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Sexual risk behaviours,
perceptions and norms
among unmarried
adolescents: evidence
from case studies



Risk behaviour and misperceptions among low-income college students of Mumbai

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Background

Sexual behaviour studies of unmarried youth in India estimate that 19-28% of young men and 1-9% of young women have had (penetrative) sexual experience (Family Planning Association of India, n.d.; Watsa, 1993; Goparaju, 1993; Bhende, 1994; Rangaiyan, 1996; Abraham, 1998; Jejeebhoy, 1998). These studies indicate that premarital sex among young men is not as rare as commonly believed, while it continues to be comparatively rare among young women. Gender differences in sexual behaviour are not merely the result of over-reporting by men and under-reporting by women, but rather are the outcome of a sexual ideology that promotes male sexuality and controls female sexuality in India (Abraham, 1999). Studies have reported that young people form a significant segment of those attending sexually transmitted infection (STI) clinics and those infected by HIV (AIDS Research and Control Organisation, 1995; National AIDS Control Organisation, 1994; Ramasubban, 1992; Urmil et al., 1989); it is, therefore, important to understand the risk behaviour of young men and women. This article discusses data on sexual behaviour gathered among unmarried, low-income youth attending college in Mumbai during 1996-1998.

Methods

As sexual behaviour studies tend to focus on English-speaking students of 'elite' colleges, our study aimed to gather data from low-income students. The study was conducted in and around the premises of four colleges with co-ed, low-income student bodies. The colleges included both higher secondary (Junior College) and undergraduate courses (Senior College) in the arts, science and commerce streams. The sample consisted of students in their first year of higher secondary, who had just entered college, as well as students in their third year of Senior College, who had spent a minimum of four years in college. A majority of juniors were aged 16-18, and a majority of seniors were aged 20-22. This study design was chosen to ensure coverage of students with and without sexual experience.

In the first phase, researchers gathered qualitative data through focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews with students from two of the four colleges. In the second phase, they conducted a survey among students from the other two colleges. A total of 75 students distributed in 10 groups took part in the FGDs, and each group participated in at least two 1- 1½ hour sessions. The FGDs explored students' social interaction, views on marriage, partners and premarital sex,

sexual experiences and sources of information. The FGDs were followed by in-depth interviews with 87 students to gain more detailed information about their personal views and experiences. The qualitative data gathered in the first phase were used to design the structured, self-administered questionnaire, which was applied among a representative sample of boys and girls from the two classes mentioned. The final sample consisted of 966 students (625 boys and 341 girls). Researchers made the questionnaire available in both English and Marathi, the local language.

As stated above, the students in our study belonged to families of low socioeconomic background. The families lived in poor and crowded living conditions, very often in single-room tenements located in slums. The students belonged to different religious and ethnic groups. For instance, one college had a sizeable Muslim population, while the remaining three had a majority of Hindu students from various middle and lower castes. Students from middle class families constituted a minority in all four colleges. The students did not consider themselves to be “very religious”, but considered their families to be “religious”.

Key findings

Mixed sex peer groups were not common, and fewer girls than boys said they were members of mixed sex peer groups. However, friendships with the opposite sex can be established in different ways. Respondents distinguished three types of friendships with opposite sex peers: *bhai-behen*, ‘true love’ and ‘time pass’. *Bhai-behen* is said to be a platonic relationship; ‘true love’ is a romantic one with the intention of marriage; and ‘time pass’ is a transitory sexual relationship (Abraham, 2000). The boundaries of these categories are fuzzy, and there are times when partners perceive the relationship differently, as well as instances when *bhai-behen* is used as a cover for other types of friendship. The extent of physical intimacy varies between each type of relationship from minimal

physical intimacy (*hath masti*— ‘hitting’, ‘shaking hands’) in *bhai-behen* to sexual intercourse in ‘time pass’ relationships. In general, ‘true love’ does not involve intercourse but includes holding hands, touching, kissing and hugging.

In our study, we used the term ‘any sexual experience’ to refer to any of the following acts: kissing, hugging, touching genitals, sexual intercourse, anal or oral sex. According to FGD data, however, students did not consider kissing and hugging as ‘sexual acts’. For most students, sexual behaviour or ‘sex’ meant vaginal intercourse, or oral and anal sex. Many students also considered ‘touching’ sex organs or being ‘touched’ by the opposite sex as a sexual act.

The survey data showed that many boys and girls had engaged in sexual acts of varying degrees of physical intimacy, but there were marked gender differences. While “any sexual experience” was reported by nearly half the boys (49%), only 26% reported sexual (vaginal) intercourse. Comparatively fewer girls reported either “any sexual experience” (13%) or sexual intercourse (3%) (Table 1).

