Extended abstract

PREMARITAL SEX AMONG ADOLESCENTS AND YOUTH IN VIETNAM: FINDINGS FROM THE NATIONAL SURVEY

Introduction

This study focuses on premarital sex among adolescents and youth in Vietnam and the relationship with other demographic and socio-economic factors as well as sexual/reproductive health knowledge, behavior and sexual risky practices. Differences between male and female adolescents are also considered. The study will give better understanding of the factors that influence adolescent sexual practice by not simply describing the percentage of adolescents involved in various behaviours and practices, but rather helping to understand what contributes to better and worse outcomes.

Data

This study uses data from the Survey Assessment on Vietnamese Youth (SAVY) with a sample of more than 10,000 persons aged 14-25 years from provinces across the country. The SAVY was undertaken in 2008 by the Ministry of Health with collaboration of other international organizations - a comprehensive survey of adolescents and youth in Vietnam.

Sexual practice can be different between males and female and associated with various demographic, socio-economic factors and sexual/reproductive health knowledge, behavior and sexual risky practices. Five groups of factors are considered for their relationship with sexual practice namely individual characteristics (sex, age, age at first sex, ethnicity, residence, education, working or not, migration), family characteristics (family arrangement, family size, parents’ education and occupation, positive family situation) and social factors (social participation, peer information received, positive and negative friend pressure, surrounding community), sexual/reproductive health knowledge (knowledge on HIV, contraceptive, attitude toward premarital sex) and risky practice/service use (having sex with prostitute, condom use when having sex, drunk, use of reproductive health services).

Findings

Practice of premarital sex

Among 10,016 respondents for whom information on sexual practice is available, 936 persons or 9.3 percent reported having had premarital sex. This percentage includes both those currently single and married.

Premarital sex and Individual demographic and social characteristics

Males are much more sexually active than females. The percentage of premarital sex almost three time higher for males comparing to that of females (13.5 and 5.1 percent respectively).

It is consistent with findings from many other studies that percentage of premarital sex increases with age i.e. lowest at age 15 and highest at age 25. If only 1.7 percent of respondents aged 14-17 reported having had sex, the figure increases to 10.3 percent among ages 18-20 and 21.3 percent among ages 21-25. The difference is significant.

Among those having had sex, 15.9 percent had it for the first time when they were less than 18 years of age, 36.8 percent between the ages of 18-20 and almost half of them did it when they were 21 years or older. Females tend to have sex earlier than males but the difference is not much.
Ethnic minority adolescents and youth have higher percentage of premarital sex than the majority of Kinh and Chinese ethnicities (14.6 and 8.1 percent respectively). More active and earlier sex is more common among ethnic minorities partly due to their culture and other socio-economic factors.

Place of residence is also significantly related with premarital sex. Respondents living in urban areas of big cities have the highest percentage of premarital sex (16 percent), followed by those living in smaller city and lowest in rural areas (8.9 percent).

Premarital sex is highest among respondents with little education i.e. primary or less or highest i.e. college/university or higher (24.4 and 23.5 percent respectively) and much lower among other educational groups. It is possible for the explanation that those leaving school early in case of little education or at higher ages in case of high education are more sexually active. Chi-Square test is highly significant for this relationship.

Premarital sex is highest among respondents who have ever worked for money are also much more sexually active than those not (15.5 percent compared with 2.6 percent). Migration also associates with sexual activeness. Adolescent migrants tend to have premarital sex than non-migrants. The longer the moving distance the higher the percentage of having premarital sex. The figure is 18.9 percent among inter-provincial adolescent migrants compared with only 8.7 percent among non-migrants and 11.9 percent among short-distance migrants.

The findings suggest that all the individual demographic and social characteristics have influence on sexual activity of adolescent and youth. The Chi-Square test shows highly significant results for all of those relationships.

**Premarital sex and Family characteristics**

Family characteristics are expected to have certain influence, mostly positive, on sexual practice of adolescents and youth. Respondents from bigger families are somewhat more sexually active. The percentage reporting premarital sex is 7.6 percent in small families of 1-2 children but increases to 11.7 percent among big families of 5 or more.

Living with parents seems having positive impact on sexual activities of their children. Only 7.5 percent of respondents still staying with both parents report having premarital sex. The figure is 13 percent among those living with either father or mother and jumps up to 17.4 percent among those not living with parents. Better relationship with parents is adversely associated with sexual activeness of the adolescents.

Mother’s education has been cited from other research as an important factor in forming sexual behavior and practice of their children. The findings also suggest that adolescents having mothers’ low education i.e. primary or less report much higher percentage of premarital sex (14.1 percent) than other educational groups of mothers.

The relationship between family characteristics and premarital sex of adolescents is all found significant by the Chi-Square test.

