint	32	13.91
Received Sex Education	Yes	70	30.43
	No	160	69.57
Relationship Status	Single	156	67.83
	Committed	74	32.17

**Table 2: Distribution of responses based on sex myth items related to male**

Item No	Statements	FALSE	Per cent	TRUE	Per cent
Item6	Semen is the essence of life; its loss damages one's health.	187	81.30	43	18.70
Item11	Night discharge is an indication of sexual weakness.	207	90.00	23	10.00
Item14	Most men lose their sexual drive around the age of 50.	170	73.91	60	26.09
Item16	Blacks are sexually more potent than whites.	183	79.57	47	20.43
Item18	The size of penis is directly proportionate to the body size of a man	207	90.00	23	10.00
Item19	It is dangerous for a man to have sexual intercourse during menstruation.	196	85.22	34	14.78
Item21	Having sex with a virgin rejuvenates one's body.	199	86.52	31	13.48
Item22	The size of penis determines the sexual potency of a man.	204	88.70	26	11.30

**Table 3: Distribution of responses based on sex myth items related to female**

Item No	Statements	FALSE	Per cent	TRUE	Per cent
Item4	An intact hymen is a proof that a woman is a virgin.	191	83.04	39	16.96
Item7	Sexually active women have large breasts.	197	85.65	33	14.35
Item9	Sexual intercourse during pregnancy harms the health of a woman.	163	70.87	67	29.13
Item13	Absence of hymen is a proof that a woman is not a virgin.	202	87.83	28	12.17
Item15	Menopause terminates a woman's sex life.	199	86.52	31	13.48
Item17	A large penis is a must for a woman's sexual gratification.	192	83.48	38	16.52
Item20	A woman ejaculates like a man when she experiences orgasm	127	55.22	103	44.78

**Table 4: Distribution of responses based on sex myth items related to both the genders**

Items	Statements	FALSE	Per cent	TRUE	Per cent
Item1	Masturbation causes impotency in men / frigidity in women	196	85.22	34	14.78
Item2	Sterilization / vasectomy inhibits sexual drive in men / women	183	79.57	47	20.43
Item3	Masturbation causes mental illness.	202	87.83	28	12.17
Item5	Masturbation is a sign of mental weakness.	198	86.09	32	13.91
Item8	Oral-genital sex between a man and woman indicates homosexual tendencies.	203	88.26	27	11.74
Item10	To enjoy the best health, one should avoid sex. Conception occurs when both man and woman	224	97.39	6	2.61
Item12	experience simultaneous climax during sexual intercourse.	174	75.65	56	24.35
Item23	Over indulgence in sex causes early ageing.	208	90.43	22	9.57

**Table 5: Gender difference on sex myth**

Gender	N	Mean	SD	df	t	p
Male	134	4.43	4.29	228.00	2.83	0.001
Female	96	2.95	3.27			



With respect to gender differences in sex myths, (Table 5) the significant difference between male and female students was noted ( $p < 0.01$ ). Sex myths score was more in male students compared to their counterparts.

## Discussion

A sex myth is an information/belief that one holds with no support of relevant scientific evidence. This study describes the status of sex myths among male and female college-going students and further identifies the gender differences.

'Most men lose their sexual drive around the age of 50 (26.09 percent) is found to be the most prevalent male-related sex myth in the present study. Although some studies suggest that individuals with previous sexual experience could have lesser sex myths, some studies contradict it. Yasan reported that sexual experience and having sexual partners decreases the prevalence of sex myths among women but most myths persist despite sexual experience.<sup>[12]</sup> Gökçe S and Herkiloglu D in their study reported very high sex myth beliefs among married participants.<sup>[7]</sup> The contradicting results of these studies suggest that sexual experience does not significantly influence the sex myth beliefs.

