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Community's Perception on Premarital Sex: A Qualitative Research in an Urban Area of Mandalay City, Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

Premarital sex means practicing sexual relationship before marriage. This activity could lead to many health problems such as sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancy, abortion and maternal death. This qualitative study was conducted in PyiGyi Ta Gon township of Mandalay city during 2008 to determine the community's perception on premarital sex. Eight sessions of focus group discussions were implemented. A total of 80 adults consisting of 20 married males, 20 unmarried males, 20 married females and 20 unmarried females were recruited into the study using purposive sampling. The participants were within reproductive ages (i.e., between 18 and 49 years). As might be expected, most of the participants did not accept this kind of behavior. They said that this behavior was too bad for our culture and morality, and value of our society, especially for young ladies. Although premarital sex among Myanmar youth seemed not to be uncommon, knowledge of the participants on sexual health was low. Talking about sex in the community was still taboo. Strict cultural control might be a barrier for achieving knowledge on sexual health. Familial and religious factors were reported as important factors in preventing premarital sex, especially among youths. Health education on sexual and reproductive health should be intensified and expanded. Priority should be given to youths, especially migrant workers and students. Further studies should be conducted to determine the extent and determinants of premarital sex among adolescents and youths.

Key words: Premarital sex, reproductive health, sexual health, youth

INTRODUCTION

Premarital sex means having sexual relationship before marriage.¹ About 20% of college students reportedly experienced premarital sex in some developing countries. This behavior may lead to health problems such as sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancy, abortion, maternal death, etc.² As HIV/AIDS is one of the principal epidemic diseases in Myanmar and the major mode of transmission is sexual route, premarital sex becomes an interesting area to do social science research. Adolescent health has been increasingly important in developing countries, in part because of real or perceived increase in sexual activity among adolescents and rates of pregnancy outside marriage, and in part because of high rates of HIV

infection among them.³In addition, favorable attitude towards premarital sex appears to be increasing among youths.⁴⁻⁶

Overall health and development of adolescents and youths are influenced by many factors ranging from social, economic, cultural and political conditions of the wider society to those that characterize living situation of an individual adolescent, including family, education and income level. Improving health education programs for young people may be a partial solution to addressing issues that concern their health. As study on sexual behavior of adolescent is a sensitive issue in Myanmar culture, there were very few studies conducted previously. Again, it may require resources like trained professionals, money and time to do behavioral and cultural studies. Therefore, a simple qualitative cultural study was conducted.

The general objective of the study was to explore community's perception on premarital sexual behavior. The specific objectives of the study were (i) to identify how people know about premarital sex, (ii) to enquire how people know about consequences of premarital sex, (iii) to explore how people know to prevent premarital sex, and (iv) to describe how people think about premarital sex.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

As the purpose of this research was to identify culturally constructed meanings on premarital sexual behavior, a qualitative study design was used. The research design included preliminary observation in the field as well as focus group discussions (FGD). It was a community based ethnographic study using structural functionalism theory and textual analysis on society's perception about premarital sexual behavior and explanation of how these perceptions affect Myanmar young people to get sexual health knowledge.

Sampling Method and Selection Criteria

Purposive sampling method was used. The selection criteria for the research subjects were as follows: (i) reproductive age (between 18 and 49 years), (ii) Burmese ethnic group that uses the common tongue (thus representative of language and culture in Myanmar, in general), (iii) lives in a particular community in Mandalay city, and (iv) willing to participate in this study.

Methods of Data Collection

Eight sessions of FGD were done within one month. There were eight groups of participants; group 1 and 2 were composed of married males, group 3 and 4 consisted of unmarried males, group 5 and 6 included married females and group 7 and 8 contained unmarried females. Each group consisted of 10 participants who were selected purposively with the help of local

authorities. Therefore, a total of 80 participants discussed about perception on premarital sexual behavior. Most of the participants are educated to middle school and high school levels. Their participation was voluntary.

Study Site

This ethnographic study was conducted in two wards of PyiGyi Ta Gon Township, Mandalay city, in which the community still values local traditions and cultural beliefs. People living in this community use the common Myanmar language and almost all of them believe in Buddhism.

Research Instruments

Guidelines for FGD were developed according to conceptual framework obtained from literature review and preliminary studies in the common Myanmar language. These guideline questions were pre-tested by conducting interviews with subjects to check whether or not it could be easily comprehensible and understood.

Preliminary Study in the Community

One week before the study, a preliminary observation on the place and residential people was undertaken. The ward included in the study had a population of around 140,000 individuals, more than half of which were women. The main bread earning occupations of the people were manual laborers, shopkeepers, car drivers and government office workers. Their educational level was mostly middle school passed and very few were graduates.

FINDINGS and DISCUSSION

A. How people know about premarital sex

Unmarried female group was reluctant to discuss about sex. Other groups reported and discussed the stories of their neighbors, friends, relatives or other popular stories among their society. No one described his/her own experience of premarital sex. It was found out that most of the people were not surprised by asking about premarital sex apart from unmarried female group. They admitted that premarital sexual behavior was commonly practiced among the people around their environment, especially among those who were migrants from other places, like university students, businessmen, and some girls from poor families for their basic needs.

B. How people know about consequences of premarital sex

Participants discussed the consequences of living together before marriage as good endings and bad endings. As good endings, some couples got married, some couples loved much more than before and some couples became happier during their stressful lives.

As bad endings, some couples separated by marrying other partners, females got abortion, some females were left by their promiscuous partners leaving bad image among the society, and most of the couples were looked down by the society. Therefore, it was obvious that some women were experiencing unwanted pregnancies and abortions due to premarital sex. However, people did not say anything about sexually transmitted diseases among couples who experienced premarital sex. It might be due to silent culture of Myanmar people not to talk about sex, especially premarital sex.

C. How people know to prevent premarital sex

Participants reported that familial and religious controls were important in preventing such behavior among youths. They suggested that much more care and love should be given to youths, especially to students and working girls who are away from their families. Moreover, religious control seemed to be lacking in youths due to changing situations of economy and culture. Thus, people thought that more religious discourses should be given to the younger generation.

D. How people think about premarital sex

Although very few participants dare to say that having premarital sex was suitable for couples who would marry definitely; most of the participants agreed that premarital sex was not appropriate for our culture and not good for the morality and value of Myanmar girls. Participants mentioned that some couples were practicing such shameful acts even at public places like parks and road sides especially during night time. They even assumed those kinds of people as animals.

According to the results of the study, it can be said that premarital sexual behavior among Myanmar youths seemed not to be uncommon, sexual health knowledge was very low among them, talking about sex was still a taboo and strict cultural controls might be barriers for getting sexual health knowledge. These findings are consistent with those of previous studies done in Thailand⁷ and Nepal².

CONCLUSION

Sexual health problems among Myanmar youths should not be underestimated. Health education on sexual and reproductive health should be intensified and expanded. Priority should be given to youths, especially migrant workers and students. Further studies should also be conducted to determine the extent and determinants of premarital sex among adolescents and youths. The researchers would like to suggest that some of the cultural values should be kept intact, for example like obeying religious teaching of “hi-ri-aut-tat-pa-ta-yar”(shamefulness) to avoid easy way of practicing premarital sex for any reason. Again, some misbelieves should be changed by

the society, for example, talking about sex means “lin-u-thar-mway” (married and get children) is very shameful. Otherwise, Myanmar youths will never have correct knowledge about safe sexual practice.

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