



## Research Article

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# Awareness About Reproductive Tract Infections and Health Seeking Behaviour Among Women

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**Abstract:** Particularly for women of childbearing age, reproductive health is a critical component of general health. A significant health concern in nations like India is Reproductive Tract Infections (RTIs), which include infections that originate internally, are transmitted through intercourse, or are brought on by medical procedures. Despite the government's numerous initiatives to enhance reproductive health, many women—particularly those in rural and impoverished areas—continue to experience RTIs without receiving the appropriate care.

According to numerous studies, women frequently do not seek treatment for RTIs for a variety of reasons, including embarrassment, ignorance of the severity of the symptoms, a lack of access to healthcare in their area, and a lack of autonomy to see a doctor independently. The situation is exacerbated by issues like inadequate menstrual hygiene, young marriage, financial hardship, and requiring consent from a male family member to see a doctor. It is not always the case that women who are aware of RTIs will act or seek treatment.

When it comes to guiding women and exchanging information, health professionals like ASHAs and Anganwadi workers are crucial. Enhancing awareness and promoting early treatment can be achieved by providing these workers with training and support. Serious health issues can be avoided with the aid of community awareness campaigns and simple education about RTIs. All things considered, it's critical to empower women via education, lessen the stigma associated with these infections, and facilitate access to quality healthcare.

**Keywords:** Reproductive Tract Infections, awareness, stigma, rural women, health education, community health workers, reproductive health, India, and women's health

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## INTRODUCTION

Reproductive health is an essential component of general health and a critical part of human development. It significantly affects the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. Among various reproductive health concerns, Reproductive Tract Infections (RTIs) pose a substantial public health challenge, particularly in low- and middle-income countries such as India (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019). RTIs comprise a broad range of infections affecting the reproductive tract, which may be endogenous (originating within the body), sexually transmitted, or iatrogenic (caused by medical interventions). Despite progress in reproductive rights and health services, RTIs remain prevalent, especially among women living in rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged settings (Gulati et al., 2020).

Due to social stigma, ignorance, inadequate health infrastructure, and low health- seeking behaviour,

RTIs are frequently asymptomatic, misdiagnosed, or ignored (Bhargava et al., 2021). Women frequently put off getting help until the symptoms get out of control or problems start to occur. This delay can result in serious health outcomes, including chronic pelvic pain, infertility, ectopic pregnancy, adverse pregnancy outcomes, and an elevated risk of HIV infection (Rani & Bonu, 2003). Therefore, it is essential to comprehend women's health- seeking behaviour and their level of awareness regarding RTIs in order to develop focused and successful interventions.

### Understanding Reproductive Tract Infections (RTIs):

Infections affecting the reproductive organs in both men and women are referred to as Reproductive Tract Infections. However, because of their reproductive, social, and physiological roles, women are especially affected (Jejeebhoy et al., 2011). RTIs are divided into three main categories by the World Health Organisation (2019):

Type Of RTI	Definition	Common Examples	Causes	Key Symptoms	Possible Consequences
Endogenous Infections	Infections caused by overgrowth of organisms normally present in the reproductive tract	Bacterial Vaginosis Candidiasis (yeast infection)	Imbalance in natural vaginal flora	Abnormal vaginal discharge Itching Odor	Discomfort Recurrence Pregnancy complication
Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)	Infections acquired through sexual contact	Chlamydia Gonorrhea Syphilis Trichomoniasis HIV	Transmission through unprotected sexual activity	Vaginal discharge Pain during sex Lower abdominal pain Genital sores	Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID) Infertility Increased HIV risk
Iatrogenic Infections	Infections resulting from medical procedures or poor hygiene practices	Post-abortion infections Infections from unclean IUD insertion	Unsterile medical instruments Unsafe abortion/delivery	Fever Pelvic pain Foul-smelling discharge	PID Infertility Sepsis Maternal Morbidity

### Prevalence and Burden of RTIs:

Every year, millions of women worldwide suffer from RTIs, many of which remain undiagnosed and untreated. It is estimated that up to 40% of women in India who are of reproductive age self-report having RTI symptoms (International Institute for Population Sciences [IIPS] & ICF, 2021). Poor menstrual hygiene, limited access to high-quality healthcare, early marriage, high fertility rates, and diminished decision-making autonomy make rural women more vulnerable (Nair et al., 2020).

