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Arabic speaking migrant parents' perceptions of sex education in Sweden: A qualitative study



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ABSTRACT

Background: It is well established that migrants underutilise sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services for structural and socio-cultural reasons. Sex education at Swedish schools is compulsory and an important part of Swedish upbringing, yet little is known about how migrants perceive this. This study examined migrant parents' views on sex education that their children receive at Swedish schools.

Methods: This is a qualitative study using 14 focus group discussions (74 = n) with Arabic speaking migrant parents attending Swedish integration courses. Qualitative data analysis was used following Saldana's coding method.

Results: Migrants' perceptions about sex education provided at Swedish schools are influenced by their home countries, where most participants received no sex education at schools and very little sex education at home. Therefore, values about sex in home countries and Sweden are often contrasting. Consequently, migrant parents are concerned about sex education that their children receive at Swedish schools. There are varied interpretations of sex education, concern over the content and methods taught, and there are numerous assumptions about potential negative effects of sex education.

Conclusion: The study echoes findings on intergenerational challenges in migrant families surrounding the topic of gender and sex, often brought on by discussions about sex education at schools. Innovative approaches are needed to support migrant parents as part of Sweden's effort to strengthen effectiveness and inclusiveness of sex education.

Introduction

Background

It is well-established that access to quality sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services improve a broad range of physical and mental health factors [1]. Research shows that refugees and migrants who reside in relocated countries underutilise SRH services [2–9]. Different values about sexuality, gender and sexual practices are often a key reason that hamper the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for migrants [10]. Specific cultural factors and patriarchal systems may present barriers to attain SRH for migrants [11]. Norms and values are influenced by an individual's cultural background and arguably forms the basis for value systems that influence health seeking, and on which "the effectiveness of science depends" [12].

Comprehensive sex education – defined as a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the physical, cognitive, emotional and social aspects of sexuality [13] – is an effective intervention that can significantly improve SRHR outcomes. In 1933, the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU) was created, and by 1956 a national compulsory sex education programme was introduced at all Swedish schools. The initial focus was on health promotion and did not take into account varying sexual values, e.g. sex before marriage remained a taboo. However, by 1977, the curriculum was revised to include the reality that at least hetero-sexual young people were sexually active before marriage. Today, sex education is compulsory from pre-school (age six) onwards, and is integrated across a range of school subjects and often offered in collaboration with youth sexual health clinics and other organisations recommended such as RFSU. To date the Swedish

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sex education curriculum has a strong focus on the promotion of the non-hetero sexual 'other'. The curriculum is not set but instead provides key areas that need to be covered with the core aim to help students with their personal development and knowledge of 'sexuality', 'personal relationships', 'gender equality' and 'self-esteem' [14]. From 2021 sexuality education will be included in the curricula for all who study to become a teacher in Sweden [15].

There has been a stark increase of migrants in Sweden over the past decade, in particularly from the Middle East [16]. In response to high numbers of migrants, Sweden has implemented strategies to ensure effective integration of newly arrived migrant populations. In order to ensure access to SRHR in culturally and linguistically diverse populations, it is crucial to address the specific needs of migrant parents in Sweden. Ensuring access to comprehensive sex education for children and adolescents of migrant parents is an important step towards improving access to SRH services for all. However, little is known about migrant parents' views of sex education at schools. Consequently, this study explores migrant parents' perceptions of sex education at Swedish schools.

Methods

This study took place in Stockholm, Sweden. A qualitative research design was employed, with 14 focus group discussions (FGDs) and a total of 73 participants (for details see Table 1). Eligible participants were migrant parents, 18 years or older, and Arabic speaking. This Knowledge of Arabic was an inclusion criteria since the largest immigrant groups in Sweden are Arabic speaking and this would further allow for a common language facilitating communication in the FGDs. Participants were recruited from five of the "Swedish for Immigrant" language courses (SFI) in Stockholm. These language courses are free and encouraged for all immigrants. The details of the study participants are summarised in Table 1.

The FGDs with women were conducted by SF (female) and the FGDs with men were conducted by a male medical doctor or a male nurse, trained in the facilitation of FGDs. An authorized interpreter of the same sex as the FGD participants was used in twelve of the discussions, while participants' Arabic-speaking teachers interpreted in two of them. The FGDs took place at the different language schools in separate rooms where the group could talk in private. Each FGD lasted for 1–2 h. The FGDs with women were conducted during February-March and October-November 2018, and the ones with men during February-March 2019.

The questions for the thematic guide were created from a review of the literature. Themes included: an exploration of perceptions of sex in

Table 1Details about the study participants.

