

Sexual Behavior and Substance Use among Young People in Nepal: What Roles Do Families Play?

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Background

Increase in age at marriage, education, employment and migration have transformed the attitudes and behaviours of young people in many countries including Nepal. Young people have better access to education and health facilities especially in the urban areas now compared to the previous decades. Educated youth are increasingly involved in community programs from local to national level. However, existing traditional norms and social taboos of the Nepali society require young people to constantly negotiate such norms along with the changing attitudes of their own peers. A large body of literature has revealed that despite cultural restrictions and taboos, young people are increasingly indulged in sexual experiences or substance use.

Recent surveys in Nepal report higher levels of sexual behaviour or sexual risk behaviour compared to those published in the early 2000s. The Nepal Adolescent and Youth Adult (NAYA) (Dahal et al., 2005) and the Teenage Survey (UNICEF, 1999) were pioneer studies conducted among a large sample of young people in the late 1990 and early 2000 in Nepal. The NAYA survey interviewed young people aged 14-22 years, including both married and unmarried. The survey shows that only eight per cent of the single men and 85 per cent of the married men reported being sexually active (Dahal et al, 2005). In the Teenage Survey among unmarried young people, 22 per cent of the boys were found to be having sexual intercourse. The proportion of young men who reported sexual behaviour has always been higher among men compared to women especially in the two Nepal Demographic and Health Surveys (NDHS). About 17 per cent of unmarried men in the 2006 NDHS and 41 per cent in the 2011 survey reported sexual intercourse (Khatiwada et al, 2013). In the most recent survey among

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young people, sexual intercourse was reported by one in five unmarried young men and very few unmarried women respondents (2%) (MoHP, 2012). College-going youths and factory workers reported different prevalence of sexual behaviour. About 20 per cent of male and 12 per cent of female carpet factory workers reported having sexual intercourse (Puri and Cleland, 2005). Around half of the college going male youths (47%) were reported to have sexual intercourse (Adhikari and Tamang, 2009).

Studies on substance use in the past have always focussed on injecting drug use as this category of people have been categorised as risk takers in the programs focusing on HIV/AIDS. Very few studies look at other forms of substance use among young people. Existing research highlight that peer influence or family background often instigate or prevent young people from taking decisions which may lead to risk behaviour. However, these studies offer little explanation about how such influences work in a particular context, for instance, in the context of Nepal. Therefore, this paper will examine the influences families in the sexual behaviour and substance use of young people in Nepal.

Data and Methods

This paper employs mixed methods using data obtained from a national survey conducted by the Ministry of Health and Population in 2010. A total of 14500 young people aged 10-24 years were interviewed across the country. This paper analyses results obtained from the interviews conducted with 8153 young people aged 15-24 years (MoHP, 2012). In addition, the paper also draws on a qualitative study carried out with young people aged 20-24 in Kathmandu, Nepal between June and November 2013. As part of the qualitative study, focus group discussions were conducted separately with young men and women while in-depth interviews were conducted with two peer groups. Written consent was obtained from all the participants. The interviews and group discussions were carried out in Nepali language and later translated into English. The findings of the qualitative study will also be discussed along with the survey results.

Results

Findings from the survey show that premarital sexual intercourse was reported by one in three men aged 20-24 years (28%) and 14 per cent men aged 15-19 years. A negligible proportion of women reported premarital sex. The substance use variable was examined by combining variables such as use of alcohol, smoking of cigarette and the different drugs such as marijuana, brown sugar and injectables. Nearly two thirds of men aged 20-24 years (62%) had experience of using substance use. This proportion was slightly lower among those aged 15-19 years (39%). Among the young women, only 15 per cent aged 20-24 used atleast one form of substance use.

Logistic regression for sexual behaviour was carried out only among the young men due to very few proportions of women reporting premarital sex. The preliminary findings suggests that among young men in Nepal, those who were of older ages, educated, employed, living in urban areas and married were more likely to have ever had premarital sex. Caste and ethnicity was significantly associated with premarital sex. Parental control was measured in three ways: three different variables: permission required to go out of the house, amount of information given to parent on friends and parents reaction when they come home late. Only those who gave all information on their friends were less likely to have premarital sex and was statistically significant.

Logistic regression analysis shows that age, education, residence, employment and caste/ethnicity was statistically significant with substance use among men. Unlike sexual behaviour, those who did not have to take permission and those who had given partial information on their friends were more likely to use substance use. Parents who ignored their children when they came home late were also more likely to be current substance users. Similar to men, women's age, education level, employment, residence and caste/ethnicity was significantly associated with substance use. Unlike the men, none of the parental monitoring variables were statistically significant.

The findings from the qualitative shows since sex is considered a sensitive issue, the respondents stated that such issues were not discussed with parents. Relationships with their parents, relationship between parents and monitoring of children was considered important while young people transition to adulthood. Young people especially young men stated that there should be balance between not being too strict or too lenient with children.

Conclusion

Findings suggest that although parental control and support was weak in influencing premarital sexual behaviour, it was important in terms of substance use. The relations with parents and their monitoring behaviour influenced the decisions of young people especially young men. This paper suggests that programs directed to promoting health and wellbeing of young people should involve their parents.

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