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Romance and sex before marriage among young women and men in Maharashtra

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Romance and sex before marriage among young women and men in Maharashtra

PRE-MARITAL PARTNERSHIPS AMONG YOUTH, INCLUDING THOSE THAT DO NOT involve sexual relations, are widely discouraged in India. Indeed, there is a widespread perception that youth do not find opportunities to mix and form romantic relationships, and that pre-marital sex is negligible. These kinds of perceptions are often cited to argue against the provision of sexuality or family life education and sexual and reproductive health services to unmarried young people.

While several small and unrepresentative studies have noted that sizeable proportions of young people, particularly young men, are sexually active before marriage,^{a b c d e f} the lack of rigorous and representative evidence on the levels and patterns of intimate partnerships among youth continues to hamper designing of appropriate policies and programmes to address youth sexual health needs.

The study

Data are drawn from the *Youth in India: Situation and Needs* study, a sub-nationally representative study undertaken for the first time in India of key transitions experienced by young people in six states of India. The study included a representative survey of young people in both rural and urban settings. Respondents included unmarried women and men and married women aged 15–24 and, in

view of the paucity of married men in these ages, married men aged 15–29.

In Maharashtra, the survey was conducted in 2006. A total of 7,570 married and unmarried young women and men were interviewed in the survey. These included 1,947 married young women, 2,541 unmarried young women, 1,065 married young men and 2,017 unmarried young men.

Acknowledging that young people may have been reluctant to disclose pre-marital sexual experiences, the Youth Study included a number of approaches to elicit data on sexual behaviour. Questions were posed both in a face-to-face interview format as well as an anonymous format in which youth were asked to mark a blank card indicating whether or not they had ever experienced pre-marital sex, place the card in an envelope, seal it and return it to the interviewer. Envelopes were opened only at the study headquarters. In addition, youth were also asked to report, anonymously, the pre-marital sexual experiences of their same-sex peers.

Opportunities to form pre-marital romantic relationships do exist for young people

Despite socio-cultural taboos, findings indicate that opportunities to form pre-marital romantic relationships did exist for young people. Findings suggest that 30% of young

^a Abraham, L. 2001. Redrawing the *lakshman rekha*: Gender differences and cultural constructions in youth sexuality in urban India, *South Asia* 24:133–156.

^b Abraham, L. 2002. *Bhai-behen*, true love, time pass: Friendships and sexual partnerships among youth in an Indian metropolis, *Culture, Health, and Sexuality* 4(3):337–353.

^c Abraham, L. and K.A. Kumar. 1999. Sexual experiences and their correlates among college students in Mumbai city, India, *International Family Planning Perspectives* 25(3):139–146.

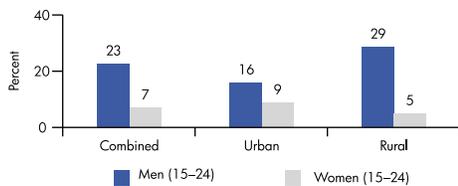
^d Alexander, M., L. Garda, S. Kanade et al. 2006a. *Formation of Partnerships among Young Women and Men in Pune District, Maharashtra*. New Delhi: Population Council.

^e Alexander, M., L. Garda, S. Kanade et al. 2006b. Romance and sex: Pre-marital partnership formation among young women and men, Pune district, India, *Reproductive Health Matters* 14(28):144–155.

^f Awasthi, S., M. Nichter and V.K. Pande. 2000. Developing an interactive STD prevention programme for youth: Lessons from a north Indian slum, *Studies in Family Planning* 31(2):138–150.

men and 24% of young women had either been approached by or had approached a person of the opposite sex to form a romantic liaison. Moreover, 23% of young men and 7% of young women acknowledged the experience of a romantic partnership before marriage. Where romantic relationships occurred, they were usually hidden from parents but not from peers. Among those who had experienced a pre-marital romantic partnership, over 80% of young men and women reported that their peers were aware of their relationship; however, only 18% of young men and 44% of young women reported that their parents were aware of their relationship.

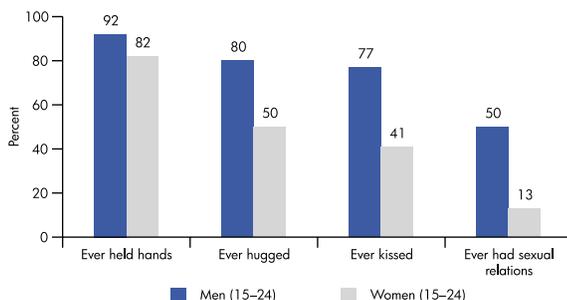
Extent of pre-marital romantic relationships: percentage of youth who reported a romantic partner



The majority of young men and women who reported a pre-marital romantic partnership had engaged in a range of intimate behaviours with the romantic partner, from holding hands to kissing on the lips to sexual intercourse. Over 90% of young men and 80% of young women had held hands with a romantic partner; however, consistently fewer reported each progressively more intimate behaviour, including hugging, kissing and engaging in sex.