Country of origin	Female n = 54 (73%)	Male n = 19 (27%)	Total n = 73 (%)
Syria	37 (68,5)	15 (78,9)	52 (71,2)
Iraq	11 (20,4)	2 (10,5)	13 (17,8)
Sudan	1 (1,9)	0	1 (1,4)
Morocco	1(1,9)	0	1 (1,4)
Egypt	2 (3,7)	0	2 (2,7)
Palestine	2 (3,7)	0	2 (2,7)
Eritrea	0	1 (5,3)	1 (1,4)
Lebanon	0	1 (5,3)	1 (1,4)
Age			
20-29	15 (27,8)	1 (5,3)	16 (21,9)
30-39	19 (35,2)	9 (47,4)	28 (38,4)
40-49	16 (29,6)	5 (26,3)	21 (28,8)
50-59	4 (7,4)	3 (15,8)	7 (9,6)
60-	0	1 (5,3)	1 (1,4)
Years in			
Sweden			
<1	8 (14,1)	4 (21,0)	12 (16,4)
1–2	28 (51,9)	6 (31,6)	34 (46,6)
3–4	4 (7,4)	8 (42,1)	12 (16,4)
5–9	8 (14,1)	1 (5,3)	9 (12,3)
10–14	6 (11,1)	0	6 (8,2)

Sweden; an exploration of perceptions of sex education in their home countries; perceptions of sex education at Swedish schools.

The FGDs were transcribed verbatim. Two of the FGDs were checked by a fluent Arabic speaker to ensure accuracy of translation. Qualitative data analysis drawing on Saldana's coding approach, whereby several rounds of coding lead to categorisation of codes and creation of themes [17]. The data was first read through several times by SF and EL. SF and EL conducted three rounds of coding, SHvW conducted one round of coding. Codes, categories and themes were compared and discussed upon which a final coding tree was agreed upon.

Ethical approval was received from the Regional Review Board in Uppsala ("dnr 2013/346"). Informed consent was obtained from all study participants after receiving written and oral information about the study aim and method.

The interviewers were of the same sex as the group participants. All were Sweden-born. SF, who performed the interviews with female participants, and one of the male interviewers are both trained in SRHR nursing/midwifery care. The third interviewer, the male doctor, has substantial experience in discussing SRHR with migrant patients.

Results

The analysis resulted in two main themes consisting of five categories altogether (Table 2). In the first theme "Notions of sex and sex education" participants describe how they navigate different notions about sex from their countries of origin and in the Swedish context. In the second theme "Concerns about sex education at Swedish schools" participants are concerned about sex education for their children. The analysis of the data with men and women mainly generated the same themes although some differences appeared.

Notions of sex and sex education

Sex education in countries of origin

The analysis showed that sex is a taboo subject both at home and outside of the home in the participants' countries of origin. Sex is also taboo topic at schools; the participants had not received any form of sex education at school.

"Education in the home country is zero. As we said before, not in school, not in our country."

Male, FGD 11

Sex education was thus something that participants obtained through other channels than their formal educational settings. However, men and women had obtained information about sex differently. Female participants had a very vague idea of sex until they got married, and asking questions or seeking information about sex would be very inappropriate for a young unmarried woman. At the time of marriage, their mother, sister, or some other female relative had given them some information:

"I got married really young, I was 14 years old, so I didn't understand anything, it was the parents who sat down and taught or explained a little to us. So our traditions are like that, that the parents explain before marriage."

Female, FGD 2

Table 2 A summary of the themes and categories established during the analysis.

Themes	Categories
Notions of Sex and Sex Education	Sex education in countries of origin The notion of sex in Sweden Embracing the benefit of sex education
Concerns about sex education at Swedish schools	The meaning and content of sex education Assumptions about negative effects of sex education

Among the male participants, on the other hand, information about sex was commonly sought from friends, especially older friends, as well as the internet, as opposed to talking to their parents. Although still difficult to talk about, some described that once they are married they seek help from a health professional or use the internet:

"I come from a city where it is completely forbidden to talk about such things [sex], even within the family. ...so when I got married, me and my wife looked at Google and YouTube, and we learned. And it has come slowly, after this marriage, slowly, slowly but surely."

Male, FGD 12

The notion of sex in Sweden

Participants experienced stark differences between the notion of sex in their home countries and in Sweden. In Sweden, the participants described how sex is talked about openly, which was a new experience for them:

"maybe here in Sweden you talk about it openly, you sit and explain and you ask or something, but in our no it cannot, you are ashamed to talk about it, it is shameful"

Female, FGD 5

Seeing public display of emotions such as kissing and holding hands was also new and challenging to navigate and participants expressed concern that the display of emotions would arouse sexual feelings.

