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Fertility Related Attitudes And Behaviors Of Philippine Youth

By

Maria Carmen C Jimenez

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FERTILITY RELATED ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS
OF PHILIPPINE YOUTH

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Recent data would seem to point to increasing sexual activity among young people in the Philippines. Several factors have been identified for this phenomenon such as:

1. the earlier biological maturation of the young, with age of menarche in 1982 established at 13.3 years

2. an increasing trend towards delayed marriage with the average age in 1978 being 24.4 years. Young women especially have expressed the desire to put off marriage until after higher education and a career after graduation. Marriage is perceived to be a hindrance or an end to further education and work because of the prevalent attitude, especially strong among Filipino males that a married woman's place is in the home, raising children

3. the changing environment which has resulted in increased freedom of movement for women, particularly from the rural to urban areas in search of work, their entry into the labor force in great numbers and their consequent movement away from the restrictive and watchful influence of home and family. A more recent phenomenon of significant impact on the socio-cultural and psychological aspects of Philippine life would be
the great number of fathers and of mothers, to a lesser degree, who seek work overseas. Preliminary data has indicated that young girls brought up in single parent families engage in earlier and more frequent premarital sexual activity than girls raised in stable two parent families.

The longer time interval between an awareness and awakening of one's sexual needs and desires and the satisfaction of these needs in marriage after graduation and a few years of work experience has therefore resulted in greater sexual activity among the young. Couple this with the increasing freedom of women and the weakening influence of the home as well as the pervasive influence of media, particularly in the urban areas, and one can understand the increasingly liberal attitudes and behaviors of present-day Filipino youth.

**ATTITUDES TOWARDS SEXUALITY**

Considering the amount of sexuality-related information and exposure the Filipino adolescent receives from his environment, it comes as a great surprise to find that precise and scientific knowledge of sexuality has been found in study after study to be deficient. For instance, many believe that girls cannot get pregnant the first time or that a girl will be safe if she takes a pill the same day that she engages in sexual intercourse. Recognition scores are high but recall scores are low. For instance, many have heard of the various contraceptive techniques but do not know how they work. Many have relationships without knowing the most basic things regarding sexuality, although a pseudo-sophisticated attitude is affected.
ATTITUDES TOWARDS VIRGINITY

Virginity is still generally valued. Young girls say that they would like to be virgins on their wedding day, although they do not expect their husbands to be so. They generally stress the importance of virginity, especially female virginity, but concede that premarital sex is alright and even appropriate when the couple are in love, engaged to be married, are mature and accepting of the consequences of their behavior or stable and established individuals. There is further no awareness of an inconsistency or incongruity between these two attitudes.

A favorable attitude towards contraceptives has been found, although many refuse personal use of these and are opposed to making them available to youth. Many would prefer to believe that sex occurs spontaneously and out of love whereas contraceptives bring to mind premeditation and lust. Greater access to contraceptives among youth is also felt to encourage greater sexual freedom and experimentation whereas sex before marriage is justifiable and permitted only in the name of love.

If and when pregnancies did occur, adolescents felt that they would find more support and understanding among their peers, as compared with their parents. Many would refuse to inform their parents of their condition, reasoning out the hurt, humiliation and disappointment they would suffer. There is also perceived to be a protective attitude towards parents in that there is a strong desire to maintain their illusions regarding the sexual innocence of their children.

In general, adolescents favored delayed marriages and small families. Thus, they thought that one could start to think about marriage in their mid-twenties, particularly if one had a stable job already. Teen marriages were
rowned upon and widely considered to be rash and impulsive, entered into as an escape from familial problems or a result of an accidental pregnancy.

All believed that they would only marry for love and that they would do their own choosing. However, a significant number also believed that their parents may have a significant say regarding their intended bride or groom.

Physical attributes were thought to be less important than internal qualities such as intelligence, a sense of responsibility, stability of employment, compatibility in values and interests, etc. Females cited age, education and employment as most important in a prospective mate. Males were more apt to stress looks and especially virginity in a prospective bride. However, both males and females believed it very important that their prospective mates should be liked, or at the very least, accepted, by their parents.

**DATING BEHAVIOR**

More male adolescents tend to date and to date more frequently. They report physical intimacies such as kissing, petting, necking and even premarital sex to be usual during these dates. Statistics from various studies ranged from a low of 14% to a high of 33% for premarital sex reported.

Female adolescents generally prefer group dating, at least in the beginning - both they and their parents believing that there is safety in numbers. Such may also be preferred because of the young person's need for social support and advice regarding the correct social behavior on a date. However, as liking begins to develop, couples
may begin to pair off and begin single and steady dating until they are regarded as "on" or as a couple by themselves and everyone else. On the average, the entire process may take about three years. However, it is possible for single dating to occur as early as 12 years, both in the urban and rural areas.