According to the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5), a significant percentage of women had symptoms suggestive of RTIs, but only a small percentage sought medical attention from a professional (IIPS & ICF, 2021). The disparity between identifying symptoms and seeking treatment highlights the need for more targeted studies and interventions to close this gap (Patel et al., 2019).

### Health-Seeking Behaviour regarding RTI among Women:

The process by which people identify, understand, and react to illness is referred to as health seeking behaviour. A variety of social, cultural, economic, and systemic factors influence women's behaviour in the context of RTIs (Ahmed et al., 2022).

### Obstacles that prevent timely RTI care-seeking include:

#### 1. Ignorance:

According to George et al. (2013), many women are unaware that RTI symptoms are medically significant or that they need to be treated by a professional.

#### 2. Shame and Stigma:

According to Chowdhury et al. (2011), cultural taboos around reproductive issues frequently result in denial, secrecy, and delayed care.

#### 3. Budgetary Restrictions:

According to Pachauri, 2009, Women from low-income households are significantly discouraged by the high costs of medical care, travel, and medications.

#### 4. The distance to medical facilities:

According to Desai et al. (2015), women in rural areas frequently have to travel several kilometres in order to obtain even basic services.

#### 5. Care quality:

According to Singh & Arora, 2020, Lack of privacy, unavailability of female doctors, and unpleasant encounters with public health personnel erode trust and deter future visits.

These obstacles frequently compel women to turn to untrained professionals or home cures, which can exacerbate their conditions (Nair et al., 2020). Because of mistrust, poor quality, and a lack of outreach, government healthcare services are frequently underutilised, even when they are theoretically available (Das et al., 2016).

### Role of Socio-Cultural Norms:

Women's health behaviours are significantly shaped by social and cultural norms. Reproductive health and ideas of moral purity, female subservience, and family honour are strongly related in traditional societies (Jejeebhoy & Sebastian, 2003). According to Chacko (2001), women are frequently expected to bear pain and discomfort in silence, which normalises suffering and deters them from getting help.

Additionally, women may be discouraged from seeking modern healthcare due to their spiritual and religious beliefs. Women seek spiritual or alternative healing methods rather than biomedical treatment because RTIs are perceived in some communities as moral failings or divine punishments (Banerjee & Andersen, 2021). The situation is made worse by the absence of official sex education, particularly for teenage girls who are ignorant of the biological mechanisms underlying reproductive health (Santhya et al., 2007).

### **Need for Awareness and Intervention**

Raising awareness of RTIs is crucial to guaranteeing prompt diagnosis and treatment. To debunk myths, expand knowledge, and promote healthy behaviours, information, education, and communication (IEC) strategies are essential (Ravindran & Balasubramanian, 2020). IEC campaigns can enable women to access health services without fear of discrimination or stigma, identify early symptoms, and comprehend preventive measures.

India has launched several programmes aimed at improving reproductive health, such as:

- Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) Programme
- Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY)
- National Health Mission (NHM)

By encouraging institutional deliveries, vaccinations, and reproductive health education, these programs seek to enhance the health of mothers and children. However, poor implementation has limited their effectiveness, particularly in underserved and remote areas (Gupta et al., 2019).

The initial point of contact between rural women and the healthcare system is community health workers, such as Anganwadi workers and Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs). When given the necessary training and assistance, they are essential in promoting service use, educating people about RTIs, and offering fundamental reproductive health counselling (Kumar et al., 2021). Early detection and referral can be significantly enhanced by bolstering their capabilities and incorporating RTI-related modules into their training.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **The Necessity of the Research**

Research on awareness of Reproductive Tract Infections (RTIs) and how women seek treatment in the modern era is desperately needed. Many women are still unaware of the warning signs of RTIs or are too embarrassed to discuss them. They consequently frequently put off seeking assistance, which can result in major health issues. We can improve health education programs, lessen stigma and fear, and assist more women in maintaining their health by knowing what women know and what prevents them from visiting the doctor.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To determine how much women know about RTIs.
- To comprehend how women with RTI symptoms seek medical attention.
- To determine the obstacles preventing women from receiving treatment.

