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By Mukesh Kumar Mishra

NIMS College T.U

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Determinants of Age at First Sexual Intercourse for Youths of Nepal

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Abstract—The largest number of youth population in Nepal's demographic history has drawn attention regarding their behaviours, particularly sexual behaviours. This study examines predictors of sexual behaviours of youths using the data from Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2006. Background characteristics - place of residence, level of education, ecological region, caste/ethnicity and wealth index are used as predictors of sexual behaviour. Level of education, geographical location and caste/ethnicity are found to have significant influence on sexual behaviour. But the effects are not uniform for male youths and female youths. Geographical location and family characteristics tend to have strong influence on female youths while not for male youths. Though education is important factor to influence sexual behaviour, the effect diminishes with the increase in age at first sexual intercourse. Meanwhile other factors like caste/ethnicity, geographical region become effective to determine sexual behaviours. Gendered differences in sexual practices are observed implicitly in caste/ethnic groups. Terai Hindu female youths are more likely to enter in sexual activities before or at 18 years than Hill Hindu women, on contrary to, Terai Hindu male youths who are less likely to enter in sexual activities before or at age 18 years their hill counterparts. These marked differences require attention to address the differential sexual behaviours among youths in order to ensure safer sex and sexuality.

1. BACKGROUND

The outspread bulge of youth population in global demographic composition is demanding cautious attention to focus on behaviours of youth population than ever before. The demographic indicators at the advent of 21st century show positive direction in many developing countries to facilitate the demographic transition. Fertility and mortality rates are decreasing considerably, despite few exceptions, thereby contributing to increase in life expectancy. Ages at marriage and first birth have gone up. Use of contraceptive manipulated by increasing level of education, information, health advancement, economic development and cultural transformation has become a powerful proximate determinant to guide fertility behaviours along with sexual activities. The wide spread use of contraception is claimed to have increased premarital and extra-marital sexual relationships. The increasing age at marriage, contrasting to early marriage in the past, has increased the age at first sexual

intercourse among the youths in many countries of the world, if not premarital sexual activities considered.

There are arguments that as the differential fertility or mortality or nuptiality is observed, differential sexual experiences of youth are observed, either marital or non-marital. Age at entry to sexual relationship is determined primarily by social, cultural and legal grounds on which youths are living. The differences between perceived and observed values by youths have made them experimental (Pokharel and Subedi, 2007) which paves way for sexual experimentation. Entry into first sexual union may take place within a marital union or non-marital union. In many developing countries where age at marriage is considerably lower, youths are more likely to experience sexual activities within in marital union (Bruce, 2002) than pre-marital union. But with the increase in the age at marriage, the pattern and practices of sexual activities among youths have considerably been changing. There is emerging debate whether the sexual practices are consensual within marital or non-marital union. Less attention is paid for non-consensual sexual practices in which youths are involved in (Jejeebhoy and Bott, 2005).

Youths' experiences of sexual practices are diverse and depend on many factors including one's sex, place of residence, socio-cultural context, economic circumstances and marital status (UNFPA, 2005), encircled by different social pressures - values and norms of community to which individuals belong (Billy et al., 1994) - affecting their ability to approach sexuality responsibly (UNFPA, 2000). Guided by the country specific characteristics, in some parts of the world, sexual activity begins during adolescents and often risky whether within or outside marriage (WHO, 2004). Parental characteristics, family relationships and attitudes, values and norms of the family have also been associated with sexual behaviour of youths. Gray and Steinberg (1999) argued since the family values and norms provide specific perspective on the meaning of sexuality (Ongaro, 2001, op cit.), youths design their sexual practices within the contextual framework.

