

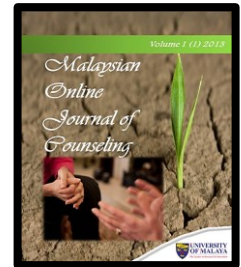
ENGAGING ADOLESCENTS WITH AN UNWANTED PREGNANCY: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Engaging adolescents with an unwanted pregnancy requires an understanding of their experiences. Disclosure of experience takes place once trust and rapport between the adolescents and researcher has been cemented. This paper intends to explore and describe the quality relationship established by the researcher during fieldwork. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the newest entry to the existing qualitative approach was used with purposive sampling to select all four participants. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to collect data using three-interview series, an in-depth based on phenomenological type of interviewing. Results show that rapport building; ethical code of conduct, methods of data acquisition and researcher's self-reflection applied during the fieldwork has been effective in empowering participants to share their experiences, thereby providing a thick description and in-depth information. Given the complexity of data gathering at the first stage, counselors and mental health professionals working with this group should develop a wide range of practical and interpersonal skills.

Keywords: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Adolescents, unwanted pregnancy



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INTRODUCTION

Working in the helping professions requires us to undertake research on a broad range of sensitive issues in helping us understand the many aspects that affects the norms of the society. Undoubtedly, the research undertaken may result in face-to-face interviews with participants and touches on their personal and private aspects of their lives. These sensitive issues are often questioned through the methods of qualitative research undertaken in a study. However, very few have specifically pointed out the effective ways in engaging with participants with sensitive issues (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2006; Upadhyay, Cockrill, & Freedman, 2010). Researchers in the helping professions are required to reflect on their experiences while conducting their research on sensitive issues and to confront them (Lee, 1993).

This paper is aimed to document the effective ways in engaging adolescents with an unwanted pregnancy in the Malaysian context. Discussion on unwanted pregnancy among adolescents is considered sensitive since pregnancy before marriage is unacceptable in the Malaysian culture and norms. Challenges in engaging with the adolescents with an unwanted pregnancy will also be addressed. Subsequently, this paper intends to provide an insight to the quality relationship established by the researcher and adolescents with an unwanted pregnancy during the data acquisition process.

BACKGROUND

Adolescence pregnancy is an area of concern that needs focusing in Malaysia due to the increase in premarital sex in the last decade (Low, 2009). The steady increase in numbers of sexual activities was a consequence of rapid globalisation and social changes that includes the enmeshed boundary in interactions between unmarried male and female adolescents (Jaafar, Wibowo, & Afiatin, 2006). It was found that sexually active youth often have a monogamous and short-lived relationship with different partners, a trend that warrants concern (Klein, 2005; Low, Ng, Fadzil, & Ang, 2007). The adolescence pregnancy, a result of premarital sex is a transition to parenthood and may result in a stressful life event for young mothers especially when the pregnancy is unplanned and unwanted (Farber, 2009; Catriona, 2010).

Within the context of this paper, adolescence unwanted pregnancy is defined as a pregnancy that was not planned by the couple at the time of conception due to lack of knowledge on the outcome of sexual initiations (Mohamad Nor & Sumari, 2013). In Malaysia, the subject of sexuality is considered as a taboo and not discussed widely and openly (Zulkifli & Low, 2000). Engaging the adolescents with an unwanted pregnancy is important in empowering their voices to be heard and as a consequence, assist in providing adolescent friendly health services (World Health Organisation, 2003).

Evidently, the present knowledge of adolescent sexuality in Malaysia, thought to be somewhat conservative is limited in the literature. Unwanted pregnancy amongst the adolescents which is a taboo subject and the psychological well-being of these adolescents and their knowledge on sexuality are not being researched widely in the Malaysian context (Low, 2009). The adolescents are not exposed to sex education since it is not being taught as a subject on its own but absorbed in other subjects. In the context of Malaysia, many cases of pregnancy out of wedlock are unwanted due to the sensitivity of the religion, morality issues and it is considered a taboo to be pregnant before marriage (Jaafar et al., 2006). On that note, although adolescent sexual health is regarded as an imperative area for research and intervention, vital gaps in the understanding of the problems

still exist. There is a lack of research pertaining the perceptions, personal meaning, affect and experience surrounding the pregnancy of the adolescents (Coleman, 2006; Kogan, 2004; Catriona, 2010; Middleton, 2011; Pinto e Silva, 1998).