Sexual partners of girls were peers, either as ‘true love’ or ‘time pass’ partners. Girls tended to be monogamous, except in some instances of ‘time pass’ relationships. Boys’ sexual partners included peers (as both ‘time pass’ and ‘true love’ partners), commercial sex workers (CSWs) and older women, whom they called ‘aunties’. Boys not only engaged in multiple partnerships but also explored different types of sex through these partnerships (Abraham, 1999). The sexual networks of boys depended on opportunities to meet different partners, peer influence, personal income, erotic exposure and leisure time available. The qualitative data showed five sets of sexual partnerships among boys, including: 1) only CSWs; 2) only ‘time pass’ partners; 3) ‘true love’ partners and CSWs; 4) ‘time pass’ partners, aunties and CSWs; and 5) a ‘true love’ partner. Except for the last category, which was the only reported monogamous relationship, all were multiple partner relationships, either

Table 1. Sexual experience of boys and girls

	Boys (N=625)		Girls (N=341)	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Any sexual experience*				
Never	294	47	284	83.3
Ever	308	49.3	43	12.6
No response	23	3.7	14	4
Sexual intercourse				
Never	453	72.5	323	95
Ever	165	26	10	3
No response	7	1	8	2
Oral sex				
Never	500	80	324	95
Ever	105	17	9	3
No response	20	3	8	2
Anal sex				
Never	567	91	330	97
Ever	38	6	3	1
No response	20	3	8	2

* Includes kissing, hugging, touching genitals, sexual intercourse, anal or oral sex.

serially monogamous or simultaneous partnerships.

Survey and interview data showed that most boys had basic information regarding condoms; however, this knowledge did not lead to consistent condom use. Condom use and risk perception varied depending on the type of partner, the type of sex and the circumstances of the sexual experience. Among boys who had sexual intercourse, about 52% never used condoms with their “regular” partner, and 56% never used condoms with “casual” partners. Among those with multiple partners, none reported consistent condoms use with all partners (Table 2).

During interviews, boys said that they were more likely to use condoms with CSWs than with girlfriends or ‘aunties’. Survey data suggest that sex worker contacts were probably under-reported by boys. Of the 29 boys who reported a CSW contact, 13 reported condom use at least once in these contacts; however, they were — in fact — less likely to report regular condom use than boys engaging in sex with girlfriends or other casual partners. Qualitative data suggest that boys did not use condoms in the first few instances of sex with CSWs. Their first experience was often

unplanned and occurred under peer pressure. At that moment, condoms were not foremost on the youth’s mind as much as fear of sex itself and fear of being found out by the family. However, in a few instances, the CSW insisted on condom use, and some boys reported that the brothels supplied the condoms. Condom use reportedly increased with

Table 2. Frequency of condom use among male students who reported sexual intercourse, by type of partner (N=165)

Frequency of condom use	Number	Per cent
Regular partner (N=165)		
Never	85	52
Once	24	15
Sometimes	20	12
Always	20	12
No response	16	10
Casual partner (N=165)		
Never	94	57
Once	12	7
Sometimes	17	10
Always	21	13
No response	21	13
CSWs/Call girls (N=29)		
Never	0	0
Once	13	45
Sometimes	4	14
Always	0	0
No response	12	41

Table 3. Reasons for non use of condoms among boys (N=125)

Reason	Number	Per cent
Not aware of condom	20	16
Sex suddenly happened	26	21
Condom reduces pleasure	19	15
Partner married, it is her responsibility	6	5
Condom not available	6	5
Feel shy to buy	7	6
Partner insisted not to use	2	2
Do not know how to use a condom	10	8
No response	29	23

subsequent experiences with CSWs, mainly out of fear of AIDS.

The survey explored boys' reasons for not using condoms (Table 3). Of the 125 boys who reported not using condoms, just over 23% did not give any reason. Others said that "sex suddenly happened" (21%), they were "not aware of condoms" (16%), or "condom reduces pleasure" (15%). Qualitative data suggest that low use of condoms could be due to situational factors, lack of information — particularly at the time of first sexual experience — and low risk perception associated with certain kinds of sexual partners.

Young men did not fear infection from sex with peers, although they did fear pregnancy. Sexual intercourse was rare in 'true love' relationships, and if it occurred, young people generally took precautions against pregnancy. Condom use in 'time pass' relationships was inconsistent. Boys said that they generally planned sex within a 'time pass' relationship and used condoms for fear of pregnancy, unless "sex suddenly happened" or they "got an unexpected chance for sex". Boys considered sex with 'aunties' to be the least risky, since the woman initiated the relationship and — in their view — was responsible for contraception. As a result, boys did not usually use condoms, according to focus group discussion data from third-year boys. They did not report using condoms during oral or anal sex with other males (though there were very few cases reported); nor did most boys think it was necessary to use condoms during oral or anal sex. In general, students did

not have information about the potential risks of HIV/AIDS from unprotected sexual relationships with another male.

More than half the students who engaged in sex did not perceive any risk of contracting STIs, including HIV. This seemed to reflect ignorance about STIs as well as different perceptions of risk from different types of relationships. Boys who were not sexually active considered those who were active to be "at risk" and those who were sexually active considered those who visited CSWs to be "at risk". Some younger students mentioned sexual abstinence before marriage and avoiding certain partners such as CSWs or 'time pass' friends as effective measures of protection against HIV. Girls seemed to believe that abstaining from premarital sex not only preserved their *izzat* (honour) and ensured marital bliss, but also provided insurance against HIV. Projecting risks onto others and believing oneself to be immune from risks could increase their vulnerability to STIs by making young people less likely to take preventive measures against possible infection.

Conclusions

About one-fourth of boys in this particular sample had engaged in risky premarital sex, and their sexual networks included multiple partners and unsafe sex. They carried misperceptions about what constituted risky behaviour and therefore did not consider themselves at risk. Although many girls were aware that some boys had sexual relations with their peers and that some went to "red light areas", they did not perceive any risk of contracting HIV from their future partner or spouse. However, as long as boys continue to have unprotected sex within multiple, transitory relationships, including relationships with 'aunties', 'time pass' friends and CSWs, they are at risk of contracting STIs, including HIV, and are likely to pass on the infection to their spouse or other partners.

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