The sexual experiences of male and female youth vary largely. A large proportion young females experience intercourse in marital union in contrast to

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large proportion young males experiencing in non-marital (premarital) union. The timing of sexual initiation and continuation varies widely by country and gender (UNFPA, 2000; Ghuman et al., 2006). Worldwide, a large majority of sexually experienced males aged 15-19 are unmarried compared to two-thirds or more sexually experienced females of the same age group are married. Adolescent girls who marry early are not exposed to premarital sex having the later years of adolescence when premarital sex is more likely to take place (Choe et al., 2004). Ongaro (2001) claimed that since first sexual intercourse is becoming more and more a young person's event, the family, with its (material and nonmaterial) resources, contributes to the creation of opportunities that young people have to spend on the "market" of meetings with the other sex.

1) *Youths' Sexual Behaviour in Nepal*

Alike the global demographic composition, youth population (15-24 years) comprises the highest proportion (19.38%) ever in the demographic history of Nepal (Aryal and Adhikari, 2003). Studies on sexual behaviour of youths in Nepal largely depend on the convenient sample and/or specific group of population. Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) has recently started to collect information on sexuality through nationally representative sample. Sexual activity in Nepal within married youths is common (MoH, New ERA and ORC Macro, 2002); whilst premarital sexual activity is gaining momentum (Pradhan and Strachan, 2003). The relatively lower age at marriage of girls compared to boys indicate most of the girls practice sexual activity within the marital union whereas the proportion of boys practicing sexual activity outside the marital union, particularly premarital sex, is noticeably increasing since last few years.

Sexual activity in Nepali youths is, by and large, explained by the socio-cultural and economic dimensions. Sexuality is less discussed and exposed. Despite the tremendous development of and exposure to communication media, the youth behaviours are being changed as an impact of modernization. The changes are observed markedly in urban youths than rural youths; the rural youths being not isolated of change. The median age at marriage for women was observed to be 16.6 years in 2001 which increased to 17.2 years in 2006 whereas the corresponding figures for men are 19.7 in 2001 and 20.2 years in 2006. Interestingly, the age at first sexual intercourse for females was 16.7 years in 2001 and 17.2 years in 2006 which is higher (or equal in 2006) than the median age at marriage showing that a large majority of females

practice sexual activities in marital union. But, in contrast, the age at first sexual intercourse to males was 18.8 years in 2001, nearly lower by one year than median age at marriage, and 19.6 years in 2006, nearly lower by half a year, admitting that the premarital sexual activities are taking places (MoH, New ERA and ORC Macro, 2002 and 2007). Though less discussed and researched, 15 percent of Nepali male and less than a percent female adolescents are estimated to have premarital sexual activities (Choe et. al., 2004), which is argued to increase consistently over the years.

Sexual behaviours of Nepali youths are less explored and documented. The DHS 2006 provides a few elaborated sexual behaviours of youths for the first time. The DHS 2006 confirms sexual behaviours of Nepali youths vary across the social, economic, cultural, ecological and urban-rural sub-groups. Both, median age at first marriage and age at first sexual intercourse, for example, are higher for urban youths (20-24 years age group) compared to rural youths for both males and females. The median age at first marriage for urban women (current) aged 20-24 was 19.0 years whereas the corresponding figure for rural women is two years less (17.0 years). Same discrepancy is observed for male - 23.4 years for urban men against 20.4 years for rural men with the current age 25-29 years. With more disaggregate analysis, 7.5 per cent women with current age 15-24 years reported to have sexual intercourse before age 15. The percentage increases considerably to 47 percent to women aged 18-24 who have had their first sexual intercourse by age 18. Examining the men's behaviour, a relatively lower percentage (4.0%) claimed to have sexual intercourse by the age 15 among the 15-24 years men whereas the percentage increases to 27 by the age 18 among the 18-24 years men.

The point of analysis, despite the lower percentage of youths involved in sex in earlier than 18 years compared to females, is a large proportion of men claimed to have premarital sexual practices. Nearly three per cent never married men aged 15-24 years are sexually active by age 15, the proportion increases to 13.1 per cent by the age 18 among 18-24 years never married youths. But the proportion of females is considerably low, almost less than 1 per cent (MoH, New ERA and ORC Macro, 2007).