### **Research Design**

This study uses a Descriptive Research Design to evaluate women's health-seeking behaviour and awareness of Reproductive Tract Infections (RTIs).

### **Universe and Study Area**

Married women between the ages of 18 and 49 who live in Gujarat's cities and rural areas are included in the study. The geographic scope is adaptable because respondents from different regions were reached by the online data collection method, Google Forms.

### **Sample and Sampling Procedure**

A total of 65 women of reproductive age were selected using convenience sampling. The participants were approached through social media i.e WhatsApp, and email to fill out the structured Google Form.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

- Women aged between 18 to 49 years.
- Only married women
- Women who gave their consent.
- Respondents able to read and understand the language of the form.

### **Exclusion Criteria**

- Women below 18 or above 49 years of age.
- Those unwilling to participate.

### **Tool for Data Collection**

A structured questionnaire was designed using Google Forms. The tool included both closed-ended and multiple-choice questions divided into the following sections:

- Demographic details
- Awareness of RTIs
- Health-seeking behaviour

### **Method of Data Collection**

Data was collected online using Google Forms, ensuring convenience, safety, and wider reach. The form link was shared digitally, and participants could respond at their own place and comfort.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

According to a study by Subramanyam et al. (2024), even though many women in rural Kancheepuram, Tamil Nadu, are aware of reproductive tract infections (RTIs), many of them suffer from them. However, since many people still experience symptoms, this awareness does not always translate into safe or preventive actions. The primary information source was

health professionals, demonstrating the significance of their role. The study emphasises how urgently rural communities need consistent, carefully thought-out health education initiatives. RTIs and their negative impacts can be lessened by educating women about safe reproductive practices and raising community awareness.

Although many rural women in Surendranagar are aware of RTI symptoms and HIV prevention, many are still unaware of the major health issues that RTIs can cause, according to a study by Thekdi et al. (2014). This emphasises how important it is to improve health education. Promoting early diagnosis, prompt treatment, and targeted awareness campaigns that describe the transmission of RTIs, and their long-term consequences are all crucial to lessening their impact.