For the urban adolescent female, the first sexual experience often happens about 6 months after the first single date and almost always with the boyfriend. For the rural adolescent female, it takes a bit longer – almost two years afterwards. Very little anxiety or guilt was reported as a result of this first experience and almost all tended to repeat the experience after a short period of time. However, many claim that their sexual activities were accidental and spontaneous rather than deliberately planned. Among the sexually active who used contraceptives, the most popular methods were the condom, rhythm and the pill. The most popular and usual explanation for their physical intimacy was love, at least for the females. Male adolescents said that it was the opportunity presenting itself and the willingness of the partner. Thus, for the young girl, sex almost always occurs within the context of a relationship and certainly with a loved one while this may not necessarily be so for the male.

The first sexual experience often occurred in the girl's home or more frequently, in the home of the partner. Outside of the home, the hotel or the motel was the favored place for the first sexual experience.

RELEVANT FACTORS CONSIDERED

Various factors have been studied in relation to the sexuality related attitudes and behaviors of Filipino adolescents.
Young people in the urban areas have been found to have a more liberal attitude and behavior regarding sexuality than those in the rural areas. Generally too, young people in the rural areas marry at an earlier age than those in the urban areas. More limited career and educational opportunities for the rural adolescent female have been pointed out in the decision to marry early as there is nothing else for her to do but start a family. Then too, the more conservative sexual attitudes and behaviors in the rural area have been thought to result from a more limited media exposure.

- greater religiosity
- greater adherence to traditional values
- more effective parental control.

Females have been found to be more conservative in their attitudes and behaviors than the males although adolescents are more liberal regarding sex than their parents. For instance, adolescents see nothing wrong with:

- blind dates
- steady dating at 18
- kissing and petting on dates
- premarital sex when in love or with a willing partner
- separation or divorce if the partners are found to be incompatible and when all efforts at reconciliation have failed.

However, their parents object to:

- girls asking boys out for a date
- going unchaperoned on dates for females
- kissing on first date
- premarital sex even when in love or engaged
- kissing in public
Younger adolescents were more conservative as compared with older people, especially those considered by themselves to be mature and established.

Religion was found to have no bearing on sexual attitudes and behavior. Adolescents in exclusive Catholic schools were found to date more frequently but this might be because of their better economic position.

**INFLUENCE OF THE PEER GROUP**

The peer group exercises a pervasive influence on the attitudes and behaviors of the adolescent. At this time of development, it becomes the single most important influence in his life, replacing parents and family. It fulfills many functions for the adolescent such as:

1. serving as a virtual replacement for family and providing non-judgmental, objective support and evaluation
2. providing a stabilizing influence and consensual validation that others are having the same difficulties and problems, seeing things in the same way
3. bolstering self esteem
4. providing a source of behavioral standards
5. providing security by their presence and number
6. providing safe opportunities for practice by actual doing - such as dating, smoking, etc.

In general, the peer group provides the uncertain adolescent with a sense of identity, self esteem, a strong sense of acceptance and support and a set of standards and behaviors to live by. So all-important does the peer
group become that adolescents may begin to change themselves over to adapt to and be accepted by their peers. They may take on their values and in the process, dismay and anger their parents. For instance, it has been found that more sexually active adolescents have close friends who are also sexually active. Such findings are usually correlational so we have no way of knowing if the adolescent was influenced by more experienced friends or if those with similar experiences tended to group together to facilitate easy sharing and discussion of experiences, providing mutual support and sympathy for one another.

The peer group then becomes a main source of friction between parent and adolescent, as parents worry about the undue amount of time the child spends in the company of his friends to the detriment of school and family. They also worry about the extent of influence the group exerts over the child and the potential for mischief and worse. Finally, there seems a certain amount of resentment at the loss of power and control over the child and the passing on of these to the peer group.

On the part of the child, there is resentment regarding parental objections to the child's choice of friends and the refusal to allow the child enough freedom of choice and movement. There is also hurt at the lack of trust regarding the child's good sense to discriminate right from wrong. Young girls also resent parental objections to friends of the opposite sex. How else are they to know how to relate well with young boys if they did not have the chance to try out behaviors in the company of boys who are safe and familiar? Parents see malice and problems where there are none and create difficulties for the child, they cry.
The relationship between adolescent and parents is a close and loving but not entirely open one. While the adolescent as a child may have shared all his thoughts and secrets with the parents, the adolescent begins to keep his own secrets or to categorize these into those which might be shared with parents and those which should be kept from them.

According to parents of adolescents, the more common problems brought them by their children are the following:

1. Financial
2. Health, physical
3. Academic
4. Career choices
5. Sexuality related

Sexuality problems brought to them by female children dealt with boy-girl relationships (how can one be sure that one really likes someone?), dating, courtship, the proper age for a relationship, pregnancies and marriage. Male children usually asked about female behavior, dating and courtship, relationships, falling in love and pregnancies.

Parent approached more often

Both parents agreed that the mother was the preferred confidant for both male and female children. Only in 6% of the cases was the father the preferred confidant and then only by male children. But fathers remained tolerant of this.