Not only, the proportion of youths involved in premarital sexual activity is increasing, they are equally practicing risky sexual activities. The same survey disclosed that use of condom among youths during the first sexual intercourse is considerably low. Only 5.3 per cent women of age group 15-24 who have ever had

sexual intercourse admitted to have used condom in the first sexual intercourse but the corresponding figure is higher for men, 25.7 per cent. Condom use pattern is higher for urban youths, youths having SLC and above level of education and from higher income quintile. Nearly half of the never married youths who have had sex did not use condom in the first sexual intercourse (MoH, New ERA and ORC Macro, 2007).

II. OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

On the grounds that along with the demographic, socio-economic, cultural and political transitions in Nepal, sexual behaviours of youths (15-24 years) are expected to be changed remarkably. Increase in the age at marriage, wide availability and accessibility of contraceptive and increasing sexually sensitive activities through different sources, many youths are thought to sexually active in fairly young age, often in premarital sexual union. This paper attempts to explore the factors that determine sexual behaviours of youths concentrating on age at entry into sexual union. Affects of background characteristics - place of residence, household income, level of education, ecological zone and caste/ethnicity - of youths on age at entry into sexual union are explored to verify against the hypothesis that background characteristics affect sexual behaviours of youths.

III. DATA AND METHODS

2) Data

The study is concentrated to discover the determinants of age at first sexual intercourse among the Nepali youths. Youth population is defined as the population in the age group 15-24. Data from Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) 2006 are used for this analysis. The NDHS 2006 provides more disaggregated information on sexual behaviour of youths for the first time. A trend analysis is not possible while the earlier surveys largely lack information on sexuality of youths. NDHS 2006 has interviewed 10,793 women in the age group 15-49 and 4,397 men of the age group 15-59. However, this study is concerned to age group 15-24 which is characterised as youth population. The 15-24 years population is classified into two broad categories respective to objective - 15-24 and 18-24 to determine the probability of having had first sexual intercourse before or at 15 or 18 years of age respectively. The sample population included in the study, therefore comprises 4,431 women aged 15-24 and 2,916 women aged 18-24 whereas the corresponding sample for men is 1,573 for age group 15-24 and 985 for age group 18-24.

3) Methods

a) Dependent variables

For making the analysis comparable and traceable, two categories of age classification - 15 years and 18 years have been used. Based on which two groups (four categories) are formed - i) having sexual relationship earlier than or at 15 or 18 years of age (coded as '1') and ii) not having sexual relationship earlier than 15 or 18 years of age (coded as '0'), hence, forming a dichotomous dependent variable. The reasons for using 15 and 18 as classifying year are i) age 15 is used to measure the probability of having sex at early age or pre-reproductive age, ii) age 18 is, therefore, selected it is the legal age of marriage for both sexes with the consent of parents and iii) age 18 is also considered as bridge age of transition from adolescence to adulthood.

b) Independent variables

Background characteristics of individuals - sex, place of residence, level of education, ecological region of origin, caste/ethnicity and wealth index are considered as independent variables based on the results produced by NDHS 2006. As discussed earlier, age at first sexual intercourse is hypothesized to be influenced by sex of individual, place of residence (rural-urban), level of education (illiterate - SLC and above), ecological region of enumeration (Mountain, Hill and Tarai), caste/ethnicity (Hill Hindu, Tarai Hindu, Janjatis/Nationalities, Newar, Muslim and Dalits/untouchables), and wealth index (Lowest-Highest quintile). Probability of having had or not having had sexual intercourse before or at 15 or 18 years age is compared against each reference category of each background characteristic.

c) Models

Having classified the dependent variable in dichotomous form, binary logistic regression is the appropriate model to identify the relative risk of having had or not having had sex earlier than or at age 15 or 18 years. In logistic regression, the dependent variable is transformed into the natural logarithm of the odds of being in one category versus the other and the model provides estimates that fit independent variables to the logistic response function (Ongaro, 2001). Four logistic regression models are fit - each for male and female for estimating the probability of having sex before or at 15 and 18 years of age by background characteristics.