In the past, many literatures have predominantly utilized the quantitative research methodology in their studies (Coleman, 2006; Jaafar et al., 2006; Kellogg & Hoffman, 1995; Lee, Chen, Lee, & Kaur, 2006; Zulkifli, Low, & Yusof, 1995). The literature search has indicated that mostly the studies involved the assessment of risk in adolescent pregnancies, factors that contribute to the increase of premarital sex amongst the adolescents, sexuality issues from the perspectives of the boys, sexuality behaviors, but none in the area of understanding the experience of the adolescents with unwanted pregnancy. Understanding the experience of the female adolescents and factors that trigger their behaviors are beyond the means of statistics and is essential in this approach.

However, in order to fully understand the phenomena that involve the female adolescents, the researcher has to look from their perspectives and not focusing on the adult preoccupations, gathering information on the rather complex topic of female sexual expressions in the Malaysian context. Researching sensitive subjects has its drawbacks; henceforth, a quality relationship with all participants is necessary to ensure their voices are heard (Sieber & Stanley, 1988). Subsequently, handling participants involved in sensitive topic requires researchers to enter into their world with open mindedness, eloquent in their interviewing techniques and emphatic to their needs (Reich, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative research methodology was chosen as the research design that concerns with the quality of human experiences and what these phenomena mean to individuals in the context of everyday life and its individual meaning (Draper, 2004). A latest entry to the existing qualitative approach, IPA research is popular in the area of health and counselling psychology with sex and sexuality as one of the key area (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The IPA has been widely used in studying sex and sexuality due to sensitive nature of the participants involved (Smith et al., 2009). In this article, the sensitive nature lies in the unacceptable behavior of premarital sexual initiation before marriage in the Malaysian context. This includes the disclosure of experience whereby the topic of sex intimacy or related sexual issues are considered as a taboo in the community. Hence, the IPA approach in qualitative research allows for the researcher's participation as the main instrument to engage with participants with an unwanted pregnancy and takes into consideration the researcher's conceptual comments in understanding the participants' world view of their experience in their context (Smith & Smith, 2003).

The IPA approach in this article is interested in understanding 'an experience' of the adolescents with an unwanted pregnancy as opposed to a mere experience. For an example, an adolescent being in a relationship is the smallest unit of experience. IPA approach on the other hand is interested in understanding the comprehensive meaning of experience. How does one define a comprehensive unit of experience? The comprehensive unit of experience may include the consequence of pregnancy, the psychological impact it has on participants, affecting their emotions, behavior and way of thinking and; eventually allows them to think, feel and reflect on the significance of the event (Smith et al., 2009). Hence, engaging adolescents with an unwanted pregnancy empowers them to externalize their personal voices and narrate their stories from their emic perspectives.

Participants

Four samples were selected based on purposive sampling. The criteria for purposive sampling includes: 1) aged between 16 to 18 years old, 2) first pregnancy and in their third trimester, 3) unwed before pregnancy, 4) participants were of Malay-Muslim origins and 5) all participations were selected on voluntary basis. A total of four cases is reasonable and sufficient sample size for IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

Data Collection

A three-interview series were used during the data collection period. The three interview series focused on (1) life histories, (2) current experience and (3) the reflections of experience and meaning making for individual series. Data gathering was completed within four months due to time constraints on the part of the participants. Interview protocol assisted in the interviewing session and consists of semi-structured questions. The interview needs to be completed before the birth of their unborn child. All participants were housed in the safe home and letter of consent was obtained from the gatekeeper prior to data collection. An informed assent was also gathered from all participants before individual interview were conducted. The question to guide the interview was “how are the experiences of adolescents going through an unwanted pregnancy?”

