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Gaza Strip, Palestine

Sexual knowledge, attitudes, self-esteem and psychological well-being among adolescents in Gaza: a cross-sectional study

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Background

Adolescents in Gaza are growing up amid prolonged conflict, repeated displacement, disrupted schooling and collapsing services. These conditions restrict access to reliable sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information while also eroding self-esteem and well-being.

SRH and conflict-related mental health have mostly been studied separately, so little is known about how they relate among adolescents living through a humanitarian crisis.

Objective

To assess SRH knowledge and attitudes among adolescents in Gaza and examine their associations with self-esteem, psychological well-being and mental well-being.

Methods

Design Cross-sectional survey, 1 March – 30 June 2026

Sample 802 adolescents aged 11–19 from all five governorates, recruited by convenience sampling at schools, community centres, health facilities and displacement sites

Measures Arabic self-administered questionnaire: WHO-5 Well-Being Index (α 0.82), Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (α 0.89), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (α 0.84), and new 10-item SRH knowledge (α 0.78) and attitude (α 0.86) scales, expert-reviewed and piloted (n = 40)

Analysis SPSS 27; t-tests and χ^2 by sex; binary logistic regression for good WHO-5 (≥ 50) and high WEMWBS (≥ 48), adjusted for 13 sociodemographic, displacement, socioeconomic and service-access covariates

Who took part

802 adolescents, 65.1% girls, mean age 16.9 years

95.5% displaced at least once

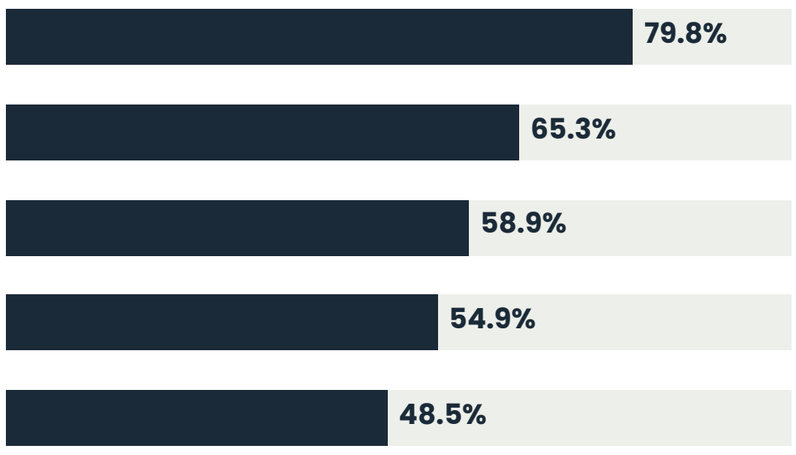
7.4 displacements on average per adolescent