"If I ride on a bus or a train and a Swede and his girl hug and kiss, we look down, we can't stand and watch. Because we haven't experienced this situation in our home country, so we think of it as something wrong for us. It arouses other people".

Male, FGD 11

Participants also commented on the fact that it is not unusual for people in Sweden to have several sexual partners, something that would be illegal in their home countries.

"I have a female friend, a Swedish friend. She told me that she's had sex with 60 people... I told her this is too much, you have too many sexual contacts, but she told me' this isn't much, my girlfriends have had 200 or 180"

Male FGD 13

This acceptance of having several partners was consistently raised as difficult to accept for the participants.

Embracing the benefit of sex education

Not all, but many participants express disapproval of having had no formal sex education at schools and very limited informal sex education from parents or other members of the family.

"After getting married, I used to stare angrily at my mother because there were things I didn't know, that I thought I would have wanted to know"

Female, FGD 4

Moreover, despite concerns about a liberal attitude to sex in Sweden, many participants expressed that they wish their children would have more and better information than they had themselves. Some parents even embraced the Swedish openness and clearly wish that for their children.

"We shall tell her (the daughter) everything. For her to be able to protect herself. Because in the home country you know nothing about sex and such things, /..../ But here you explain to the children that you have to protect yourself, you have to be careful."

Female, FGD 1

Women in particular describe their lack of knowledge about sex and their bodies prior to getting married and highlight how difficult it was to learn everything. Women describe that they were too ashamed to ask so they would just wait and see, which was described by many as a stressful phase in preparation for their marriage.

Similarly, Men describe challenges in learning that their newly wed wife knew very little about sex and their bodies and the challenges involved in overcoming this lack of knowledge:

"I couldn't believe my wife knew nothing when she was married. It took a long time to learn everything. It was not easy."

Male, FGD 1

However, despite the fact that parents wish they had more knowledge and want that for their children, some parents expressed a lack of clarity on how they would navigate these changing perceptions and how to handle talking to children about sex.

"I don't know how to talk to my children about sex. I want them to learn our culture/.../ I don't really know what I should raise my child in. My values in the home country or the Swedish values."

Female, FGD 2

This uncertainty and the benefits of a liberal approach to sex in society further fostered concerns about sex education that their children receive at Swedish schools.

Concerns about sex education at Swedish schools

The meaning and content of sex education

There was a strong consensus that children need better information about sex than they, the parents, had received, and that schools could play an important role in providing such information. However, a major concern that emerged was about the meaning and content of sex education. The data revealed uncertainty about the term sex education and very different notions of it. Sex education was often understood as teaching about sexual practice:

"We don't want anyone under the age of 18 to be taught how to act with his girlfriend in bed."

Male FGD 11

Similarly:

"Sex education is something you learn naturally. I mean; I don't need anyone to tell me how to fuck my wife."

Male, FGD 14

Thus, there is a strong notion that sex education is about teaching practice and behaviour. This inevitably raised concerns about the content of the teaching of sex education in schools. For example, the demonstration of educational films was interpreted as a way of teaching children to *have* sex. A further concern linked to the films was that they were interpreted as porn, whereby students were essentially instigated to have sex. In other words, the film materials as such caused a lot of concern.

Moreover, parents worried about what the current curriculum actually contains. Sex education in Sweden puts strong emphasis on individual choice and acceptance of non-heterosexual identities. This was a topic of concern for many parents and clashes with religious values. Parents felt that teachers were undermining their beliefs and values:

"They (teachers in school) should know that they shouldn't tell the children that your mother can't decide for you whether to have sex or not, you decide yourself."

Female, FGD 3

Concerns over meaning of sex education and its contents as well as

distrust in teachers revealed several assumptions about the negative effects of sex education.

Assumptions about negative effects of sex education

Three major assumptions about the negative effects of sex education were found from the data analysis. Firstly, participants were concerned that too much and too early information about sex provokes sexual feelings and thoughts:

"If you start talking with the children at a very young age, about sex life and such things, you help them to start to feel these things."

Female, FGD 4

Second, participants described a fear that sex education has physical implications and might speed up the production of hormones and set a child into an earlier puberty:

"If the girl doesn't get to learn these things, that her whole body doesn't get affected, that the body hormones don't become active. That's why she... doesn't start having her periods early and she keeps on growing to a good height."

Female, FGD 2

Third, sex education was considered a risk because it may distract children from what is important, namely their studies, and get them into trouble. Sex education would encourage them to have, and/or think about sex.

