

Shellfish Catchers' Health in Relation to Their Biological Cycles

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Abstract. *Shellfish catchers' health can be damaged due to several factors in relation to their biological cycles. The menstruation, pregnancy and menopause are natural processes in women, but experienced in some work ambiances, such as the sea, can cause health alterations. It is conducted a descriptive, observational and transversal design, using quantitative methodology through an auto managed survey, being the sample size twenty-five women between 28 and 62 years old. The aim of this paper is to understand the impact of the biological cycle in shellfish catchers' health and to identify possible risks at their working site. The importance of this issue requires a suitable understanding about their specific needs with the purpose of improving their health and wellness, promoting gender equality and contributing to the implementation of ad hoc health programs and policies for this professional collective.*

Keywords. Shellfish catchers, reproductive health, menstruation, pregnancy, menopause and working conditions

1 Introduction

The World Health Organization defines health as: “The complete state of physical, mental and social wellness, and not only the lack of illnesses or complaints”. This concept was not exempt from plenty critics, because it was considered utopian. However, it was a landmark, and it keeps being, due to the fact that for the first time, the person is considered a bio- psycho-social being. [1]

There is a current vision more focused on health in a context of personal and social development in which lifestyles play a basic role, although it is not the only factor. The choice of a healthy lifestyle not only depends on the Will (“to want”), but also on knowledge (“to know”), and the access to itself (“power”). This implies the need to carry out some actions in order to modify the environment and making it healthier. [2] Here lies the need of knowing the environment where the shellfish catchers' activities are taken place on, and being able to understand those social, cultural, working, economic and political aspects that might affect their health conditions. This environment also has an impact on working conditions, which have effects on biological cycles. [3]

Regarding the socio-economic context, they are qualified workers enrolled in the Social Security System as “self-employed”, and they are gaining an increasing level of education. Even though they belong to a highly-feminized sector that is affected by gender inequalities, they are obtaining more social recognition.

The purposes of this paper consist of understanding the impact of biological cycles on shellfish catchers' health and to identify the possible risks and specific challenges they face regarding the different stages of biological cycles.

As it is observed in the literature, Rodríguez Romero (2011) carried out an observational investigation, in which he highlights the prevalence of musculoskeletal injuries and its consequences in the quality of life of this collective, that he considers is lower for them than for the rest of the reference Spanish population. [4]. Other investigations, carried through an institutional level, such as the CANO group, point as an aggravating circumstance pregnancy and breastfeeding, and they describe the risks they have in these phases of the vital cycle. [5]

As for justification, it is important to highlight that this investigation about sea women's health in relation to their biological cycles may help to contribute the lack of knowledge in scientific literature, and provide useful data for future investigations centred on improving the health and wellness of this collective, the promotion of gender equity, the equality in the maritime background, and, even the contribution to the implementation of specific programs and policies for the sea women.

2 Material and methods

The design is descriptive and quantitative, conducted through a survey targeted to a group of shellfish catchers from “Ría de Arousa”.

It is transversal, because it was carried out in a certain time and place, and also observational, due to the lack of control in variables.

The survey consists of four sections: sociodemographic data, menstruation, pregnancy and reproductive health, and menopause. Preliminary results are shown in this paper, choosing a question for section.

A convenience sample has been proceeded with a non-randomized design, since the chosen participants are those who attended the Conference: “Avanzar Compartindo”, taking place on 22/09/2021 in Vilagarcía de Arousa (Pontevedra – Spain).

The sample is made up of a total of twenty-five women. The selection criteria for the sample are based on women who belong to the shellfish catcher’s sector in a professional way, and those who do not belong to it are excluded.

It has been used for the literature review different databases, such as: Scopus, Scielo, Elsevier and the Google Scholar meta-search engine.

Microsoft Office Excel 2013 was the tool used as data and graphic processor and Zotero has been used as a bibliographic manager.

The ethical principles that are into force regarding Helsinki Declaration are taken into account: anonymity and right to self-determination. The form has got an academic purpose and it is confidential.

3 Results

The average age in the sample is 47.51, the distribution of age varies from 28 to 62, and the average period of time in this working activity is 14.92 years.

Regarding menstruation, it is important to observe the affectation caused to their health conditions and wellness, the obtained answers to the question: How do you feel when you have your period? Are shown in Fig. 1:

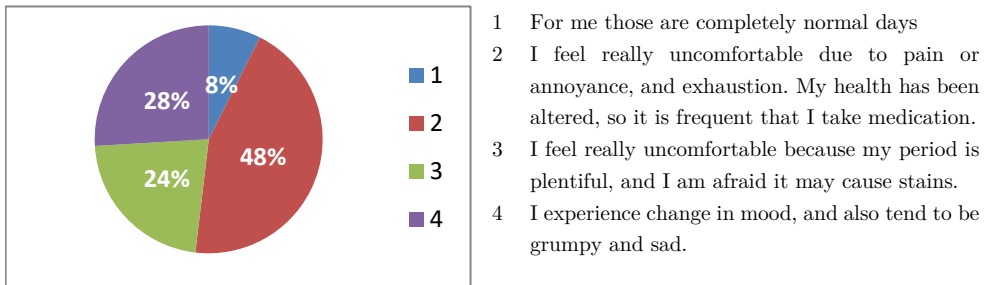


Figure 1. Menstruation

It is observed that 48% of the interviewed women have some kind of disruption, such as pain, exhaustion, etc., 24% present discomfort, but only 8% do not appreciate any differences with other days in the cycle.