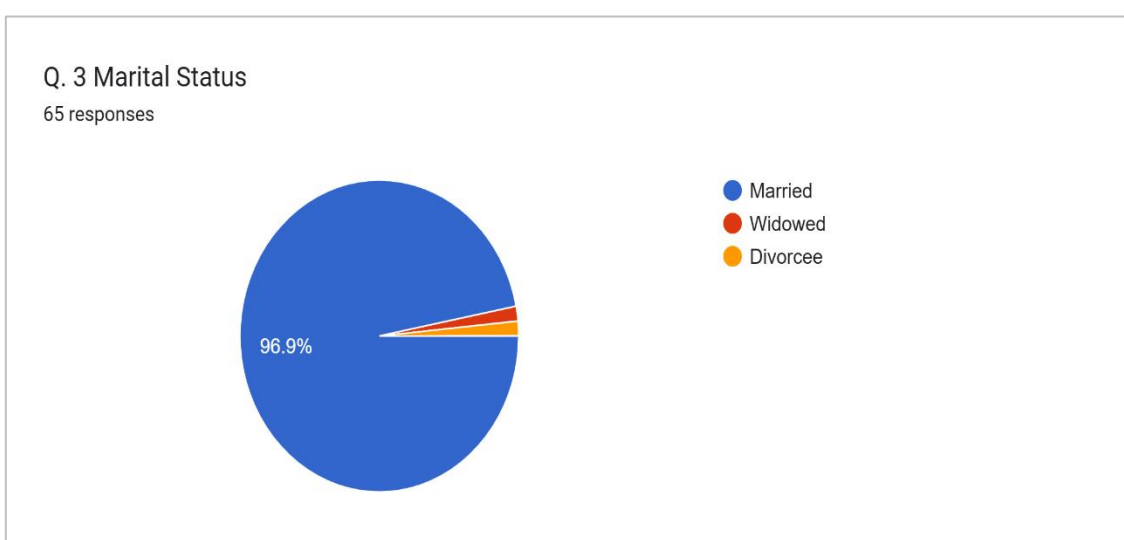
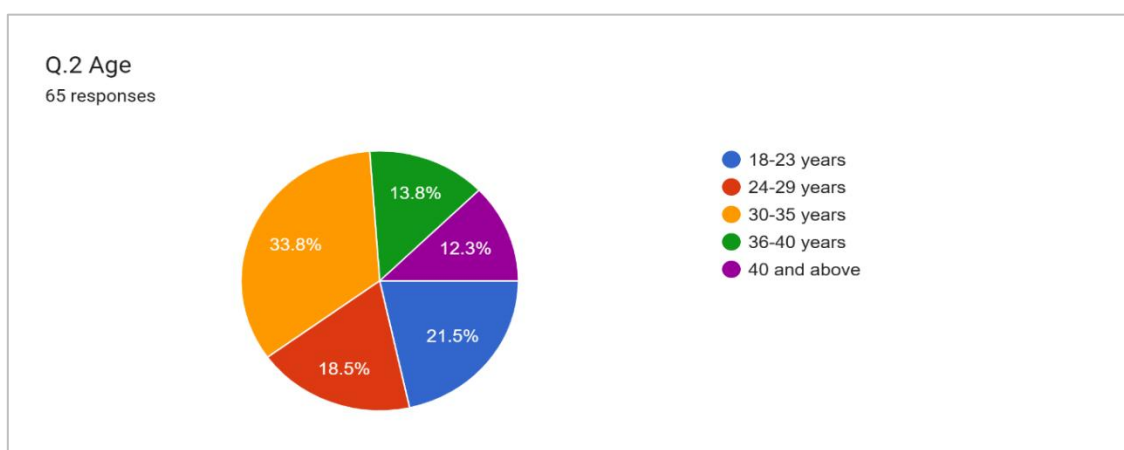
Only 7.6% of rural women in Haldwani block have adequate knowledge about reproductive tract infections (RTIs), according to a study by Verma et al. (2024). RTIs were lower among women who used sanitary pads, engaged in safe sexual behaviour, and gave birth in medical facilities with qualified personnel. This demonstrates how adopting healthier behaviours

can help ward off infections. The study emphasises the critical need for health education and awareness initiatives that educate women about family planning, safe delivery practices, and menstrual hygiene. In rural areas, these initiatives can significantly lower RTIs and enhance the health of women.

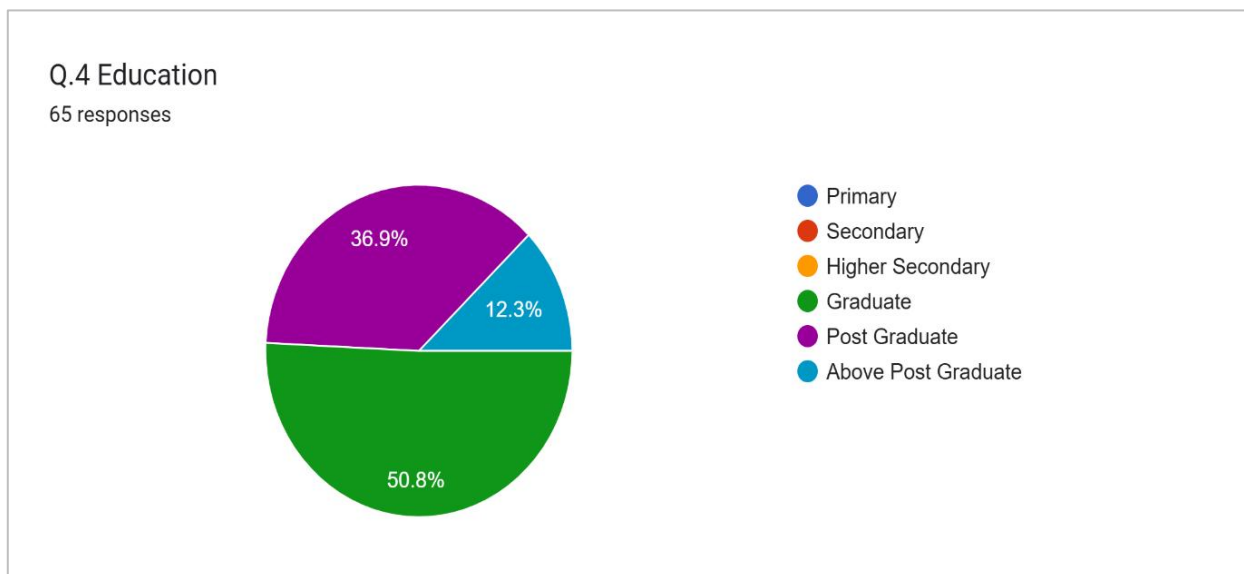
Many women (65.3%) in Gautam Buddh Nagar, Uttar Pradesh, an urban resettlement area, had symptoms of STIs, RTIs, or other reproductive health problems, according to a study by Verma et al. (2024). Only 54.1% of them sought treatment, though. Fear of stigma and ignorance were cited by many women who chose not to seek care. This demonstrates the pressing need for community health education and initiatives to lessen stigma associated with these conditions. In cities like this, educating women through qualified medical professionals or local authorities can contribute to better reproductive health.