87.2% living in camps, tents or emergency shelters

85.3% without household electricity

56.2% families unable or struggling to meet basic needs

High burden across every domain



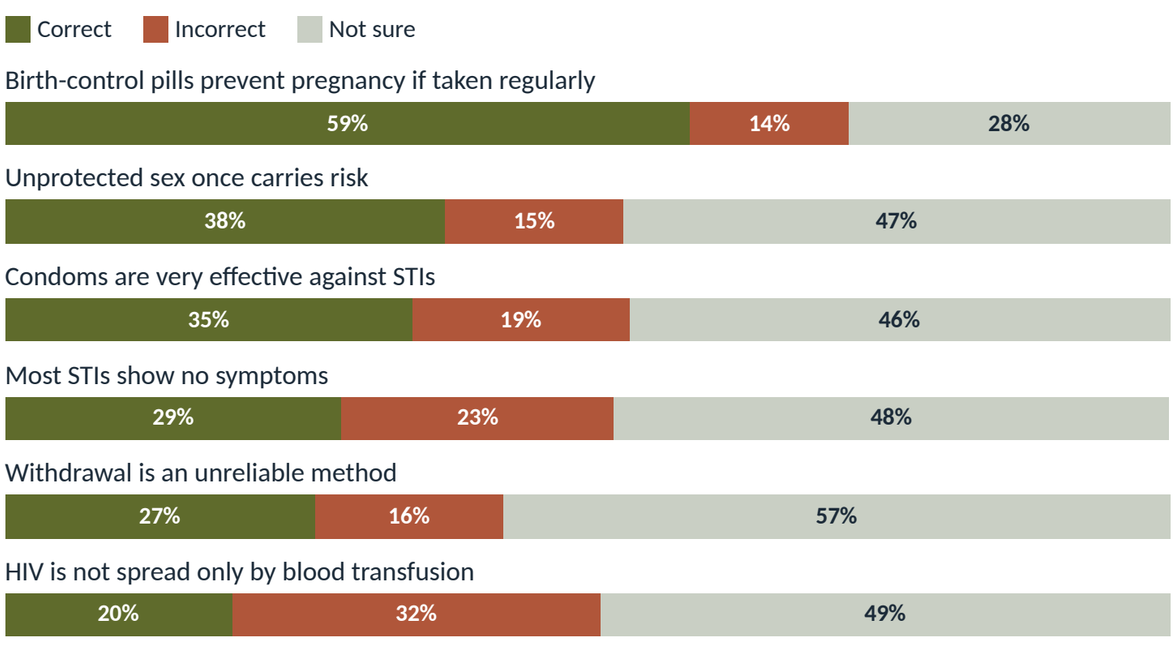
Only 2.4% had good knowledge, 2.2% positive attitudes and 3.5% high self-esteem.

Girls carry a heavier load

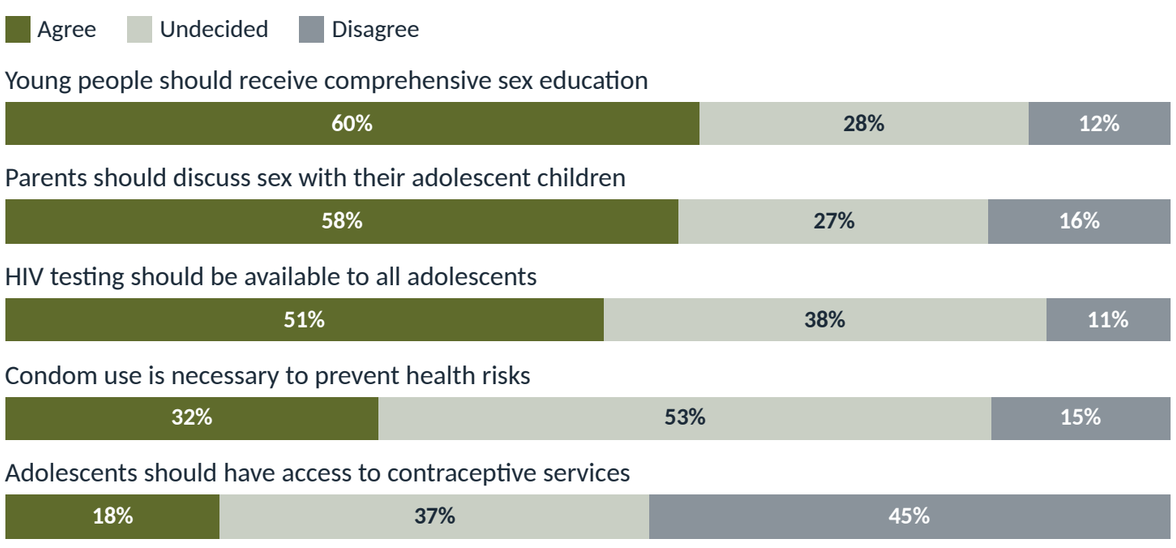
Mean ± SD or %	Boys (n = 280)	Girls (n = 522)	p
SRH knowledge (0–10)	3.7 ± 2.0	3.3 ± 2.3	0.004
Self-esteem (10–40)	25.3 ± 2.3	24.7 ± 2.3	0.001
WEMWBS (14–70)	49.5 ± 9.9	47.2 ± 10.5	0.002
WHO-5 raw (0–25)	11.0 ± 5.6	10.7 ± 5.1	0.585
Sexual attitudes (10–50)	28.7 ± 4.9	28.3 ± 5.0	0.258
Low mental well-being	42.9%	51.5%	0.012
Displacements, mean	6.2 ± 3.7	8.1 ± 4.7	0.001
Household electricity	24.6%	9.4%	0.001
Nearby health services	72.5%	62.3%	0.004

