

Early sexual debut with older partners in India: Determinants and associated reproductive health risks

Over the past decade, sexual activity between young teens and older partners has become a legal and policy issue, prompted by growing awareness of the personal and societal costs of this activity. Adolescents are vulnerable to sexual manipulation by adults and significantly older adults. Large age differences are accompanied by wider disparities in maturity level and power dynamics among couples. For this reason significant age differences could be classified as statutory rape, as in USA. According to the Indian Penal Code, a man is said to have committed 'rape' when he has had sexual intercourse with a woman with or without her consent, when she is less than 16 years of age.

Unfortunately the fact that older husbands are also further implicated in most other negative sexual outcomes among teens, such as abortions and sexually transmitted infections (STI), including HIV/AIDS, has received virtually little discussion. Moreover there are growing evidences that the wider the age gap between partners, the more likely the relationships are to be abusive. Earlier researches have confirmed that the worldwide incidence of premature birth and low birth weight is higher among adolescent mothers. In developing countries, programs of reproductive health aimed at teenagers are often small scale and not centrally coordinated. Thus, more need for such research arises due to both, a limited number of nationally representative information as well as studies exist on the characteristics of youth who had early sexual debut with an older partner and its possible consequences.

Age at first intercourse more specifically, age at consummation of marriage in the Indian context, can be viewed as a life course transition that can influence childbearing and reproductive health outcomes. Early age at marriage may have implications for the number of children and survival rate of young children; it may increase vulnerability of woman to more work and exploitation. Also the age at first birth is critical to the educational and occupational outcomes of females. In general the relationship between a younger woman and an older man is an indicator of the physical, social, psychological and economic vulnerability of the woman. Older partners are also implicated in most other negative outcomes among women arising primarily due to lower negotiating power in sexual relations and lack of control over their own sexuality, may in turn result into low use of contraception, unintended pregnancies, abortions and sexually transmitted diseases (RTIs, STIs, including HIV/AIDS) and other adverse social and psychological outcomes among the women. Perhaps age discordance is an indirect indicator of "equality" or parity between partners, as marrying a same age partner is perhaps associated with shared responsibility and greater female empowerment and male support.

Despite its prevalence, there is strikingly little information on both early sexual debut and its effects on subsequent sexual risk-taking during adolescence, as well as studies on the combination of early sexual experience with older partners and the resultant consequences. Commonly, our comprehension of early sexual experiences and adult-teen relations, what they involve, their meaning as well as their individual and social consequences is very limited and thus needs elucidation through combination of qualitative and quantitative research. Thus, the need for research arises as limited nationally representative information and studies exists on the characteristics of youth who had their

sexual debut with an older partner, at an early age. Hence the present study is an endeavor to unravel the reproductive health risks and outcomes that are possibly entailed in early sexual debut with older partners, which is yet largely neglected in the Indian context. Additionally effort is made to investigate the regional variation in threats confronted with such relationships in view of the predominance as well as diversity of such alliances in the Indian context.

The particular **objectives** of the present study are,

- To analyze the levels, trends and differentials in the prevalence and correlates of early sexual debut with older partners in India.
- To examine spousal communication, the gap between perception and behavior in terms of sexual and reproductive rights and incidence of physical and sexual violence among those women having early age at sexual union and large age gap between partners.
- To investigate the extent of association and its variation over time, between women's age at first sex and age asymmetries between partners and the negative reproductive health outcomes.
- To assess the regional variation existing among married and unmarried young women having early sexual initiation as well as its resultant health risks.

The specific **hypotheses** framed for the study are,

- Younger the age of women and age at first sex, wider is the spousal age gap.
- Age of sexual debut is lower while age asymmetries between partners are higher among rural women as compared to urban women.
- Women from low caste status and having low level of education have wider husband-wife age gap and lower age at sexual debut.
- Wider age discordance among partners is associated with lower age at first birth of women and more delay in contraceptive use.
- Women having higher spousal communication experience more autonomy and lesser incidence of violence and adverse reproductive health outcomes.
- Married women suffer more reproductive health problems than unmarried women having lower age of sexual initiation.
- Women perceiving higher sexual and reproductive rights suffer more violence and reproductive health problems.
- Having intergenerational sexual relationships (age gap of more than 10 years) at young age results in much higher incidence of adverse reproductive health outcomes.

