THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ENHANCING FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' AWARENESS OF REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

Hang Hoang Thi Thu [1,2], Mao Hui Qu [1]
[1] School of Law, Hunan University, Changsha, Hunan, China
[2] Faculty of Law, Thai Nguyen University of Sciences, Thai Nguyen, Vietnam

Abstract: *Reproductive rights are an important component of human rights and are closely associated with health, gender equality, and individual autonomy. For female university students, higher education plays an important role in developing the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to protect reproductive health. However, limitations in knowledge and the increasing availability of unverified information in digital environments highlight the need to strengthen reproductive rights education in universities. This paper employs document analysis, synthesis, and literature review methods to examine the role of higher education in enhancing female university students' awareness of reproductive rights. The findings indicate that higher education not only provides knowledge about reproductive health, contraception, and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections but also contributes to developing self-protection capacity, decision-making skills, and awareness of gender equality. Based on these findings, the paper proposes strengthening comprehensive sexuality education, providing reproductive health counselling, and developing students' ability to critically evaluate health information in digital environments.*

Keywords: *reproductive rights; female university students; higher education; reproductive health; sexuality education.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Reproductive rights constitute an important component of the human rights framework and are closely associated with the rights to health care, access to information, privacy, equality, and self-determination. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), sexual and reproductive health encompasses access to contraceptive methods, reproductive health care, the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, the prevention of sexual violence, and education on safe and healthy relationships. Therefore, reproductive rights encompass not only the right to have children but also the right to access the information and services necessary for individuals to make appropriate decisions concerning their bodies and health.

For female university students, awareness of reproductive rights is particularly important during the transition to adulthood. This is a period in which students develop their lifestyles, relationships, and capacity for self-determination, while their knowledge of reproductive health, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, consent, and personal autonomy may remain limited. Higher education is therefore well positioned to provide students with additional knowledge and help them develop the skills necessary to make informed decisions regarding their reproductive health.

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is regarded as an important approach to enhancing awareness of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Guidance developed by UNESCO, UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women, and WHO emphasizes that sexuality education should be grounded in scientific evidence, human rights, and gender equality, while equipping learners with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values needed to develop healthy relationships and make responsible decisions. The evidence synthesized in this guidance also indicates that sexuality education can improve knowledge and attitudes and promote behaviors that protect sexual and reproductive health.

In the context of the growing use of the Internet and social media, students have greater opportunities to access information but are simultaneously exposed to inaccurate or unreliable content. Higher education should therefore help students develop the ability to critically evaluate information and identify reliable sources. WHO emphasizes that comprehensive sexuality education should provide scientifically accurate information that is appropriate to learners' age and context, while also helping them recognize misinformation.

The situation in Vietnam demonstrates that this need remains evident. A multicenter study conducted at six universities involving 1,134 students found that 91.4% of students had positive attitudes toward contraception, but significant gaps remained in contraceptive knowledge and use. Accordingly, this paper analyzes the role of higher education in enhancing female university students' awareness of reproductive rights

through the analysis, synthesis, and systematization of relevant literature, and proposes several solutions appropriate to the current higher education context.

II. RESEARCH CONTENT

2.1. Awareness of Reproductive Rights among Female University Students

Reproductive rights should be understood within the interrelationship between health and human rights. According to WHO, access to sexual and reproductive health information and services is an important component of promoting health and gender equality. A human rights-based approach also emphasizes the principles of non-discrimination, access to adequate information, privacy, voluntariness, and the right to make informed decisions.

For female university students, awareness of reproductive rights first involves understanding their right to access scientifically accurate information, choose appropriate contraceptive methods, and use reproductive health-care services. At the same time, they need to be aware of their right to protection from violence and sexual coercion and their right to confidentiality regarding personal information. Adequate awareness is also closely associated with the ability to evaluate information and make appropriate decisions. Therefore, reproductive rights education should not be limited to the provision of knowledge but should also foster self-protection skills, decision-making capacity, and the ability to proactively seek appropriate support when necessary.

2.2. Higher Education as a Provider of Scientific Knowledge on Reproductive Health

Higher education plays a direct role in providing scientifically accurate knowledge about reproductive health, thereby establishing a foundation for students' awareness and informed decision-making. In the absence of accurate information, students may become overly dependent on personal experiences or unofficial sources of information. Educational content should include knowledge about the human body, menstruation, sexual health, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, preconception health care, and available support services. Such information should be presented in a scientific and accessible manner and should avoid judgmental language.

According to the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education, educational content should encompass relationships; values and rights; gender; violence and safety; skills for health and well-being; the human body and development; sexuality and sexual behavior; and sexual and reproductive health. The study by Doan et al. also indicates that Vietnamese university students have limited knowledge in certain areas related to condom use and emergency contraception. Therefore, reproductive health education should connect theoretical knowledge with practical situations that students may encounter in their daily lives.

2.3. Higher Education and the Enhancement of Female University Students' Self-Protection Capacity

Providing information alone is insufficient; female university students need to be able to apply their knowledge to protect their own health and reproductive rights. Higher education should equip students with the skills to identify potential risks, take proactive preventive measures, recognize when medical assistance is needed, and access appropriate health-care services. At the same time, students should be encouraged to proactively seek counseling without feeling embarrassed or being subjected to judgment or stigma.

Comprehensive sexuality education contributes to a transition from knowledge acquisition to the development of practical competencies. According to UNESCO, quality sexuality education programs can improve knowledge and attitudes and promote behaviors that protect sexual and reproductive health. WHO also emphasizes the role of sexuality education in developing skills to build respectful relationships, make informed decisions, and seek support when necessary.

