

Unmet Sexual Needs among Thai Elderly Married Women

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Introduction

In Thailand, the median age for menopause is 49.5 years and women's life expectancy after age 50 is 21.5 more years. In addition 60% of women age 50 years and over are currently married. Furthermore, it is reported that more Thai women are married or cohabiting more than there are single persons. Consequently, the marital relationship also increases in significance particularly when understanding married couple's intimate interpersonal relationship regarding sexual health. Examining this relationship provides insights into partners' verbal and non-verbal communication which often contributes to unmet sexual needs among elderly couples.

The meaning of "unmet sexual needs" of this study is either: 1. one partner does not want to have sex (having no sexual desire), but is forced to engage in sexual intercourse; or 2. one partner wants it, but does not have sexual intercourse. All too often these circumstances result in a form of gender-based violence, generally against the women. Violence takes several forms including psychological, physical, and sexual. However, very few Thai studies regarding the sexual health of elderly persons have been conducted, because everything related to sexuality in Thai society is considered something private and personal. This includes the notion that for elderly persons to be sexually active is a taboo, being so is considered to be appropriate only for persons during their reproductive years.

Objectives

To estimate the prevalence of unmet sexual needs among Thai married elderly women and clearly identify the influencing factors.

Methodology

This survey study collected data through face-to-face interviews from women between the ages of 50–79 years. A simple random sampling was drawn from villages in three Thai provinces (Pathumthani, Singburi, and Nakhonratchasima) where all elderly persons in the villages were invited to participate. Additional information was gathered during in-depth interviews. Factor analysis was applied and the University's Ethical Committee approved before the study began in 2012.

Results

This study enrolled 403 married women age between 50 to 79 years. Results indicated that the prevalence of unmet sexual needs among women ages 50-59, 60-69 and 70-79 years was relatively high at 30.8, 31.2 and 14.9 percent, respectively. The prevalence rate dramatically decreased in the 70-79 year age group, possibly due to health conditions. The husband or partner's sexual demands overwhelmed women of all ages. Seventy-four percent of married women age 50-59 had sexual intercourse, but only about half considered it to be pleasurable.

Factors influencing married women's unmet sexual needs fell into 4 categories:

1. Age group, years married, sexual needs/desires and sexual response.

2. Differentiation of sexual needs, gender based violence.
3. Physical and mental health including joint pain, feeling fatigued or weary.
4. Experiencing vaginal pain and painful urination after intercourse.

Conclusion

The study found that many related factors, e.g., age, years married, physical and mental health including exhaustion, especially the onset of menopausal symptoms such as dryness and soreness, contribute to unmet sexual needs and thus sexual intercourse was not pleasurable or pleasant. In Thailand, the social value of a person's sexuality is based on patriarchy in which women are inferior and men are superior and dominant. As a result, most of Thai women whom the society casts in the role of the 'good wife' blame themselves when they cannot respond to their partners' sexual needs.

The results of this study suggested for the communication between partners, in terms of what they want during intimacy, including encouraging women to negotiate and empower both partners to respect each other. Better understanding based on genuine caring can enhance sexual health and well-being thereby improving the quality of life and creating harmonious conditions for elderly Thai couples and families.

Keywords: unmet sexual needs, sexual intercourse, sexual desires, vaginal pain, family.

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