Participants were interviewed individually and each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and transcribed verbatim. As the primary instrument in this approach, the researcher kept a reflexive journal to reflect on the experience of the participants. Field notes were used to record the participants’ body language, usage of linguistic tones, as well as their affective responses while relaying their personal stories. The interviews were all conducted in the local language – Malay language and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. It was noted that translations process was crucial to ascertain the authenticity of the meaning and the context of the participants’ voice from their emic perspective. Hence, in this study, the translations were checked via a peer reviewer who is a qualified researcher and an expert in the English Language to ascertain the accuracy in the translation process (Emmel, 1998). The researcher however, took note that ideas, concepts, and feelings might not always translate exactly from one language to another (Halai, 2007).

Data Analysis

Data analyses were conducted based on IPA six-steps of analysis (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003). The steps include (1) reading and re-reading the transcripts, (2) initial noting, (3) developing emergent themes, (4) searching for connections across emergent themes, (5) moving to the next case and, (6) looking for patterns across case. IPA approach allows the researcher to look at each unique case from the researcher’s lens to allow further understanding and probing on the phenomenon of unwanted pregnancy. However, the researcher’s conceptual understanding of the phenomenon were derived from the voice of the participants which includes questioning for answers, reflecting on experience, and interpreting for meaning making were applied (Seamark & Lings, 2004).

As a primary instrument, the researcher accessed the participants experience directly through interviews, field notes and researcher’s own reflexive journal. Henceforth, this research were enhanced through a number of strategies based on the process of triangulation, prolonged

engagement, member checks, peer review, and audit trail to address the issue of rigorousness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). The transcripts have been read and reread to ensure the full understanding of the context of the said phenomenon (Mohamad Nor & Sumari, 2013). Engagement with the participants has enabled the researcher to collect their innermost thoughts and feelings in relaying their personal stories (Creswell, 2012).

Strategies in Engaging Quality Relationship

Implementing the strategies in engaging a quality relationship with adolescents with an unwanted pregnancy may result in a researcher pondering on the question of “how would a researcher undertake a research on sensitive topics?” or “what kind of standard research training that needs to be acquired before embarking on such studies?” (McCosker, Barnard & Gerber, 2001). The following strategies in engaging adolescents with an unwanted pregnancy in a quality relationship are found to be helpful.

Basic Counselling Skills

Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, and Liamputtong (2008) and Owens (1996) suggests that an understanding of, and training in basic counselling skills would be of help, not so that interviewers could become some kind of counsellor, but having basic skills makes a researcher better equipped to deal with emotional interviews and remain professional in the face of displays of emotion and emotional requests for help. (p. 65).

It is important for researchers to have the skills to resolve with emotional issues since studies have found that those who undertook research in the areas of domestic violence, rape cases and unwanted pregnancies have experienced emotional and physical symptoms themselves (Gregory, Russell, & Phillips, 1997). Basic counselling skills in dealing with emotional issues does not warrant a researcher in becoming a counsellor while research was undertaken, but to provide an avenue for researcher to resolve their personal issues whilst maintaining objectivity (Carkhuff, 1979).

The researcher has experienced physical and emotional symptoms that were translated into headaches, blurring of vision, gastrointestinal problems and sleep deprivation (Carkhuff, 1979; Etherington, 2007). However, having coming from counselling background and a Registered Counsellor has helped in the emotional entanglement (Owens, 1996). It was important for the researcher to be able to understand the role played and maintaining the objectivity. Counselling skills have enabled the researcher to enter into the relationship with the participants with open mindedness, emphatic and grounded (Dickson, Hargie, & Morrow, 1996). Bracketing or epochè was another method that was applied to ensure that the researcher does not have preconceived ideas of the adolescents with an unwanted pregnancy (Harvey, 2004). Biasness towards the participants are bracketed and recorded in the researcher’s reflexive note to maintain objectivity (Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009).