Considering the probability of having had first sexual intercourse before or at age 15 for females having certain background characteristics is expressed as:



$$P_{fsi \leq 15, f} = E \left(Y = \frac{1}{X_i + \dots + X_n} \right) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(\beta_1 + \beta_2 X_1 + \beta_3 X_3 + \dots + \beta_n X_n)}} \dots\dots\dots (1)$$

Where $P_{fsi \leq 15, f}$ is the probability of having had first sexual intercourse before or at age 15 for females with $X_i \dots\dots\dots X_n$ set of characteristics (explanatory variables).

Rewriting in logit form and replacing by the actual set of characteristic variables, the equation (1) becomes,

$$Y_i = \ln \left(\frac{P_{fsi \leq 15, f}}{1 - P_{fsi \leq 15, f}} \right) = \beta_1 + \beta_2 PR_i + \beta_3 EDU_i + \beta_4 ER_i + \beta_5 CE_i + \beta_6 WI_i + u_i \dots\dots\dots (2)$$

Where PR is place of residence, EDU is level of education, ER is ecological region of enumeration, CE is caste/ethnicity, WI is wealth index and u_i is error term.

The model specification for males having had first sexual intercourse before or at age 15 years is same like as the equation (2) when $P_{fsi \leq 15, f}$ is replaced with $P_{fsi \leq 15, m}$, which is the probability of having had first sexual intercourse before or at age 15 for males. When the reference age for having had or not having had first sexual intercourse is changed from 15 years to 18 years the other two models can be constructed in the similar procedure as equations (1) and (2).

The logit model producing the odds ratio given by:

$$\frac{P_{fsi \leq 15 \text{ or } 18, f \text{ or } m}}{1 - P_{fsi \leq 15 \text{ or } 18, f \text{ or } m}}.$$

This relation explains the probability of having had first sexual intercourse before or at age 15 or 18 for males and females which is very similar to the odds ratio obtained by $\frac{P_i}{(1-P_i)}$ - the ratio of the probability of having had to the probability of not having had first sexual intercourse before or at age 15 or 18 for both females and males.

IV. RESULTS

Results are summarized based on the four different models with each model having five explanatory variables introduced in each successive attempt, thus, forming a huge set of interactive models result. Table 1 shows the odds ratio of having had first sexual intercourse before or at age 15 or 18 years for men 15-24 and 18-24 as explained by the individual characteristics.

Table 1: Determinants of age at first sexual intercourse for male youths 15-24 and 18-24: dichotomous odds ratio

Covariates	Odds ratio for having first sexual intercourse before or at age 15 for male youths age 15-24	Odds ratio for having first sexual intercourse before or at age 18 for male youths age 18-24
Place of residence		
Rural ®		
Urban	1.340	0.845
Level of education		
No education ®		
Primary education	0.496**	0.959
Some secondary	0.450**	0.723
SLC and above	0.069***	0.375***
Ecological region		
Mountain ®		
Hill	0.924	0.609
Tarai	0.819	0.490**

Caste/ethnicity		
Hill Hindu caste ®		
<i>Anabatic</i> /Nationalities	0.667	1.099
<i>Tarai</i> /Hindu caste	0.325**	0.514**
<i>Newar</i>	1.166	0.430**
Muslim	0.994	0.901
<i>Dalits</i> (Occupational caste)	1.381	1.847**
Wealth quintile		
Lowest ®		
Second	1.424	1.214
Middle	0.882	1.063
Fourth	1.233	0.912
Highest	1.028	0.967
Nagelkerke R Square	0.100	0.146

