

Urgent need for addressing Reproductive Health (RH) related challenges in higher learning institutions in Ethiopia

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According to a study published in this issue, only 42.5% of the respondents of a survey conducted among female students of Arba Minch University (Southern Ethiopia) have heard about emergency contraceptive, with an overall summary index for knowledge disclosing that only 21.9% had good knowledge (1). Underscoring this issue would not be considered overemphasizing even when data seem to be already fairly available on the problem. An earlier cross-sectional survey conducted among female students of Addis Ababa University and Unity University College (both in the Capital) in 2005 has shown that there was low level of knowledge and practice of emergency contraceptives among female university students (2). A similar study done in 2009 among female students of Adama University (Central Ethiopia) also showed lack of knowledge as one of the significant predictors of non-use of emergency contraception (3). Also more recently, a study involving 572 female students in Haramaya University (Eastern Ethiopia) revealed that 47.6% of the respondents had ever heard about emergency contraceptives with only 25.7% having good knowledge of the issue (4).

With the recent increase in secondary and tertiary education enrollment, there is a pronounced increase in the number of youth in their teens and early twenties entering high schools, colleges and universities. Most of these students are studying away from home interfacing with populations of rapidly growing urban centers. Some of these students usually tend to get involved in drinking alcohol and chewing *kebat* that may expose them for being involved in risky sexual behaviors (5-8). According to a study in Hawassa University (Southern Ethiopia), respondents reported sexual practices that were considerably unprotected, with likelihoods that approximately two-fifths and nearly 10% would be exposed to STIs and to unplanned pregnancies respectively (9).

Given the HIV related risks facing youth and young adults, colleges and universities need to take more vigorous actions to combat risk behaviors against HIV/AIDS. Of course, there are already such initiatives in most of the higher learning institutions, such as the Addis Ababa University (AAU)'s Modeling and Reinforcement to Combat HIV/AIDS (MARCH) Project, a BCC effort to prevent and control HIV/AIDS among university students through encouraging the adoption of prevention behaviors in the student population; linking students to counseling, testing, and care and treatment services; and changing social norms related to HIV within the University community (10). However, such efforts should be scaled up in all higher learning institutions as well as high schools in the country. In actual fact, studies conducted on the subject matter recommend that "a great deal of relevant intervention should be carried out during earlier school years" (9).

All these evidences indicate the need for urgent and concerted actions to address risky sexual behaviors among students of higher learning institutions, to prevent adverse consequences related to HIV/AIDS, STI as well as unwanted pregnancies. Furthermore, such concerted efforts would be vital to improve female performance in tertiary education and to avert the relatively high attrition rates among female students (whose enrollment ratio is already comparably very low to that of male students) across the universities in the country (11).

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