"When children see such things they get shocked... and this might impact their behaviour and stress and mental well-being, and make them care less about their studies too"

Female FGD 5

There was generally a concern that sex education is promoting sex and promiscuity and because of that perception, there was a very strong notion that sex education should be introduced when adolescents approach the age of marriage. In terms of the content, parents preferred that sex education focus on biological reproduction. Some parents emphasised the importance of teaching girls about their rights to ensure that they understand dangers surrounding sexual abuse and violence.

Discussion

This study shows that migrant parents are concerned and skeptical about sex education provided at Swedish schools. The study further shows that parents themselves did not receive formal sex education but many wish they would have. Parents describe a clash of attitudes towards sex in their home countries and Sweden and this is challenging to navigate.

Parents' assumptions and concerns about sex education in Sweden are consistent with previous research on Muslim parents' attitudes towards sex education in Western schools. For example, Alfakir (2004) has reported that among a group of Somali and Arabic-speaking parents at a school in the Stockholm suburb of Rinkeby, 74% thought of sex education to be a shared responsibility between home and school [18]. However, 11% did not know what sex education meant [18]. This is consistent with our results, where several of the informants lacked knowledge on what sex education means and contains. Similarly, Griffiths et al. [19] and Orgocka [20] have shown that Muslim parents often consider Western society to be overly sexualized, and fear that sex education at school encourages children to engage in sexual activity. Berggren et al. [21] have described how Somali, Sudanese and Eritrean mothers living in Sweden have concerns about how to balance their daughters' upbringing in such a liberal society as Sweden. In line with our study, Griffiths et al. [19] and Orgocka [20] calls for teaching that respects and is adapted to children's culture and religion.

Parents' values and their concern about sex education can accentuate

intergenerational conflicts. Whilst intergenerational conflicts occur in all families, it is well established that tensions in post settlement families can be much more pronounced [22]. There is a substantial body of literature that shows that causes of intergenerational conflict in migrant families is often due to differing views on gender norms and sex [23–27].

Cook and Waite argue that transnational migration brings with it important dilemmas for families who find themselves inhabiting a terrain that includes practices from countries of origin alongside exposure to new socio-cultural milieu from the host country [28]. Alfakir has also described intergenerational tensions in migrant families in Rinkeby, Sweden [18]. One important component to consider in sex education in Swedish schools might be to explore ways of linking to the parents. From 2021, all teacher students, irrespective of subject and age group, will receive training on sex education [15], this might be an opportunity to re-think parents' roles in sex education. A Iranian study on parents' role in sex education found that parents believed that the school should play an important role, and further that they as parents also needed more knowledge on how to discuss issues of sexuality with their children [29].

This study suggests that parents want their children to have more knowledge about relationships and sex than they have had prior to getting married. In other words, there is no opposition to sex education per se. This echoes findings from a study that explored parents' options about sex education in culturally diverse populations in the USA, where most parents agreed with the importance of this topic and were glad that their children received this information at [30]. As the latter study also highlights and this study shows, the language and approach of sex education can overwhelm migrant parents. This may in part be because sex education has a strong history in Sweden. Compulsory sex education was introduced in Swedish schools in 1956 and places a strong emphasis on sexual and reproductive health and rights. Secondly, there is a lack of information regarding what and how sex education is communicated to parents from their children's schools. Consequently, the study reveals a need for innovative ways to include schools, parents and children in a dialogue that allows for sensitive exploration of these topics. In Australia, for example there are examples of innovative projects that have attempted to engage in an intergenerational dialogue between parents and their children and support both parties in overcoming common conflicts around gender and sex education [22].

Limitations

Participants included in this study were Arabic speaking migrant parents, studying Swedish at SFI courses. However even within this group, there is a great variety regarding e.g. educational level, prior knowledge, norms, and values. There is also significant diversity in terms of countries of origin. Also, fewer male than female participants were included in this study. However, in general the answers of the male and female participants were similar. Moreover, there is a group of migrants that never takes up establishing measures such as SFI language courses and civic orientation. These are presumably the least integrated in society, but their experiences would have been most valuable in a study on experiences of perceptions and experiences of SRHR and sex education. There are therefore limitations to drawing wider interference to migrant groups Moreover, there are limitations to working with interpreters in an FGD since nuances of language can be missed out. Yet, training of the interpreters and good rapport between the researchers and interpreters helped mitigate but not eliminate this limitation.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that migrant parents have concerns about sex education that their children receive at Swedish schools. Although parents struggle to negotiate different values about sex, they support the idea of sex education for their children. Hence, parents need information about sex education at Swedish schools. Further is it necessary to find ways to support parents to avoid intergenerational conflicts and improve

integration efforts into Swedish society.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

To protect participants anonymity and confidentiality the data set upon which the analysis is based cannot be made publicly available.

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