**Premarital sex and Social/community characteristics**

Peer relationship and living community can have both good and bad impact on sexual practice of adolescents and youth. Percentage of premarital sex among those encouraged by bad peer friends to take risky practice such as heroin, drinking, watching pornography journals, having sex with prostitutes, etc. is almost 5 times higher than those not having such bad friends (25.5 percent comparing with 5.3 percent).

Adolescents living in communities where porn journals and prostitutes are easy to find also report a much higher percentage of premarital sex than in the places more difficult to find such things. For example, the figure is 21.4 percent having sex comparing to less than 10 percent in areas difficult to find or no prostitutes.
Sexual practice in the living community also influences the practice of adolescents and youth. The percentage of premarital sex is much lower in communities where such practice is not common (less than 5 percent). The figure becomes as high as 40 percent in communities where premarital sex is much more common.

The Chi-Square test shows significant results to the relationship with all the community characteristics.

**Premarital sex and S/RH knowledge**

Adolescents and youth have quite good knowledge on ways to transform HIV. All of them can mention at least 2 ways of transforming HIV and almost 90 percent of them can name up to 6-7 ways. Similarly, they also have good knowledge on prevention of HIV with nearly 90 percent able to name 5 ways or more to prevent from getting HIV.

Respondents show good knowledge on contraception. Only 6.8 percent do not know any contraceptive method. In contrast, more than half of them can list at least 3 contraceptive methods.

Research findings suggest an adverse relationship between premarital sex and knowledge on contraceptive and HIV. Respondents with better knowledge tend to be less sexually active than those with less knowledge. For example, 16 percent of those having named none or only 1 contraceptive method reports to have premarital sex while the figure is only 5 percent among those able to name 6 or more methods.

Regarding attitude of adolescents and youth on premarital sex under five given situations, research findings reveal that adolescents and youth are quite opened to premarital sex. Nearly 40 percent accepts premarital sex (14 percent in all situations and 26 percent in some situations). However, among the other 60 percent not accepting premarital sex, a considerable proportion is still not sure about their answers. A high proportion of accepting premarital sex may be due to more opened view about premarital sex or change of value and perception on virgin. However, this opened view can lead to the increase of unexpected consequences such as teenage pregnancy, STDs and HIV/AIDS which will have longer impact on adolescent life later on.

Among those accepting premarital sex, 21.3 percent of them did practice this activity. In contrast, the figure is only 2.3 percent or 9 times less among those not accepting or not sure about premarital sex. The findings confirm that sexual behavior can be easily turned into sexual practice. The relationship is statistically significant.

As consequences, among female adolescents having premarital sex, 10 percent reports having had abortion. This figure must be underestimated since information from other sources shows much higher abortion rate among adolescents and youth.

**Premarital sex and Risky practice**

Regarding sexual partners, 30 percent had sex with partners becoming their husbands/wives later on. The other 70 percent had sex with lovers, friends and even prostitute. It is important to note that only 38 percent used condom in their first sex. Though the percentage of condom use increased to 58 percent in the most recent sex, it is still very low for premarital sex meaning unprotected or unsafe sex.

Among 8.1 percent reported having sex with prostitutes – a highly risky practice, there is still 10 percent not using condom during the intercourse.

Drinking is another risky practice leading premarital sex in general and unsafe sex in particular, 80 percent of those having had premarital sex reported to be ever drunk which is almost double the figure among those not having premarital sex (41 percent).
However, respondents having premarital sex also have better behavior and practice in using sexual and reproductive health services for their own health and protection. Among the sexually active respondents, the percentages of ever using family planning services, STDs examination/treatment and HIV testing are 36, 17 and 20 percent respectively. Those figures are 2-4 times higher among those not having premarital sex.

**Discussion**

Analysis from SAVY data shows that premarital sex is becoming a serious issue among adolescents and youth in Vietnam which it needs more attention from the society. Research findings reveal that sexual practice of adolescents and youth are closely related with individual, family and environmental characteristics. All those factors can have either good or bad influence on adolescents/youth’s sexual behavior and practice. Mass media play an important role in convey message on proper sexual practice to adolescents. The message emphasizes on ethical value and the importance of virgin with a slogan “adolescents say no to sex”. In addition, cultural value also discourages premarital sex. Sex education has been integrated into high school curriculum. However, this vulnerable group of adolescents has insufficient information and knowledge on reproductive issues which mainly come from mass media or friends/peer groups. Age, sex, ethnicity, family environment and friends/peer groups are important in shaping sexual attitude and practice of adolescents. Positive family environment can help adolescents to reduce the probability of having premarital sex. Pressure from peer groups, positive or negative, also places a strong impact on sexual attitude and practice.