* This data was elicited in the course of a study on the relationship between adolescent and parents for a handbook for Parents of Adolescents and another one for Understanding the Filipino Adolescent.
situation since they were eventually informed of the problem - either by the child or more usually, by the mother - even though she might have been cautioned against telling the father. In fact, it was our impression that the father might have preferred it this way since the rearing of children was felt to be the mother's area of responsibility anyway and such a process necessarily spared him a lot of unpleasantness and loss of time.

But parents regarded themselves as the main sources of comfort for their children in times of need, although they acknowledged that this was more the case for their daughters than for sons. At the same time, they also knew that their children had other and more primary sources of comfort regarding their sexuality-related problems - particularly in the case of sons more than their daughters.

Their children may feel more comfortable in consulting their friends since they share the same experiences, views and problems. Communication is thus facilitated and sympathy easier to elicit. Friends may be more accessible than parents, are not as easily shocked nor so quick to judge or disapprove of their behaviors. Then too, friends have no control over each other. Thus, there need be no fear of punishments or reprisals to inhibit the troubled adolescent.

All in all, parents concede that adolescents would consider their friends their primary sources of comfort and understanding when they have problems of a sexuality-related nature. Such a situation is troubling to most parents on the one hand since they worry about the kind of advice and support the adolescent might receive. On the other hand, there is also a sense of relief at being spared the embarrassment and the discomforting revelation.
that their children are grown up and interested in sex.

THE ADOLESCENT SPEAKS OUT

Adolescents report that they talk to their parents regarding their problems, although the degree of openness would depend upon the topic. Female children brought up health and physical problems with their parents, along with financial difficulties, academic problems and activities as well as career plans. Males more usually discussed financial and health problems, if any. All other types of problems are kept to themselves or discussed with people other than their parents.

If and when sexuality-related problems were discussed with their parents, generally calm and positive reactions were reported. Their parents proved quite open-minded and generous with their advice and own experiences. Only a small number reported their parents as shocked by their questions and revelations and harsh in their response. For instance, one girl was told that she would have to stop studying if she had a boy-friend.

However, more adolescents never consulted their parents regarding such problems. They reported feelings of embarrassment and shame in having to bring up such matters and a reluctance to anger or to provoke their parents. They thought their parents too conservative, particularly in such matters and so would never understand. Moreover, they sensed their parents' embarrassment at anything that had to do with sex. Others also feared being misunderstood by their parents who may over-react and become unduly alarmed and begin to think "maliciously" - without cause and to the detriment of the child.
In general, adolescents were none too comfortable with their parents and very much aware of the distance between them. Relations were better with the mother who was rated the preferred confidant and easier parent to deal with. She was more often available to her children, and more sympathetic in her manner. A more relaxed, informal relationship with her was reported, characterized by teasing, laughter and gossip.

In contrast, fathers had a more distant and formal relationship with them. He was less available because of his work, was perceived as the dispenser of punishment and was deferred to by both the wife and children. In fact, the adolescent often warned the mother against revealing secrets told her for fear of the father's ire.

Parents seemed resigned to the fact that children would grow away from them as they grew older, begin keeping secrets where once they had been very open. Very often, these secrets had to do with sex. Their children's reticence and silence on this matter little worried them. On the one hand, they were gladdened since it meant that their children were not yet interested in such matters and relieved that they did not have to deal with such uncomfortable topics. Most acknowledged that they did not feel good about this aspect and so avoided it as much as they could. They did not give their children any sex education, they said, since such might awaken dangerous thoughts and curiosity and lead to tragic experimentation. If their children were to raise questions, they would do their best to answer, they replied, although they were glad that the schools had sex education courses and so took this from their hands. In fact, most believed that their children might be more knowledgeable and were glad that their relative ignorance remained
unexposed. Finally, most realized that their own parents had avoided any mention of sex with them and were reprimanded when such topics were brought up. Therefore, most realized that their own children might also react as they themselves were reacting when these children had their own adolescents in turn. While they deplored the inevitability of it, they also felt helpless about changing the course of events.

**THE ROLE OF MEDIA**

What has been the role of media in all of this? More usually, media has been blamed for the attitudes and behaviors of youth regarding sexuality-related aspects. Thus, greater exposure to media, particularly the cinema, has been related to more liberal attitudes and behaviors regarding sexuality. However, in recognition of the power and many functions of media, it has also been used to try to disseminate correct information regarding sexuality and to try to direct the attitudes and behaviors of the young and significant social agents in the proper direction. Thus, various media forms such as print, television, cinema, radio and more recently video, have been and are being used in this effort. However, much basic work needs to be done such as

1. gathering more data regarding adolescents in order to better understand this target audience
2. determining the nature and degree of influence media in general and the various media forms in particular have on the attitudes and behaviors of the young
3. developing more appropriate tools and measurement methods.