Social Science and Operations Research Initiative on adolescent sexual and reproductive health

In 1998, the Strategic Component of Social Science Research on Sexual and Reproductive Health launched this research initiative with a background paper reviewing the literature, and a widely distributed Call for Proposals and Concept Papers outlining research gaps in the area of adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH). The Call for Proposals resulted in a total of over 240 submissions. As of 2007, a total of 50 projects have been funded in 28 countries, addressing issues of sexual risk behaviours and their determinants, dual protection, gender roles and sexual attitudes, unwanted pregnancy and consequences, sexual coercion, health seeking behaviour and quality of care and provider perspectives, and assessing the impact of interventions to improve ASRH. The Programme has accepted proposals addressing the following issues:

- Sexual risk behaviour: determinants and consequences
- Motivation and consistency of condom use
- Sexual and reproductive health needs: (a) of married adolescents; or (b) of vulnerable groups, for example, men having sex with men, women working in textile industry, service or entertainment sectors, migrants; or (c) of adolescents in low-fertility populations
- Consequences of non-consensual sex
- Boys as victims and perpetrators of non-consensual sex
- Innovative programmes for sexual and reproductive health information and services

Studies funded as of September 2007

50 funded studies on adolescent sexual & reproductive health in 28 countries
Recent Findings:

**Assessments**

**Bangladesh: “An ethnographic study on reproductive health among married female adolescents in an urban slum in Dhaka, Bangladesh”**

Sabina Faiz Rashid
Dhaka, India

The objectives of this study were to explore perceptions of reproductive illnesses, health and well-being, care seeking strategies and practices for reproductive health (RH) problems; and underlying socio-cultural factors influencing care seeking among married adolescent women aged 15-19 years in the slums of Dhaka.

The study focused on reproductive health needs of married adolescent women aged 15 to 19 years and surveyed 153 of them who were living in a slum area of Dhaka. In-depth interviews with 50 of the 153 survey respondents were conducted as well as case studies of eight women. Additional qualitative data were collected from key informants and community leaders.

The results show the heightened vulnerability of married adolescent women who are disempowered by poverty and social and cultural norms. They also lack information and options for informed decision-making. Cultural and social norms contributed to 128 of the 153 surveyed women bearing a child before they were emotionally or physically matured - 72% of them reported being coerced into childbearing soon after marriage. Poverty and potential loss of income due to pregnancy and childbirth caused 27 women to terminate their pregnancy, 11 of them reported being forced by other family members to do so.

**China: "Accessibility and acceptability of reproductive health care among adolescents in China"**

Li-ying Zhang
Changchun, China

Researchers explored the extent of parent-child communication on sexual matters and its relationship to sexual behaviours of adolescents in Changchun, China. Data were collected from 682 unmarried adolescents aged 15 to 24 years using a self-administered questionnaire.

Ten percent of participants (16% of males and 5% of females) reported having experienced sexual intercourse. Few adolescents reported having talked to their parents (30% with mothers and 17% with fathers) about sex-related matters. Researchers noted that the quality of communication with the respondents mother in general influenced their self-reported communication on sex-related issues. Participants who found it easy to discuss important matters with their mother were more likely to discuss sex-related matters with her as well. Respondents mentioned reading material (34%) and teachers (31%) as the "most important" source of information on sex-related issues. Even though teachers were a frequently cited source of information, school-based education was limited. Participants universally reported receiving physiology (95%), with fewer receiving information on reproductive health (28%), sexuality (8%), contraception (2%), and HIV/AIDS (9%).

**China: "A community-based intervention study on sex/reproductive health education and services among 15-24 year old unmarried young adults in Shanghai"**

Tu Xiaowen
Shanghai, China

This study evaluated the effectiveness of a youth-friendly intervention in promoting safe sex behaviour (contraception and condom use) among sexually active unmarried young people aged 15 to 24 years in the Shanghai municipality, China. The intervention was intended to build awareness and to offer counselling and services related to sexuality and reproduction to unmarried youth.

Surveys were conducted at baseline, post-intervention (after 20 months of implementation from May 2000 through December 2001), and 28 months after the end of the intervention among young people who were subsequently exposed to the intervention and to a similar group of young people who were not.

Among the sub-set of respondents interviewed both in 2000 and 2004 who were exposed to the intervention programme, the interventions significantly increased frequency of contraceptive use among those initiating sexual relations over the period of the intervention (OR=6.91) and significantly reduced ever-use of withdrawal among all sexually active respondents (OR=0.37) compared to the control group during long-term follow-up period.

The findings strongly supported the hypothesis that a multifaceted intervention programme that provides information and skills, as well as counselling and services, enhances contraceptive practice and condom use among unmarried young females and males in suburban Shanghai and increases safe sex behaviours.
Turkey: “Situation of, and influential factors on, sexual and reproductive health of adolescents in Turkey”
Ayse Akin
Ankara and Diyarbakir, Turkey

This study focused on the formative phase of a larger intervention study designed to address adolescent sexual and reproductive health needs among university students.

The study involved both qualitative and quantitative methods and was conducted among first year students (excluding those in medical and related faculties) in two university settings, as well as public and private sector providers serving these students. The study involved focus group discussions, self-administered questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews with health care providers serving the student community.

Investigators found that students appear well informed about contraceptives and the leading sources of information on sexual and reproductive health issues are the media, peers, teachers but not parents. Between two thirds and three quarters of students reported ever having a sexual partner. Students prefer sexual and reproductive health service to be easily accessible, confidential and offer an array of counselling, contraceptive and curative services. Students favour well qualified providers, who are “sensible and unprejudiced”.