Bold rows differ significantly by sex ($p < 0.05$). Category distributions of knowledge, attitudes and self-esteem did not differ by sex.

Knowledge gaps are mostly uncertainty

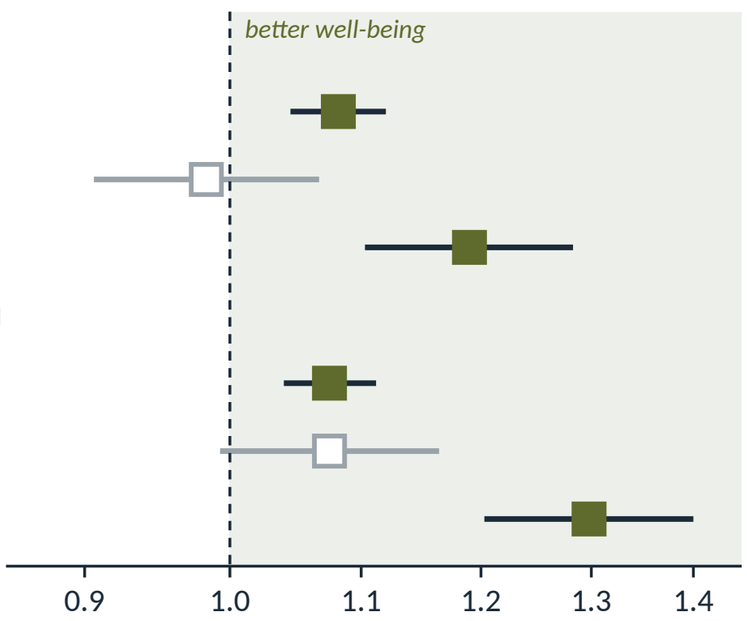


Openness exists, but many are undecided



Self-esteem and attitudes, not knowledge, go with well-being

Adjusted binary logistic regression, n = 802



	OR (95% CI)	p
WHO-5 well-being		
Sexual attitudes	**1.082 (1.045–1.120)**	<0.001
SRH knowledge	0.983 (0.906–1.067)	0.683
Self-esteem	**1.190 (1.103–1.283)**	<0.001
WEMWBS mental well-being		
Sexual attitudes	**1.075 (1.040–1.112)**	<0.001
SRH knowledge	1.075 (0.993–1.164)	0.074
Self-esteem	**1.298 (1.203–1.400)**	<0.001

Each extra point of self-esteem was associated with 30% higher odds of high mental well-being.

Positive sexual attitudes were linked to 8% higher odds of good WHO-5 well-being and 8% higher odds of high WEMWBS per point.

SRH knowledge was not independently associated with either outcome.

Conclusions

- Adolescents in Gaza show large unmet SRH and psychosocial needs, with girls more vulnerable in several domains.
- Better well-being tracked self-esteem and positive attitudes, not factual knowledge alone.
- Associations are cross-sectional; direction of effect cannot be established.

Implications

- Pair accurate, culturally appropriate SRH education with self-esteem, communication and decision-making skills.
- Make programmes gender-responsive and trauma-informed.
- Link SRH, mental health and psychosocial support, education and protection services instead of running them in isolation.

Selected references

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2. Carlén K et al. Adolescents' self-esteem and perceived mental well-being in Sweden. BMC Psychol. 2023;11:413.
3. Haj-Yahia MM et al. Palestinian adolescents' exposure to political violence, self-esteem and PTS symptoms. J Interpers Violence. 2021;36:4137–64.

Acknowledgements and rights

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