Building rapport

Building rapport with the participants is crucial to ensure the establishment of quality relationship hence encourages the voice of participants in relaying their personal stories (Mohamad Nor & Sumari, 2015; Seidman, 2012; Sieber & Stanley, 1988). In reference to this paper, rapport is an understanding with the adolescents to enhance effective communication and have successful interpersonal relationships. It was noted using this approach that the participants were found to be

reluctant to share their experiences due to trust issues. However, rapport was eventually strengthened by the researcher's ability to explain the purpose of the study, hence; finding a common ground by having effective communication and listening skills, ability to find a common ground by being objective and emphatic. Discussing sensitive issues which are deemed a taboo is not conducted widely, thus; a quality relationship between the researcher and participants are often built on trust (Nupponen, 1998; Zulkifli & Low, 2000). Basic counseling skills has helped the researcher in conducting active listening, positive and polite verbal response, and injections of sense of humor, body language, and empathy has proven to be a positive beginning for the interview sessions to be carried out successfully (Brems, 2001; Nupponen, 1998).

The researcher managed to build rapport with the participants by going a day ahead before the interview sessions began. The presence of the researcher during the first day was felt by the participants and was shown in their unfriendly behavior. In the beginning, the sense of insecurity, no-trust, and fear of their stories being leaked and made public was the main issue of their unfriendliness behavior. However, after talking casually to one of the participants, another participant joined in and the ambience at the safe home was more relaxed. At that point of time, the objective was to ensure that rapport building is cemented between the researcher and the participants.

Interview protocol

An interview protocol was used "as an aide-mémoire for the interview to cover similar topics with the interviewee" (Gabrielle, 2006). It consists of a semi-structured and one-to-one interview. This protocol is the preferred method since it encouraged the individual adolescent with an unwanted pregnancy to share their stories in their own terms, providing them the space to think, speak and be heard (Smith et al., 2009). Open-ended questions were used to allow participants' voice to be heard (Ballou, 2008; Geer, 1988).

However, the researcher is aware on how the open-ended question is best and effectively asked since it may differ in response (McNamara, 2009). For example, the following question was asked: "How have your experiences with an unwanted pregnancy influenced or not influenced you in the decisions that you have made in raising your child?" This question allows the participant to discuss how her experiences with an unwanted pregnancy have or have not affected her decision-making with their own child without making the assumption that the experience has influenced her decision-making. On the other hand, if the researcher were to ask a similar question, but from a less than useful perspective, the researcher might construct the same question in this manner: "How have your experiences with an unwanted pregnancy affected you as a parent"? The question is an open-ended but with the assumption that the experiences have indeed affected the participant as a parent.

Merriam (2009) mentioned that probing questions are follow up questions or comments after leading questions have been asked and the questions are prepared as per the interview protocol. Probing is another method used to acquire information and details out of the participants and coupled with rapport with the participant, I managed to get access to true data reflected from their experiences (Leidy, Parke, Cladis, Coltrane, & Duffy, 2009). Prompts were used during the interview as a stimulus to encourage further discussion on the next interview session. This is to encourage the adolescents to share their experiences; therefore, rapport building was crucial to encourage the participants to describe their stories in a detailed description (Creswell, 2007).

Therefore, the interview protocol acted only as a guide, encouraging dialogues and stimulating responses between the participant and researcher. The initial questions prepared in the interview protocol were modified accordingly based on the responses from the adolescents. The flexibility enables a more interesting and in-depth study to be carried out. This is supported by Miles and Huberman (1994) whereby the predesigned and structured protocol will blind the researcher to the site and may lead the study to unreliable and skewed information.

Diary

Sosin (1983), stated that “the concept of the diary as a transitional object adds a new perspective to the theory and treatment of adolescents”. Moreover, “the findings suggest that the diary mirrors, soothe, helps inhibit frightening impulses, and helps integrate inner and outer realities” (Sosin, 1983). Accordingly, the applicability of the adolescent diary usage allows enhancement and enrichment which promotes the progress of the "second separation-individuation" (Sosin, 1983). For the purpose of this article, the usage of diary was to understand the diary-diarist relationship which led to a better understanding of the phenomenon, and the ability to provide suitable treatment strategies for adolescent with an unwanted pregnancy.

In the context of adolescents with an unwanted pregnancy, problems were associated with difficulty to communicate and relate their experiences with risk behaviours, therefore; diary was an effective technique and has been able to assist the adolescents at realising, gaining insights and be aware of their problems (Porter, 2007) and minimising the potential of bias as mentioned by Demecs, Fenwick, and Gamble (2011). Diary writing was useful to gain insight of the lived experiences that these adolescents with an unwanted pregnancy are reluctant to share.