Findings also show that young men and women entered pre-marital relationships with

Progression of physical intimacy among youth who reported pre-marital romantic partnerships

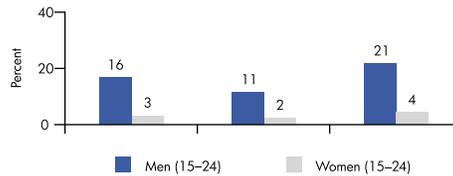


differing expectations. Young women were considerably more likely than young men to have expected a romantic relationship to lead to marriage. Of those who reported a pre-marital romantic relationship, nearly all young women (94%) compared to 59% of young men intended to marry their romantic partner.

Engaging in sex before marriage is not unknown

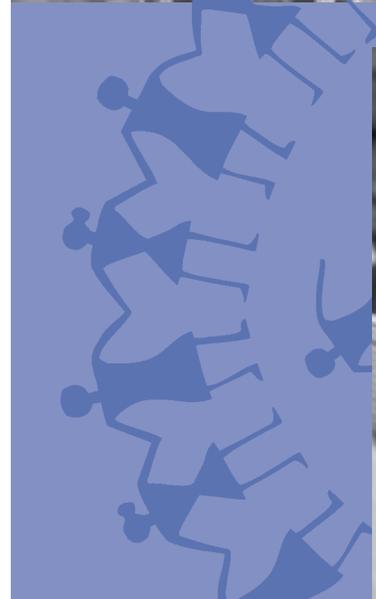
The Youth Study inquired about pre-marital sex both with romantic partners and in other situations, for example, casual, paid and forced. Findings indicate that sizeable proportions of young men (16%) and few young women (3%) had engaged in pre-marital sex within romantic and/or other partnerships. Rural youth were twice as likely as their urban counterparts to have experienced pre-marital sex (21% of young men and 4% of young women in rural areas compared to 11% and 2%, respectively, in urban areas) and more likely to report sexual experiences with a variety of partners.

Extent of pre-marital sexual experiences among youth



Pre-marital sex is initiated in adolescence for significant minorities of young men

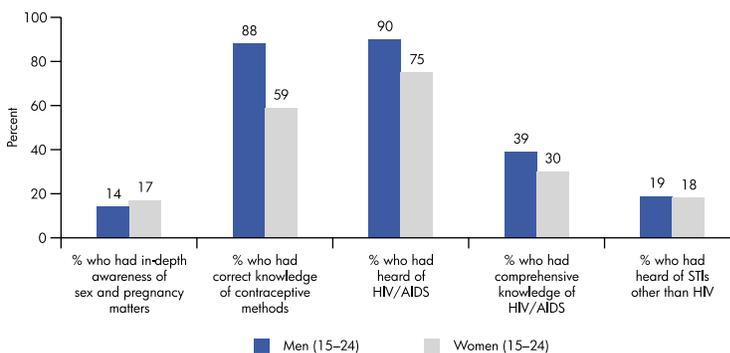
First pre-marital sex took place earlier among young men than young women. Twelve percent of young men had experienced first pre-marital sex in adolescence. In comparison,





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Of those who experienced pre-marital sex, percentage of youth who reported in-depth awareness of sexual matters



3% of young women had initiated pre-marital sexual relations in adolescence. Rural young men were three times as likely as urban young men to have experienced pre-marital sex in adolescence (18% of rural young men compared to 5% of urban young men). Even though very few young women had ever had pre-marital sex, rural young women were twice as likely as urban young women to have experienced pre-marital sexual relations in adolescence (4% of rural young women compared to 2% of urban young women).

Many young people initiate pre-marital sex uninformed

Findings also confirm that many young people had initiated sexual activity uninformed. For example, just 14% of young men and 17% of young women who were sexually experienced before marriage reported in-depth awareness of sex and pregnancy matters, including the fact that a woman is most likely to get pregnant if she has sex half-way between her periods and a woman can get pregnant at first sex.

In-depth awareness of contraceptive methods was also somewhat limited, particularly among sexually experienced young women. While 88% of young men who were sexually experienced before marriage were aware of the correct use of at least one modern contraceptive method, only 59% of young women knew about correct use of a contraceptive method.

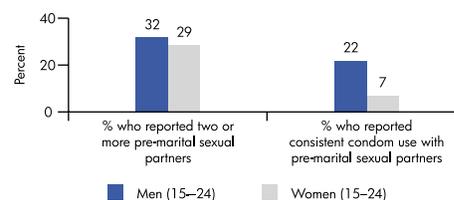
While the majority of sexually experienced young men and women had heard of HIV (no less than three-quarters), only 39% of young

men and 30% of young women reported comprehensive knowledge of HIV/AIDS. Moreover, many had never heard of sexually transmitted infections other than HIV/AIDS. Indeed, only about one in five sexually experienced young men and women had ever heard of Sexually transmitted infections

Pre-marital sex is not always safe

Findings show that where pre-marital sex was experienced, it was by and large unsafe. Of those who were sexually experienced before marriage, 32% of young men had sex with two or more partners. While few young women reported that they had engaged in pre-marital sexual relations, 29% of these young women reported multiple partners. Consistent condom use was also limited. Among youth who had experienced pre-marital sex, only 22% of young men and 7% of young women reported that they had always used a condom.