The present study uses the large scale **data** collected in the years 1992-93 (NFHS-I) and 1998-99 (NFHS-II) for the National Family Health Survey by the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai. The NFHS covered 24 states and the National Capital Territory of Delhi, which comprises 99 percent of the total population of India, using comprehensive and sophisticated multi stage sampling techniques and survey instruments. The analysis is restricted only to currently married women aged 15-49 years. Further adolescent females from CHARCA (Coordinated HIV/AIDS Response and Capacity Building) survey has also been used to study the scenario of reproductive and sexual rights among both married and unmarried young women of age 13-24 years experiencing early sexual debut with older partners in the five selected states and to furnish a better understanding of the issues through qualitative analysis.

An older partner in the present study refers to a husband who is more than five years older than his wife while early sexual debut will signify women who had their age at first sexual union below age 18 i.e. below the legal age of marriage. The major **independent predictors** examined in the study are *women's age at first sex* (age at consummation of marriage) and *age difference with their partners*. The principal **dependent variables** include *total children ever born, age at first birth, number of children at first contraceptive use, induced abortions and symptomatic prevalence of gynecological morbidities as well as spousal communication, autonomy of women and physical and sexual violence against women* are other variables. Other predictors analyzed in the study include various family and individual demographic and socioeconomic predictors such as family structure, place of residence, religion, ethnicity, education of wife and husband, occupation of husband, socio-economic status, alcoholism and extent of reproductive and sexual rights.

For the major independent variable of interest, which is **age at sexual debut and age discordance between partners**, the sample of currently married women is divided into nine categories for analysis: (i) those who had sex at early ages, i.e. below age 16, with a partner less than six years older, (ii) with a partner six to ten years older and (iii) with a partner more than ten years older; (iv) those who had sex at age 16 and 17 with a partner less than six years older, (v) with a partner six to ten years older and (vi) with a partner more than ten years older; and (vii) those who had sex at age 18 or above with a partner less than six years older, (viii) with a partner six to ten years older and (ix) with a partner more than ten years older. The age difference between the currently married women and their husbands will be calculated by subtracting the respondent's age, in completed years at the time of survey, from the partner's age, also in completed years.

In quantitative techniques, **bi-variate** analysis have been carried out with selected background variables to analyze socio-economic and demographic characteristics of women having early sexual debut with older partners as well as subject to the risks of reproductive health problems. Employing the **multivariate** analysis, logistic regression and multivariate techniques has been used to predict the likelihood of facing reproductive health problems among women having early sex with older partners after controlling for the effect of different socio-economic and demographic variables. Additionally, qualitative data from key informant interviews and focus group discussions have also been investigated using **AtlasTi** package to provide insights to the problem issue especially existing gaps between perception and behavior regarding sexual and reproductive rights of women.

The findings are:

Around two-thirds of the Indian women are marrying below the legal age of marriage, i.e. 18 years

About 30 percent of the married women are having husbands who are more than 5 years older

Place of residence and education is significantly and positively associated with lower age of sexual initiation with older partners.

Lower age at sexual union and larger partner age gap is more prevalent among women belonging to low caste and economic status.

Women having much older partners are having lower age at first child birth.

Number of children at the time of first use of any modern contraceptive is higher among couples with larger age difference.

Overall spousal communication is very low in the Indian context but it is lesser among women having older partners which thus in turn experience lower autonomy and suffer from physical and sexual violence

Unmarried adolescents perceive higher sexual and reproductive rights, however among both married and unmarried females, large gap exists between perception and behavior in terms of their actual rights and hence suffer more sexual violence

The prevalence of reproductive morbidities, especially gynecological morbidity is much higher among women involved with much older partners.

Hence the study has significant policy implications such as effective enforcement of Child Marriage Restraint Act and statutory rape law by the government of India; prevention efforts attempted to reach teenagers and adults, to educate them about the legal and ethical implications of age differences within sexual relationships; a role for parents through communication and monitoring of teenage activities and role of service providers and communities in helping define norms of appropriate age differences between teenagers and sexual partners.