The researcher distributed diaries during the first interview and all participants were requested to write their innermost feelings in relations to their pregnancy (Harvey, 2004). The diary was also used as a tool for interviewing the participants and has proven to be effective in capturing their thoughts and feelings (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003). One participant has written lyrics of a song, an externalisation of her feelings and thoughts, whilst the remaining participants wrote their journey with an unwanted pregnancy in the diary. The diary acted as a tool to interact with the participants through interviews and making sense of their experience. One participant wrote ‘Fuck couple’ in her diary and during the interview, it was found that she regretted having a partner at a very tender age and wished she has not fall for the requests of her partner to commit the sexual acts. This was highlighted by her repeated scribbles of the word ‘Fuck couple’. Diary has proven to be one of the methods used to successfully engage the participants using this approach.

Drawings

A female experience of pregnancy has an impact on her physical and psychological aspects and the usage of art therapy groups may be useful to understand the transition to motherhood among females. In a study conducted by Hogan (2003), it was found that pregnant women appreciate a support group where a discussion on feelings about their pregnancy, fear, birth and the transition to motherhood. Wadson (2000) stated that pregnant women experiencing psychosis uses art therapy as a medium to prepare for delivery. The directives used in the study of Wadson (2000) include self-portraits, life-size body tracings, and drawings of self before, during and after pregnancy. It has been proven beneficial to women who undergo the art therapy during their pregnancy and it may also benefit the adolescents with an unwanted pregnancy in understanding and give meaning to their lived experiences.

Using this approach, drawings were used as a tool to capture their innermost thoughts and feelings and translated on a drawing block. The drawings were conducted in the first interview session to allow the participants to get used to the idea of the researcher being around. It was found that the drawings has been effective in providing comfort and helped build rapport with the researcher. The drawing was unguided and used as an interview tool in capturing their personal stories (Kearney & Hyle, 2004). Drawings has helped the adolescents externalised their innermost feelings and empower the voices to be heard.

One of the participants drew rows of trees and she narrated that 'life is like a row of trees. You are surrounded with many trees, but you stay alone and have to fend for yourself. When you are being attacked by pests such as termites, no other trees will move to assist you. You are alone and need to fend for yourself'. The drawing has provided a new perspective to the researcher in understanding the meaning making of her experience. The researcher managed to look from the lens of the participant's perspectives and engaged in collaboratively effort to provide meaning of their experience.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations played an important role in ensuring the participants trust in the researcher is secured (Casas & Thompson, 1991; Jenkins, 2010). Ethics in research can be defined as the rule of behaviour; the application of a system of moral principles and rules of conduct to prevent harming and wrong doing to others, in order to benefit and contribute the society (Halai, 2006). To ensure a quality relationship between the researcher and participants is established, five ethical principles were commonly applied and helped in gaining and building trust when discussing on sensitive topics on unwanted pregnancy (Halai, 2006). The five ethical principles include informed and voluntary consent, confidentiality, and anonymity of participants, beneficence and reciprocity (Halai, 2006).

Participants were ensured that all data will be kept confidential and only the researcher will have access to the data (Sieber & Stanley, 1988) and no harm is to be inflicted on the adolescents. A written consent was obtained from the gatekeeper before the start of the study. Since the adolescents with an unwanted pregnancy are 16 to 18 years old, the researcher was required to gain the assent from the adolescents. The purpose of the informed assent form is to provide confidentiality or representation and anonymity of the participants involved (Jenkins, 2010; Smith et al., 2009). The informed assent form explains the topics to be covered during the interview as well as the purpose of the research. The informed assent form is by no means meant to replace the parental/guardian informed consent but merely to seek the adolescents' approval and agreement to participant. Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the participants (Gabrielle, 2006). Confidentiality is necessary to protect and safeguard the sensitivity, increased emotional and physical vulnerability among the adolescents with unwanted pregnancy (Jenkins, 2010). Ethical code of conduct in this research is crucial to ensure that the participants are willing and able to part of with their personal story. The code of conduct of the researcher is bounded by the Ethics Review Committee as suggested by World Health Organization.

