

Socio-psychological Constructs of Premarital Sex Behavior among Adolescent Girls in India

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ABSTRACT

Background

Like most contemporary societies, there are growing evidence of increase in premarital sex activities among adolescents in India. It is feared that it is;

- leading to increase in spread of HIV/AIDS among adolescents,
- increase in unwanted pregnancies which ends up in unsafe abortions, and
- giving rise to conflict between contemporary social values.

Against the backdrop of relatively lower levels of knowledge for reproductive and sexual health among adolescents, their poor access to health care and social norms against premarital sex, these implications may acquire threatening dimensions for the society and the nation. To respond to this situation, it is desirable to understand the social, psychological and cultural constructs, attributes and dynamics of premarital sex behavior among adolescents. This paper discuss some of these issues in the context of adolescent girls in India.

Methods

The paper drew on data from an operations research study carried out by the author with the financial assistance from Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, during the years 2001-4. The empirical data were collected from 16 randomly selected rural and urban localities of Ajmer district in Rajasthan. A systematic random sampling procedure was employed to select the respondents. The number of adolescent girls (13-19 years age group) interviewed was 614. The sample was drawn proportionately to rural- urban residence and schooling status of respondents. A series of qualitative data were also collected with the help of focus group discussions and case studies.

Results

The study shows that premarital sex relationships are not uncommon among teenage boys and girls in India. Even in a small, less developed district like Ajmer, the proportion of girls reporting premarital sex relationships (23.3 per cent) was as large as in large cities of India. This phenomenon is not confined to urban areas alone. Further, in most cases, relationships are established within the known circles (friends or relatives).

With respect to the macro background characteristics, higher sexual activities were noted among urban residing, out of school and employed adolescent girls.

S. No.	Characteristic	Percent adolescent girls maintaining sex relationships with boys
1.	Residence a. Urban b. Rural	25.2 20.9
2.	Schooling status a. Attending b. Not attending	17.4 31.6
3.	Employment status a. Employed b. Not working	36.0 21.6

Available research also indicates that the social pressures for normative behavior are relatively more diluted in these groups. At micro level, peer image and behavior (friends have physical relationships with boys) have emerged as most significant influencing factors in promoting premarital sex relationship. Exposure to television or other media was almost universal and as such its selective influence over the pre marital sex behavior could not be established.

S. No.	Characteristic	Percent adolescents maintaining sex relationships with girls
1.	Friends have physical relationships with boys a. Yes b. No	84.4 24.8
2.	Watch television every day a. Yes b. No	24.3 21.6

In the Indian socio cultural milieu, girls are often less endowed (than boys) in access to parental love, schools, opportunities for self development and freedom of movement. It has argued that their retaliation/lack of care may manifest in the form physical relationships with opposite sex. Though the data reflect a trend, it is not conclusive.

S.No.	Experienced gender discrimination at home in relation to	Percent among adolescent girls maintaining sex relationships	Percent among other adolescent girls
1.	Parental love	16.1	25.0
2.	Opportunities for education and self development	45.4	38.8
3.	Freedom of movement	74.1	66.4

Misconceptions about sex, sexuality and sexual health were large. However, adolescents having sex relationships were somewhat better informed about the sources of spread of STDs and HIV/AIDS. Further, though over 40.0 per cent of sexually active girls were aware of usage of condoms as a preventive measure against pregnancy and HIV/AIDS, only 10.5 per cent of them have actually used a condom during their last sexual act.

Discussion

The study clearly brings into focus the attributes of risk behavior. Lack of schooling, peer pressure and misconceptions about sex and sexuality are some of the most prominent ones. Bridging the gap between knowledge and practice

particularly with respect to the use of condom has emerged as a major *behavior change communication* challenge to reduce the adolescents' vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancies.