THE WINDING ROAD TO WOMANHOOD
Adolescents’ attitudes towards menstruation, womanhood and sexual health - observational and interventional studies

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Abstract

Menarche is a unique marker of female maturation representing the transition from
childhood to womanhood. When entering adolescence, children face a number of
challenges in areas such as the parent-adolescent relationship, development of the self
and identity, an expanding network of social relationships, pubertal changes and the
development of sexuality. Education may improve attitudes toward menstruation among
adolescents thus increasing their awareness of risks and enabling them to protect
themselves accordingly. This thesis aims to provide better understanding of these
phenomenons and is based on four studies:

I. Twelve-year-old girls’ experiences of early puberty were described using content
analysis of data from focus group interviews. Four themes were revealed: “Growing
up - awareness, transition, longing”, “Mother - a close and important relationship”,
“Menarche - a personal and important occurrence”, and “Sex and relationships”. The
girls had many questions about sex and physical changes but felt adults had failed
them in providing answers.

II. Twelve-year-old girls’ attitudes, thoughts and feelings towards menstruation and
their bodies as well the ability to communicate on aspects of womanhood was
elucidated using a questionnaire. Postmenarcheal girls were less positive towards
menstruation than premenarcheal. Many girls did not reaffirm the statement “I like
my body” and many claimed they had been verbally sexually harassed. Mothers were
thought of as most easily “chatted” with about menstruation.

III. This study investigated the effect of a new, structured, interactive, multisensory,
group learning education (IML) for 12-year-old girls compared with a standard
intervention. Pre- and postmenarcheal girls answered accordingly adjusted
questionnaires on attitudes toward menstruation before and six months after the
intervention. If the girls received IML just prior to menarche it resulted in
improvements in attitudes toward menstruation.

IV. Second-year adolescent high school students completed a questionnaire on sexual
experience, sexual risk behavior and the impact of an educational program on STI.
Boys took less responsibility for STI prevention than girls. Furthermore, boys
perceived themselves less influenced by STI-education than girls. Girls had greater
experience of same-sex sexuality than boys.

Key words: Adolescent, attitude, emotions, gender, HIV, learning, menarche,
menstruation, mother-child relations, puberty, sex education, sexuality, sexually
transmitted infections, transition.