## FINDINGS

The findings of the study show that most of the respondents were from the 30–35 years age group (34%), and almost all of them (97%) were married.



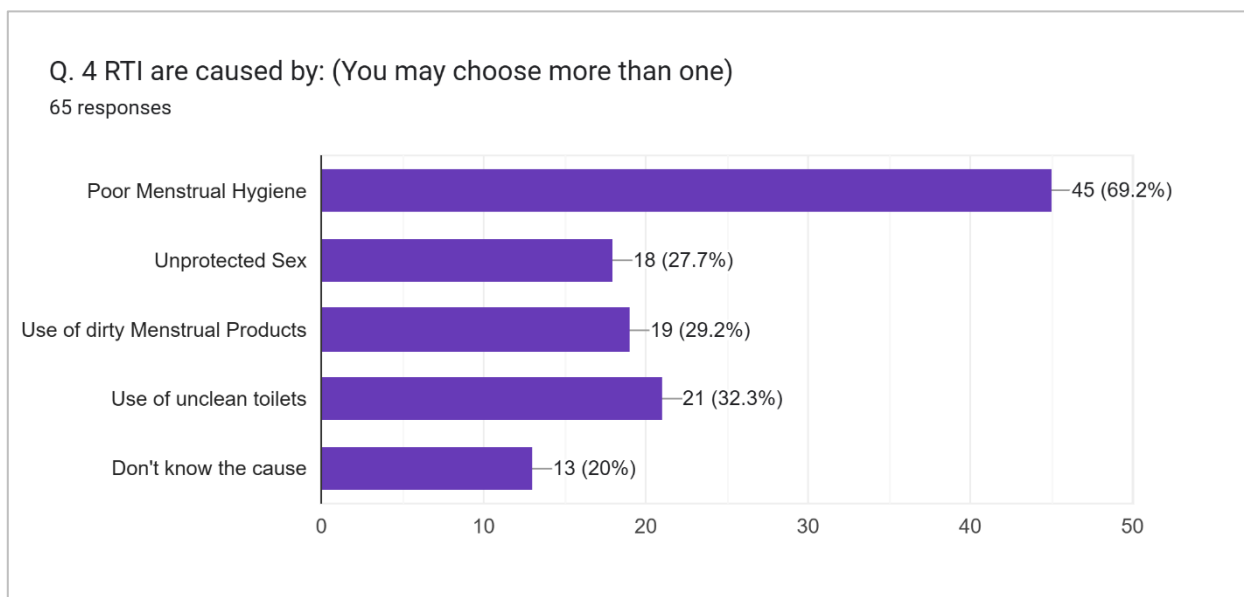
More than half of them (51%) were graduates, and a majority (78%) were engaged in service or jobs.



In terms of religion, 85% belonged to the Hindu community.