'Masturbation causes impotency in men / frigidity in women' (14.78 percent) is another prevalent sex myth. Masturbation is an act of touching one's own genitals to gain sexual pleasure. Individuals with or without partners indulge in masturbation. While the sex myths that involve both partners is present at high rates, the sex myth that involves only one individual to be prevalent might not be surprising. One of the major possible factors of myths are the lack of communication and exposure. While masturbation is a self-dependent act for sexual pleasure, there might be many doubts and assumptions that an individual might refrain from discussing with

another person. This brings us back to the lack and need for sex education among adolescents and young adults in institutions. It could enable them to have open discussions about the different aspects of human sexuality. Joycelyn Elders suggested that public sexual education must also cover the topic of masturbation, this resulted in harsh criticism, which led to her resigning from her position as a US Surgeon General.<sup>[13]</sup>

Among the sex myths related to males, the most prevalent sex myths are 'Most men lose their sexual drive around the age of 50 (26.09 percent). An Indian study conducted by Kalra, Subramanyam & Pinto has shown interesting findings on the patterns of sexual function and activity in those over 50 years of age.<sup>[14]</sup> The findings of the study suggest significant presence of sexual desire and sexual activity even post-50 years of age. Additionally, the study also reported a decline in sexual drive and activity among women over 60 years of age. While in some cases, there could be a decline in sex drive, the factor contributing to it was found to be the chronic illnesses that individuals experience. Around 43 percent of the female samples in the study reported increasing age to be the factor affecting their sexuality, whereas, for men (56.7 percent), deteriorating health was found to be the contributing factor.

'Sterilization/vasectomy inhibits sexual drive in men/women' (20.43 percent) is another prevalent sex myth. The belief that vasectomy has a possible impact on the sex drive could prevent men and women from opting for it. Vasectomy is a highly effective and secure method of contraception for couples who desire to stop having children, although only 2.4% of males worldwide adopt this approach.<sup>[15]</sup> One of the most common sex myths is that sexual intercourse should lead to orgasm. The findings of the present study suggest similar. The sex myth that 'A woman

ejaculates like a man when she experiences orgasm' has received the highest prevalent rate (44.78 percent) among college-going students.

College-going males had much more sex myth beliefs than college-going women, according to Donald L. Mosher's study on Sex guilt and sex myths among college men and women. Men with high sex guilt promoted sex myths that suggested sex was dangerous, while women with high sex-guilt considered virginity important. The study insists on 'sex education and values clarification'.<sup>[16]</sup> This supports the present study's finding concerning gender differences, where the sex myths related to both genders were more prevalent among males than their female counterparts.

Sexuality could be a subjective concept; its meaning could differ for each individual. The culture, upbringing, religion, and practices could play a significant role in the beliefs and myths that humans form. Exposure to reliable information regarding human sexual health through sex education is a direct answer to bridge the gap or debunk the myths one forms and, even better, prevent one from forming

### Strengths

1. The study's findings are consistent with the literature, which suggests that India needs effective sex education programs in institutions and public awareness campaigns.
2. Compared to interview techniques, the sex myth checklist utilized in this study enables participants to react more honestly. Using the checklist prevented the participants from finding it difficult to open up or provide a sincere response because the issue has a stigma in India.
3. Little is known about the prevalence of sex myths among Indians. This study attempted to close a gap in the literature, clearing the path for further

investigation of this subject in future studies.

4. Since the research employed the survey approach, the findings are reliable. The study was also affordable.
5. The study had a limited number of objectives. Hence it was able to concentrate on them, yielding more thorough and insightful findings.

### Limitations

The present study has only a fewer potential limitations. These are

1. The sample number of participants is not equal for men and women, with 134 men and 96 women responding.
2. The study did not investigate the causes of the persistence of different sex myths. Future studies could look at the factors that influence how sex myths are formed.
3. Sex myths might be prevalent even among the older age group, where gender disparities might be found. The study only focused on the younger population between 20 to 28 years of age.

### Conclusion

The result indicates the presence of sex myths among both male and female college-going students. Considering gender-specific myth responses, the prevalence of sex myths among females was high compared to the male students. On overall sex myth scale score, male students' score was found to be high compared to their counterparts. Also, 69 percent of the participants reported not receiving any sex education during their schooling. This indicates that there is a need for more reliable sex education during schooling to help young children understand



sex and sexual health from a broader perspective and to encourage healthy discussions regarding the same.

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**Conflict of interest : None**

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