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$

For estimating probability of having had first sexual intercourse before at age 15 or 18 for male youths aged 15-24 and 18-24 respectively, five socio-economic and spatial variables - place of residence, level of education, ecological region, caste/ethnicity and wealth quintile- are introduced. Of five covariates, level of education and caste/ethnicity are found to have partial influence for having had first sexual intercourse. For example, compared to no education, male youths (15-24 years) with some secondary (OR = 0.450, $p < 0.05$) and SLC and above (OR = 0.069, $p < 0.001$) are less likely to have first sexual intercourse before or at age 15. A similar trend is observed for male youths aged 18-24 for having had first sexual intercourse before or at age 18. Compared to male youths (18-24 years) with no education, those having SLC and above level of education are less likely to have first sexual intercourse before or at age 18. The reasons, though not known, may be speculated that increasing level education increases age at marriage which consequently increases age at first sexual intercourse.

Caste/ethnicity is another covariate having influence on sexual behaviour of male youths. Compared to male youths (15-24 years) from Hill Hindu caste, Tarai Hindu caste (OR = 0.325, $p < 0.05$) are less likely to have first sexual intercourse before or at age 15. When the probability of having first sexual intercourse by age 18 is analyzed, the Newars enter with significantly lower probability (OR=0.430, $p < 0.05$) compared to Hill Hindu caste. Whilst the Dalits (occupational caste) (OR=1.847, $p < 0.05$) are more likely to have first sexual intercourse before or at age 18. The possible reasons for caste/ethnicity differential

on sexual behaviour largely depend on the socio-economic and cultural differences of each group. However, the exact reasons are unknown and a further research is suggested. The small values of R square suggest characteristic variables included in the model have little influence on sexual behaviour of male youths.

Table 2 summaries the odds ratio of having had first sexual intercourse before or at age 15 or 18 years for female youths 15-24 and 18-24 as explained by the individual characteristics. Alike to male, five characteristic variables are included in the model. For female youths (15-24 years) place of residence, education status and caste/ethnicity tend to have close influence on sexual behaviour. Contrasting the general understanding, female youths (15-24 years) from urban area (OR=1.405, $p < 0.05$) are more likely to experience first sexual intercourse before or at age 15 compared to rural female youths. The possible reason is though not explored; a cautious explanation is suggested to sample and increasing sexual debut. But urban-rural differential turns insignificant to age 18 which demands a further investigation in sexual activities. Education is another most influential factor determining the sexual behaviour of female youths. For example, female youths with SLC and above level of education are nearly 98 percent less likely to have first sexual intercourse before or at age 15 (OR = 0.021, $p < 0.001$) than those with no education. But effect of education gradually reduces when the age at first sexual intercourse increases from 15 to 18 years. Only the education beyond SLC is likely to affect age at entry in sexual practices.

Table 2: Determinants of age at first sexual intercourse for female youths 15-24 and 18-24: dichotomous odds ratio

Covariates	Odds ratio for having first sexual intercourse before or at age 15 for female youths (15-24 years)	Odds ratio for having first sexual intercourse before or at age 18 for female youths (18-24 years)
Place of residence		
Rural ®		
Urban	1.405**	1.003
Level of education		
No education ®		
Primary education	0.721***	1.146
Some secondary	0.306***	0.835
SLC and above	0.021***	0.716**
Ecological region		
Mountain ®		
Hill	0.889	1.119
<i>aerial</i>	0.944	2.120***
Caste/ethnicity		
Hill Hindu caste ®		
<i>Anabatic</i> /Nationalities	0.773**	0.773***
<i>Tarai</i> Hindu caste	1.269	2.654***
<i>Newar</i>	1.040	1.033
Muslim	1.053	2.873***
<i>Dalits</i> (Occupational caste)	1.554***	1.572***
Wealth quintile		
Lowest ®		
Second	0.923	1.022
Middle	1.030	1.092
Fourth	1.120	0.800
Highest	1.272	0.590***
Nagelkeke R Square	0.136	0.282