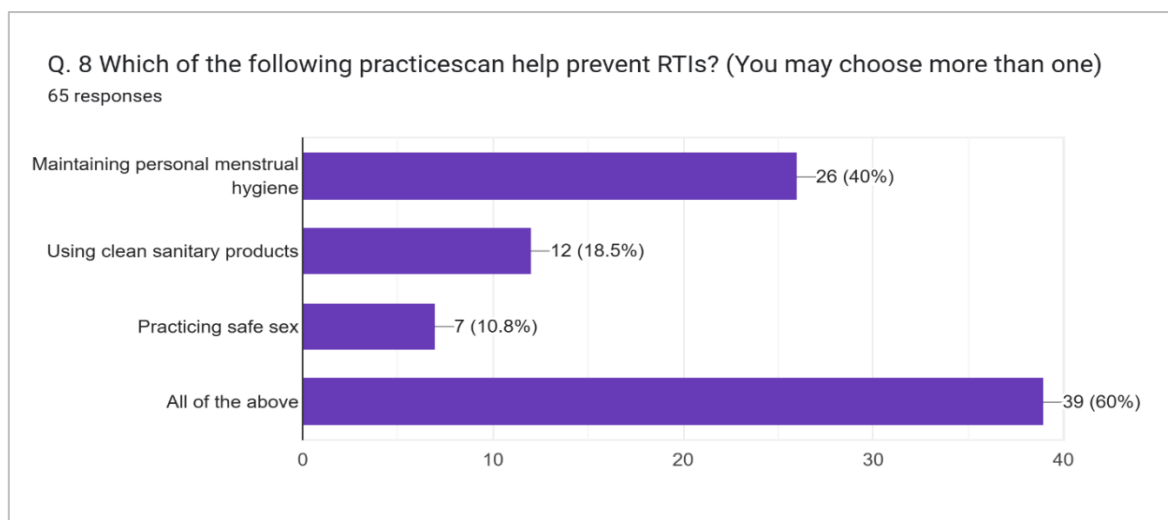
Regarding awareness, 78% had heard about Reproductive Tract Infections (RTIs), mainly through

social media (65%). Many women identified unusual vaginal discharge (62%) as the most common symptom and poor menstrual hygiene (69%) as the main cause of RTIs.



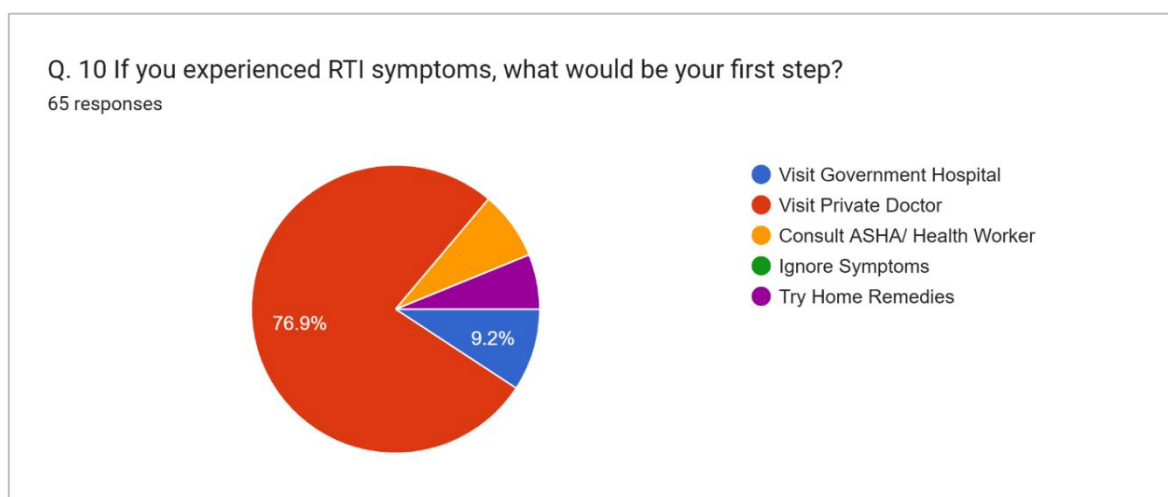
Most respondents (78%) agreed that RTIs are very serious for women's health and can affect fertility, while 89% believed that RTIs are preventable. About 60% of

women also mentioned that good menstrual hygiene, use of clean sanitary products, and safe sexual practices are important to prevent infection.