Application of proper ethical codes of conduct issues to be contemplated in ethical procedures of social sciences study, for instance when it involves research with children participant. Ethical consideration that applies to adult must be applied to children as well and it requires special

considerations. The children are vulnerable and have different competencies and capability (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001).

A summary of how to better engage adolescents with an unwanted pregnancy

The purpose of this article is to understand the adolescents' experiences with unwanted pregnancy through the IPA applications. Theoretically, "IPA's emphasis on sense-making by both participant and researcher means that it can be described as having cognition as a central analytic concern... dominant in contemporary psychology" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 54). The IPA central focus is cognitive; "is concerned with understanding what the respondent thinks or believes about the topic under discussion" (Chapman & Smith, 2002; Grigoriou, Families, & Group, 2004). IPA explores the lived experiences to examine how the adolescents are making sense of their personal and social world (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith et al., 2009; Wilde & Murray, 2009) and helps to produce an in-depth description of human experience (Clayton & Thorne, 2008).

Smith et al. (2009) helps us to understand that each adolescent's experience is unique based on their personal story. In understanding the uniqueness of each individual, the researcher has to engage and build a quality relationship with the participant in securing the trust. Rapport building was crucial to enhance the connectedness between researcher and participants (Orb et al., 2001). This is enhanced by effective communication skills which include breaking the language barrier, understanding the youth culture, active listening and the right body language signs (Brems, 2001; Carkhuff, 1979; Farber, 2006).

In relations to rapport building, it was found that basic counseling skills may be used to assist in the emotional entanglement experienced by researchers dealing with sensitive study (Nupponen, 1998). The adolescents' personal views were not distorted by the preconception ideas of the researcher. Objectivity of the research was maintained by conducting epochè (Halai, 2006; McCosker et al., 2001; Orb et al., 2001). An ethical consideration via researcher's code of conduct, confidentiality and use of pseudonym has enhanced the communication and relationships with the adolescents with an unwanted pregnancy. The barrier of trust was overcome by maintaining professionalism and ethical at all times. Additionally, the adolescents were comfortable with the researcher due to the repeated visits to the site. Credibility of the researcher was also strengthened once the trust barrier was eliminated.

The interview protocols consists of semi-structured, open-ended questions have provided an avenue of expressing their experience. The diaries and drawings were used as tools to enhance the interview sessions and resulted in externalizations of the innermost thoughts and feelings of the participants (Dickson et al., 1996; Sosin, 1983). Through diary writing and drawings, the voice of all participants was heard through descriptive, linguistic and conceptual manner. It has contributed to the free expressions of participants.

LIMITATIONS

The main potential limitation of this approach is the possible underreporting of their experience being. Firstly, the source of data was collected and analyzed based on the personal encounter with four participants staying in a home for adolescents with unwanted pregnancy. Therefore, this approach cannot be used to generalize to a bigger population but only applicable for other researchers, readers and policy makers to apply them in their own unique context. Finally, this paper encountered issues on the part of researcher trying to engage quality relationship with the

initial participant to gain her trust. Subsequent interviews were easier with other participants since they were already used to the idea of the researcher's entry and exit from the safe home.

CONCLUSION

Adolescence pregnancy has an adverse effect on the health and psychological well-being of the adolescents. The adolescents with unwanted pregnancy have issues that need to be dealt with fearing that these will contribute to the mental health instability and somatic illness due to deprivation of material, psychological immaturity and lack of support.

Successful engagements with participants have revealed that the adolescents were able to describe their experiences from their personal world view without worrying that others are labeling them. The approach has discovered that the quality relationship can also translate into development of effective counseling techniques for this particular group. In addition, listening and understanding the voices of the adolescents with unwanted pregnancy may result in the development of an effective sexual education modules aimed at reducing or eliminating the adverse health effects of adolescents' pregnancy. Quality relationship, a result of successful engagement with the adolescents has provide an avenue to encourage adolescents to 'think twice' about their rights and responsibilities in sexual relationships. Positively, this was found to contribute to a downward trend in the rates of adolescence pregnancy.

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