Of those who experienced pre-marital sex, percentage of youth who reported multiple partnerships and consistent condom use



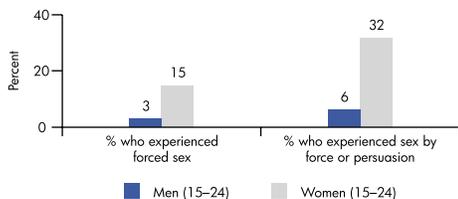
Pre-marital sex is not always consensual

Pre-marital sexual experiences were non-consensual for substantial minorities of young people, particularly young women. Of those who had engaged in pre-marital sexual relations, 3% of young men and 15% of young women reported that they were forced



to engage in sex. As many as 6% of young men and 32% of young women reported that they were either persuaded or forced to engage in sex.

Of those who experienced pre-marital sex, percentage of youth who reported non-consensual sexual experiences



Programme recommendations

Findings presented above clearly highlight that that many young people in Maharashtra had engaged in sex before marriage, and that many of them had initiated sexual activities uninformed, had engaged in unsafe relations and/or had experienced unwanted relations. Policies and programmes can no longer assume that pre-marital sex does not exist in our culture; rather they must ensure that sexual relations, should they occur, are informed, safe and wanted. Several steps are urgently needed.

Provide family life or sex education for those in school and out of school

Youth must be equipped with information ranging from physical maturation, relationship matters, risk and protective sexual behaviours (including the role of condoms) to sources of information, counselling and services. Sex and family life education programmes are needed that build awareness in ways that meet the needs of both those in school and out of school, responding to, rather than obfuscating, their questions on sexual health. Such information will allow youth to better assess whether to delay sexual relations, on the one hand, and to ensure that relations, if undertaken, are safe, on the other.

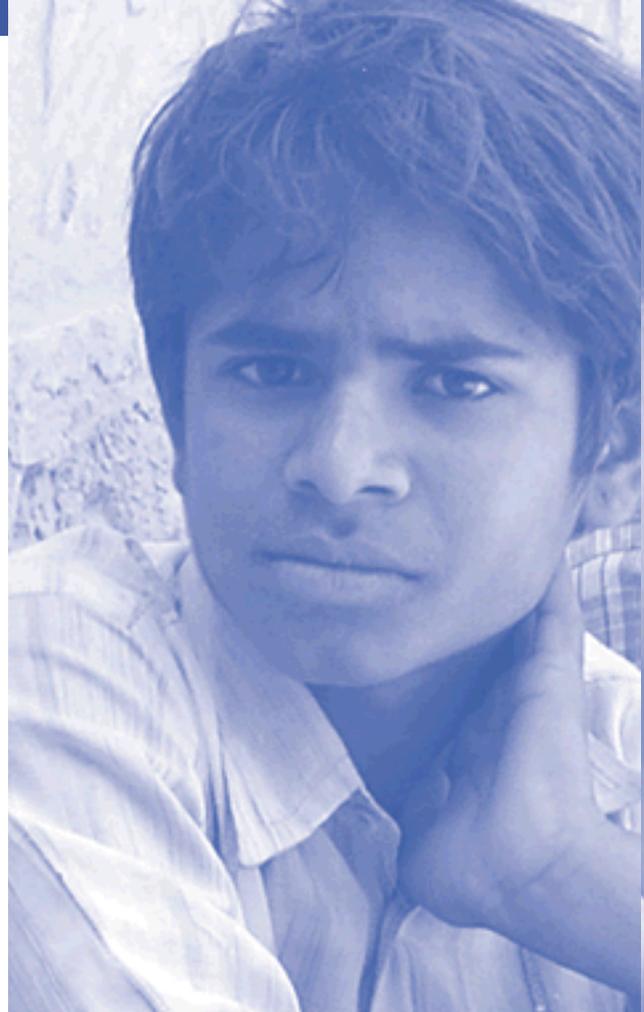
Enable young people to acquire life skills

Equally important is the acquisition of life skills that enable youth to put information into practice. Findings underscore the need for programmes that focus on building young people's skills in negotiating safe sex and communicating with partners, and that encourage young people to break down gender stereotypes and relate to each other as equals.

Reorient service provision to address the sexual and reproductive health needs of unmarried youth

At the same time, programmes must make available appropriate family planning and infection prevention services for unmarried young men and women in a manner acceptable to them. The National Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health strategy of the Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) programme has recognised the need to address the needs of the unmarried; however, much remains to be done in Maharashtra in terms of reorienting providers to include the unmarried in the ambit of services provided and to shed their own misgivings about addressing the needs of sexually active unmarried youth.

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