***p<0.001, **p<0.05, *p<0.1

Table 2 further explains that ecological region becomes influential when age at first sexual intercourse increases from 15 years to 18 years. Female youths (18-24 years) from Tarai are more than 100 percent likely to enter into sexual relationship compared to mountain dwellers (OR=2.120, p<0.001) which is consistent with Tarai Hindu caste women who are more than 150 percent likely to enter into sexual relationship before or at age 18 than Hill Hindu caste women (OR=2.654, p<0.001). As general expectation, young

Muslim women (OR = 2.873, p<0.001) and Dalits (occupational caste) (OR = 1.572, p<0.001) are more likely to enter in sexual relationship before or at age 18 compared to reference category - Hill Hindu caste women. Effect of economic class is also observed in case of female youths, which is not observed for male youths. Female youths from the highest wealth quintile are less likely to experience sexual relationship before or at age 18 compared to those from the lowest wealth quintile (OR=0.590, p<0.001). However, the effect of other wealth quintile is not observed.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Sexual behaviour of young people is influenced by contextual variables. Young people in Nepal, in general, are sexually active in their teenage years (UNDP, 2003) but sexuality of this group is less addressed. The background characteristics determine the attitude towards marriage and sexual relationship. The decreasing age at puberty and increasing age at marriage is leading to initiate premarital sexual relationships (UNFPA, 2004; WHO, 2000). This study shows that effect of contextual factors is more pronounced in female sexuality compared to male. However, education is proven factor to determine sexual behaviour of young people in countries where early marriage is prevalent and sexual intercourse is largely practiced as marital activity. But the effect of education decreases gradually when the age at first sexual intercourse increases. Analogously, education differential in sexual debut is expected, especially for women. Increase in each year of schooling is expected to reduce the probability of marrying at younger age, consequently reducing the probability of entering in sexual activities. Concurrently, ecological region and caste/ethnic orientation become influential, which is symbolic to the cultural and social practices of marriage system.

More female youths are likely to enter in sexual activities in younger ages than male youths. The most powerful determinant of sexual activities for young people, particularly in case of Nepal, is claimed to be marriage. The median age at first marriage is almost 2 years less for females than males. The mean age at first sexual intercourse for women is identical to age at marriage whereas men are likely to initiate sexual practices earlier the marriage. Though, is beyond the scope of this study, male youths are found to be inclined towards premarital sexual activities.

Young Tarai Hindu, Muslim and Dalits (occupational caste) women are more likely to involve in sexual activities earlier than Hill Hindu women, mainly because of the marriage system they practice. But a different but significant difference is observed in Janjatis/Nationalities women, who are less likely to experience first sexual relationship before or at age 15 or 18 compared to Hill Hindu women. The ethnic difference in sexual activities is attributed to differential norms and practices regarding marriage and sexuality. Except a case in female youth, wealth index is not found to have significant influence on sexual behaviour of youths.

The case of male youths is slightly different. For example, male youths from Tarai region are less likely to have sexual intercourse at age 18 compared to Mountain male youths. This finding is contrasting the

female youths who are found to be more likely to initiate sexual activities compared to their mountain counterparts. Analogous behaviour is observed to Tarai Hindu male youths against the Hill Hindu male youths. Probably the reasons may be the cultural differences in marriage system - both groups are culturally (religiously) extreme. Gender differences still exist - female youths' sexual behaviour is influenced by geographical and family context where that of male youths is not (Ongaro, 2001).

Some issues have been raised by this study. Sexual activities at younger age in youths have several implications be that marital or non-marital. It hinders social and economic development of youths. The decreasing synchronization between age at marriage and first sex shows youths are at risk. If the sex is unprotected and premarital, it generates several impediments in the lives of youths. Youths may be at risk of unwanted pregnancy, risky births and many births. Further, premarital sexual relationship may increase risk for sexually transmitted disease including HIV and AIDS.

Attention is required on the differential sexual behaviours in order to promote healthy sexual practices among youths. Considering the education as an important factor that prevents early sexual practices, especially, for female youths, it should be promoted markedly considering the ecological and caste/ethnic differences.

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