Therefore, higher education should strengthen experiential and scenario-based learning activities, such as analyzing contraceptive information posted on social media, identifying misinformation, and determining reliable sources of health-care support. This approach can enhance students' capacity to take proactive measures to protect their health and exercise their reproductive rights.

2.4. Higher Education and the Development of Awareness of Self-Determination and Gender Equality

Reproductive rights are closely linked to the right to self-determination. Female university students need to understand that decisions concerning their bodies and reproductive health should be based on voluntariness and adequate information. No individual should be coerced into engaging in sexual activity or be deprived of access to information and health-care services.

Gender equality is also an integral component of reproductive rights education. In practice, responsibility for contraception and the prevention of unintended pregnancy is sometimes placed primarily on women. Such a perspective may impose unnecessary pressure on female university students. Higher education should help students understand that reproductive health is a shared responsibility among all parties in an intimate relationship.

UNESCO places sexuality education within a human rights and gender equality framework. This approach is important because it shifts the focus from merely "warning against certain behaviors" toward developing individual capacity and shared responsibility. Students need not only to understand what they should or should not do, but also why decisions concerning sexual and reproductive health should be based on respect, voluntariness, and equality.

2.5. Higher Education and the Prevention of Unintended Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Infections

Unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are issues that may affect the health and academic plans of female university students. Therefore, education on contraception and safer sex should be considered an essential component of health education.

According to WHO, sexual and reproductive health services include access to contraceptive methods, the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, as well as the provision of information and education on safe and healthy relationships. Education for university students should help them understand the characteristics, effectiveness, and limitations of different contraceptive methods rather than merely introducing the names of individual methods.

A study conducted in Vietnam by Doan et al. [6] found that students' contraceptive knowledge was associated with the sources of information they accessed. The Internet is a widely used source of information; however, Internet use does not guarantee that all information obtained is accurate. Therefore, higher education should integrate health knowledge with digital information literacy.

Educational programs should also avoid fear-based approaches. Evidence synthesized in UNESCO guidance indicates that comprehensive sexuality education can increase knowledge of sexuality and reproductive health, promote the use of condoms and contraceptive methods, and does not increase sexual activity or sexual risk-taking behaviors.

2.6. Higher Education and the Prevention of Sexual Violence and Abuse

The right to protection from violence and sexual coercion is an important component of reproductive rights. Female university students should be equipped with the knowledge necessary to recognize behaviors that constitute violations of their rights and understand that consent must be voluntary and may change or be withdrawn at any time. Being in an intimate relationship does not diminish an individual's right to self-determination over their own body.

UNESCO guidance identifies "violence and safety" as one of the eight core areas of comprehensive sexuality education. Education on this issue not only helps students prevent potential risks but also enhances their ability to seek appropriate support when their rights are violated. Therefore, higher education institutions should establish a safe learning environment, develop confidential and accessible counseling channels, and provide clear information about support services available to students.

2.7. Higher Education and the Enhancement of Students' Capacity to Evaluate Reproductive Health Information in Digital Environments

The Internet is increasingly becoming an important source of reproductive health information for university students; however, not all information available online is accurate or scientifically substantiated. Therefore, higher education should equip students with the skills to verify information sources, authors, publishing organizations, and supporting evidence before accepting or applying such information. A study conducted at six universities in Vietnam found that 92.9% of students used the Internet to search for information about contraception. This finding indicates that higher education institutions need to strengthen students' capacity to access, critically evaluate, and appropriately use digital health information.

In addition, artificial intelligence (AI) can be used as a tool to support learning and information seeking. However, AI should not be regarded as a substitute for physicians or health-care professionals. In reproductive rights education, AI should be used to support literature searches,

explain basic concepts, and guide students toward authoritative and reliable sources of health information.

2.8. Proposed Solutions for Strengthening Reproductive Rights Education in Higher Education Institutions

First, higher education institutions should strengthen comprehensive sexuality education in ways that are appropriate to the characteristics and needs of university students. It is not necessarily essential to establish a separate course. Content related to reproductive rights can be integrated into courses on life skills, health education, student affairs activities, or existing sexuality education programs.

Second, higher education institutions should develop authoritative sources of reproductive health information. Such resources can be made available through student portals or digital libraries. The content should be updated regularly and developed with the involvement of qualified professionals.

Third, student-friendly counseling services should be developed. Counseling should ensure privacy, be non-stigmatizing, and create a safe and supportive environment for users. This is an important condition for translating knowledge into appropriate actions.

Fourth, the capacity of lecturers and student-support staff should be strengthened. Those involved in reproductive rights education need not only relevant knowledge but also effective communication skills for addressing sensitive issues. Appropriate and non-judgmental communication can encourage students to ask questions openly and seek support when necessary.

Finally, reproductive rights education should be integrated with digital literacy education. Students need to develop the ability to search for, critically evaluate, and appropriately use health-related information available on the Internet. This approach is particularly relevant to the characteristics and information-seeking behaviors of the current generation of university students.

III. CONCLUSION

Reproductive rights constitute an important component of human rights and are closely associated with health, gender equality, self-determination, and quality of life. For female university students, an accurate understanding of reproductive rights contributes to their ability to proactively protect their health and make appropriate decisions. Higher education plays an important role in providing knowledge about reproductive health, contraception, and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections, while also developing self-protection capacity, decision-making skills, and awareness of gender equality. Therefore, higher education institutions should strengthen comprehensive sexuality education, develop student-friendly counseling services, and enhance students' capacity to critically evaluate health information in digital environments. In doing so, higher education can contribute to developing students who possess the knowledge, autonomy, and sense of responsibility necessary to address issues related to health and reproductive rights.

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