

## **Social Networking and Risk-Taking Behaviour among Young Female Migrant Workers in Urban India**

Changing labor markets with globalization have increased both opportunities and pressures for women to migrate. They move single leaving their families back home, thus nobody to fall upon in case of need. They often feel insecure and isolated at the place of destination. However, migrants being social human beings develop their own social networks and relationships, which are often non-familial and of short duration particularly among single migrants. These networks act as strong emotional support as well as determine peer group behaviour and activities, which may make them vulnerable to peer group pressure and acts. Moreover, the limited data available do little to explain the determinants of the risk-taking behaviour that resulted into infection.

The present study focuses on unmarried female migrant workers under 30 years of age residing in working women's hostels in Delhi, India – about whom little is known. The main objective of this study which was initiated in January 2005 is to explore the types of networks, identify the relative influence of social networks contributing to the risk taking behaviour (alcohol, substance use, multiple partners, and unprotected sex), knowledge and practice of safe sexual practices. The data was collected in two phases, e.g. exploratory FGDs and a quantitative survey using structured questionnaire of 362 females. Social networks which may exert impact on the behaviour of the migrants have been conceptualized as the networks developed at the place of destination.

Findings suggest that majority of the migrants in Delhi (83 percent) were from cities or towns. Only about one-third of the respondents have migrated from bigger cities mainly Lucknow, Kanpur, Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chandigarh, Amritsar, Kolkata, Jaipur, Patna, and Pune. More than one-third of the migrants were from Uttar Pradesh (31 percent) and Uttaranchal (11 percent). More than half of the respondents were in the age-groups 23-25 (52 percent). Eleven percent were less than 22 years of age. Around 22 percent of the respondents got help from their friends in coming to Delhi and around 18

percent in getting a job. Majority of them (72 percent) got jobs in their friend's office or through the person well known to their friend. More than half of the respondents were staying in Delhi for the last 2-4 years.

Peer influence takes various forms such as attending late night parties, visiting discos, videos, church groups, clubs, bars which lead to their involvement in risk behaviour in the form of smoking, taking alcohol, substance use and having premarital sex. Around 45 percent of the girls were engaged atleast in one such type of activities. Out of them 20 percent were already maintaining the similar lifestyle at their place of origin. Majority of such girls belong to bigger cities. Around 60 percent of the girls after getting the exposure to urbanized lifestyles, tried to adopt their friend's or colleagues lifestyle like wearing western outfits, expensive cosmetics and jewellery, maintaining rich boy friends, acquiring expensive items like ipods, mobiles, home theatre, computer, traveling in luxury cars, visiting expensive hotels, discos, clubs and bars. And incidentally majority of such girls migrated from smaller towns or cities like Muradabad, Meerut, Bareilly, Bulandsahar, Dehradun and others. Another 20 percent were forced to take up such lifestyle as their work culture demanded them to maintain a lavish lifestyle. A substantial proportion did not change their lifestyle even after they have lived in the city for a long time. They attribute this to enclosed nature of the social network which limits their exposure to urbanized lifestyles.

Nearly 30 percent of the respondents had sexual experience. Around 70 percent of them had sex with only one partner. Love and curiosity were common motivations for having sex. Out of them 40 percent were maintaining a romantic (may or may not be engaged in sexual intercourse) and steady relationship (planning to marry in the near future) for the last 3-4 years since their place of origin. Another 60 percent got engaged after reaching Delhi. The time from beginning a relationship to engaging in sexual activity tends to be quite short in this sample. Precisely the reasons can be that in Delhi they are away from their parents and families and so they are relatively free to indulge into sex. Majority of the girls had sex out of to their own choice but still many of them showed apprehension about their partners that they will not keep their promise and only use the argument to

persuade them to participate in a sexual encounter. 20 percent of them had sex with their peers, colleagues or boss because of material or monetary gain i.e., promotion, money or gifts. A substantial proportion reported discussing sex during evenings in the hostel, which, in turn, produces a desire for sex. Around 10 percent of them had sex with multiple partners.

Younger women tended to have partner of their social group, while older women generally had a relationship with a wealthy man in expectation of good job, promotion or making quick money. Focus group interviews throw light on young women's criteria for choosing a partner and the importance of having a partner. Many of them stressed the advantage of having a partner; they may help in their day to day activities, office work, they also said that intellectual compatibility enables an exchange of ideas and many more. They also believed that if the partners are sexually inexperienced, they exert little pressure on their partners to have intercourse. While they also admitted that if a relationship lasts for a long period of time, intercourse is likely to occur eventually.

The findings also indicate that migrants who watch pornographic material, late night movies, English music channels and adult movies are more likely to experiment and practice sex in their life. Some of the respondents say that they are influenced by the way film stars wear clothes, their hair, their life style. This leads them to aspire high and ultimately involving them in risky sexual behaviour like keeping multiple sex partner in exchange of money so that they can fulfill their desire of maintaining a lavish lifestyle.

On an average, young women reported that their partners were 3.5 years older than them according to the explanations provided in the focus groups; a relationship with an older partner is not the preferred choice for young women. Young women accept a few years age difference, but they do not want their partner to be much older, for fear that such a relationship will destroy their youth and contribute to early aging.

Among girls who were engaged in sexual activities, 42 percent reported having used the condom, 11 percent pills and 47 percent had never used any method for safe sex or were not sure whether their partners used any method.

In the present study quite a few percentage of women have reported about premarital pregnancy and abortions as they were hesitant to talk about these issues but a substantial percentage of women reported suffering from at least one sexual health problem. Irritation around genitals, pain in the vagina, low back ache, pain in lower abdomen not related to menses and itching over vulva are the most common sexual health problems reported by majority (75 percent) of women, followed by swelling in the groin and difficulty/pain while urinating (25 percent).

From this discussion one can definitely say that the sexual norms and practices of these migrants are mostly guided by the permissive attitude and practices of their friends.