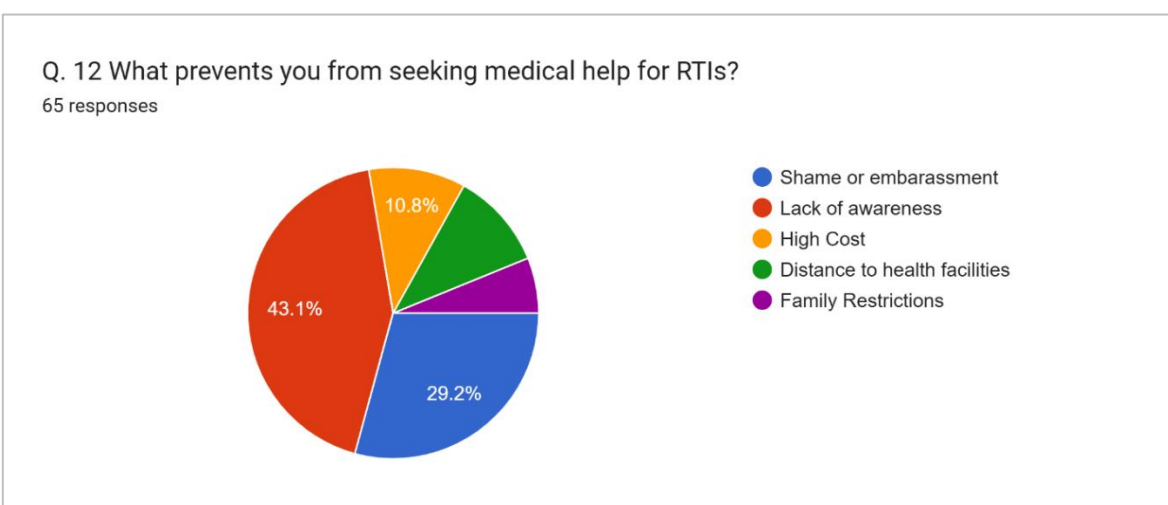


In terms of awareness programmes and treatment-seeking behavior, nearly half of the women (48%) had attended awareness sessions on RTIs. A large number

(77%) preferred visiting private doctors if they experienced symptoms.



68% said they would immediately consult experts on noticing any signs of RTIs. However, 43% felt that lack of awareness is a major reason why women do not seek treatment.





Encouragingly, 72% reported having taken treatment from a doctor, and 83% preferred private hospitals for reproductive health concerns. On the other hand, only 43% were satisfied with the services available in their area, showing that while awareness and treatment-seeking behavior are fairly positive, there is still a need to improve healthcare services and create better awareness at the community level.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study shows that most women were aware of Reproductive Tract Infections (RTIs) and understood their causes, symptoms, seriousness, and methods of prevention. Social media played an important role in spreading awareness, and many respondents believed that maintaining proper menstrual hygiene and safe practices can help prevent infections.

The findings also highlight that although many women seek medical help, especially from private doctors and hospitals, lack of awareness is still a major barrier for some. While treatment-seeking behavior is encouraging, satisfaction with available services remains low. This suggests that along with spreading more awareness through programmes, there is a strong need to improve the quality and accessibility of healthcare services at the community level so that women can receive timely and effective treatment.

## Future Scope

The study highlights that while awareness about Reproductive Tract Infections (RTIs) is fairly good, there is still much scope for improvement in the future. More community-based awareness programmes can be introduced to reach women who lack knowledge about RTIs, especially in rural and underprivileged areas. Since social media has proven to be an effective tool, future initiatives can focus on using digital platforms more widely for spreading correct information. At the same time, government and healthcare providers should work towards strengthening public healthcare services so that women do not have to rely mainly on private hospitals. Training of health workers, regular health check-up camps, and affordable access to sanitary products can play a major role in prevention. Future research can also explore in detail the barriers women face in seeking treatment, and how healthcare policies can be designed to overcome these challenges. By combining awareness, improved healthcare facilities, and policy support, the issue of RTIs can be managed more effectively in the coming years.

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