In the pregnancy survey, women are asked if they have presented any kind of complication after delivering or after having a caesarean section, like urine incontinence. Results shown in Fig. 2 and in Fig. 3 expose the level of knowledge they have about Kegel exercises or pelvic floor rehabilitation as a prevention to urine incontinence.

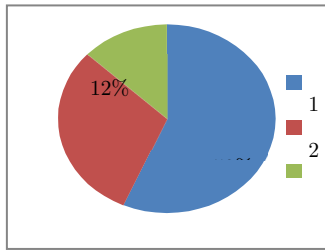


Figure 2. Pregnancy

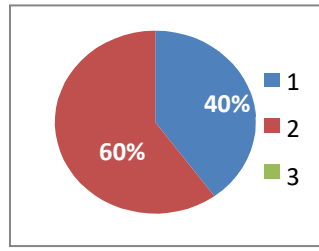


Figure 3 Reproductive Health

1. YES
2. NO
3. DK/DA

Both graphics are exposed together, since it is very remarkable to observe how 52% of women have some kind of pelvic floor disruption, but 60% of them do not know anything about the rehabilitation exercises commented before.

About menopause, they are asked about the possibility of having some symptom in relation to this biological process. The results can be observed in Fig. 4. Where it is displayed that stifling sensations constitute the most identified sign with a 56%, followed by urinary incontinence with 36% and vaginal atrophy with 28% of the interviewed women.

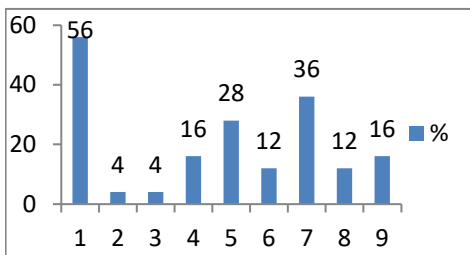


Figure 4. Menopause

1. Suffocating feeling
2. Anxiety
3. Depression
4. Health disruption
5. Vaginal atrophy
6. Sexual dysfunction
7. Urine incontinence
8. Osteoporosis
9. Memory alteration

4 Discussion and Conclusions

Women sea workers have the right to obtain safe and healthy working conditions that also include the care during their biological cycles, as it was demonstrated that these “only-women” natural phenomena, affect their health and wellness because of the following facts:

- Menstruation is a normal biological process that affect many women in reproductive age. However, working conditions in the sea may complicate their correct management, which can cause discomfort, pain, lack of hygiene, shortage in their access to adequate health products, and increase of infection risk. [6]
- Pregnant sea workers face extra risks for their health and wellness during the pregnancy, such as: exposition to dangerous substances, edemas, varicose veins, forced positions and difficulties to manage physical demands and handling loads, risk of abortion, preterm birth, and new-born with low weight. [7] [5]
- Sometimes, these workers lack of enough information and education about sexual and reproductive health that might lead to not using the adequate health resources. [8]
- Menopause is a natural stage in women´s lives that indicates the end of the reproductive capacity, and it is associated to hormonal and physical changes in the body. Regarding

the shellfish catchers, menopause may have several implications for their health and wellness:

- The stifling sensations, changes in the mood, sleep disturbances, and vaginal atrophy can affect their ability to carry out their job in an efficient and safe way, especially on those working environments with bad climate conditions or demanding physical activities.
- Menopause is associated with a decrease in estrogen levels, which might have a negative impact on bone-related health. Sea workers, especially those overtaking hard physical conditions, are more likely to have bone-related health issues. [9]
- During menopause, women are more likely to develop cardiovascular diseases. Sea workers, that usually encounter demanding and overwhelming working conditions (poaching, closed gathering season, and climate), are exposed to additional risk factors like work-related stress, bad food hygiene. [10]

As main limitations to the investigation presented in this paper, it is underlined the selection bias, as the interviewed women were already interested in this issue when attending the commented Conference. The sample was not probabilistic, and of convenience for being the most easily reachable candidates. This means that the sample is not highly representative, as it does not catch all the heterogeneity associated to these phenomena.

The purposes of this paper referring to the understanding of the impact in the health that the biological cycle has on the shellfish catchers, and the identification of the possible risks they face, have been accomplished. The graphics prove how these women suffer from the malaises present in the different stages of the women's life cycle, which are expanded because of the hard conditions associated to their working site. Pre-menstrual symptoms, cramps, cycle irregularities and good control over menstrual hygiene affect their wellness and quality of life. Pregnancy constitutes a special vulnerability period that must be protected, and the menopause is a stage in life that can have an impact in the life of shellfish catchers, due to changes in osseous, cardiovascular and mental health, among others.

As final conclusions, it can be deduced:

- It is fundamental to take suitable measures to protect the health and wellness of women sea workers in relation to their biological cycles.
- It is important that the sea workers in different stages of life have a suitable access to health resources for a correct use and monitoring of symptoms.
- Health education about women biological cycles is basic: information about anatomy and physiology of menstrual cycle, the importance of an appropriate hygiene, control over common symptoms, as well as the promotion of a positive and non-stigmatized attitude toward menstruation and women's health in general.
- The existence of suitable programs and policies regarding the health of women sea workers in relation to their biological cycles is very important. This can include the implementation of gender equality policies in the fishing sector.

Each one of the conclusions is liable to specific investigation areas. Women's biological phenomena, and its repercussion in health, and other aspects of life, are issues that have little scientific background, and, above all, women sea workers.

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