Interviews with providers indicate however that almost half considered themselves insufficiently trained to address the needs of young students. Findings of the study have been used to develop a Youth Friendly RH/SH Services model for the university medico-social services.

**Sexual coercion**
Nigeria: "Interventions for violence prevention among secondary school students in Ibadan, Nigeria"
Ademola Ajuwon
Ibadan, Nigeria

The overall objective of the proposal is to evaluate an intervention to reduce gender-based violence against young people in Nigerian schools.

The study is an experimental-control group design involving four public schools in the Ibadan Municipality of Nigeria. To date a total of 1,363 students from the participating schools completed structured interviews. Data were collected in June and July 2006. Approximately equal number of females (50.4%) and males (49.6%) participated in the survey; the mean age of the students was 14.4 years. Eight percent reported ever having sex and twenty-two percent of participants reported that they were being pressured to have sex. The three most common experiences of physical violence reported by students involved slapping (85%), throwing object at (55%) and grabbing (25%). Violent sexual behaviors experienced were unwanted touch of breast and backside (23%), being forced to watch pornographic materials (6%), attempt to rape (7%) and rape (3%). A significant number of students reported perpetrating violence, 44% had ever slapped someone, 12% touched someone’s breast and backside while 32% had spat on someone.

Sensitization workshops for teachers and training of students as Peer Educators (PE) are completed. A follow-up survey will be administered to approximately 600 students to assess the impact of the intervention.

Nepal: "Exploring the extent and nature of sexual coercion among young married women in Nepal with special reference to non-consensual sex."
Mahesh Puri
Tanahu and Dang District, Nepal

A study conducted by the Centre of Research on Environmental Health and Population Activities (CREHPA) explored the causes and risk factors of sexual coercion among young married couples in the Tanahu District and the Tharu community in the Dang District of Nepal. Investigators used in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and causal flow analysis.

A total of 387 households were visited to identify eligible participants, defined as young (below age 25 years) married men and women.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-reported experience with sexual coercion</th>
<th>Men (n=36)</th>
<th>Women (n=39)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Husband touched wife sexually against her wish or desire.</td>
<td>11 (30.6%)</td>
<td>21 (53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced wife to have sex when she did not want to.</td>
<td>7 (19.4%)</td>
<td>19 (48.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife touched husband sexually or physically forced sex.</td>
<td>7 (19.4%)</td>
<td>1 (2.6%)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Risk factors identified in the study for coerced sex among young women include:

- Lack of employment and social opportunities
- Financial dependence of women
- Alcohol consumption of husband
- Low awareness of sexual and reproductive rights among women and men
- Marital practices
- Societal disapproval of female sexual desire
- Husband perceived right to sex
- Son preference
- Lack of Social Support for Victims

Ongoing research

Assessments

Chile: "The perspectives of young people in Chile on sexual and reproductive health services: what do they know about and what do they demand from public reproductive and health services."
Ximena Luengo
Santiago, Chile

The objective of the proposal is to assess information available to adolescents about sexual and reproductive health care services, their use of such services, and to identify the reproductive health needs of adolescents in Santiago. A national Adolescent Health Programme was introduced in the mid-1990s but the investigators state that adolescent sexual and reproductive health indicators have only worsened over time. The aim of the study is to provide the Chilean Ministry of Health with data on whether the relatively low demand for sexual and reproductive health services among adolescents is due to a lack of knowledge about the existence of the services and/or whether the quality of the care provided does not meet the needs and expectations of adolescents.

A number of specific objectives address
- use and non-use of services,
- adolescents’ assessment of the services,
- barriers to use of services,
- factors that facilitate use of services,
- to document health seeking behaviour among non-users of public health services, and
- identify adolescents’ needs for sexual and reproductive health services.

China: "Reproductive health risk among unmarried Tibetan and Yi youth in Sichuan province of China"
Xiao Yu
Sichuan Province, China

The project was designed to identify influential factors related to the family environment and societal gender norms among unmarried Tibetan youth in Sichuan province. Specifically, the study intended to identify patterns of risky sexual behaviour; and analyse the influences of gender roles and norms and the household environment on young people’s risky sexual behaviour.

The investigator had previously conducted qualitative (Focus Group Discussions) and quantitative (interviewer-administered questionnaires) to achieve the study objectives. To date, 127 male and female youth participated in 16 Focus Group Discussions (FGD). Based on FGDs investigators found gender differences in parent-teen communications, low awareness levels of SRH services and information, and significant premarital sexual activity including multiple partnership. 900 unmarried, Tibetan adolescents have taken part in the survey and data analysis is underway.

China: "Informative study on parents’ perspectives towards provision of sexual and reproductive health services to adolescents and unmarried youth in China"
Cui Nian
Chengdu, China

The investigator had previously conducted qualitative research that highlighted parental discomfort and a lack of awareness in discussing sexual matters with their adolescents. The study found that parental silence on sexual matters remains a pervasive obstacle to the achievement of safe sexual behaviours among young people. The objective of the current study is to build upon the evidence of the previous study and conduct formative research that will explore parental perspectives and attitudes towards sexual and reproductive health services for unmarried adolescents and youth. Specifically, it proposes to:
- understand parents’ own awareness of SRH issues and adolescent development,
- their attitudes about providing contraception, information and services to the unmarried,
- explore the obstacles parents face in interacting on these matters with their adolescents and
- document parental preferences on what services to provide to adolescents and how.

The study will explore strategies and programmes that would facilitate better parent-child interaction by designing a module for the parents that can be tested in a future intervention study.

The study includes both qualitative and quantitative methods (8-12 in-depth interviews and self-administered questionnaire).

Sexual coercion

India: "Sexual initiation in India: Among married and unmarried youth and further experience of physical violence among married young women"
Mallika Alexander, Laila Garda, Savita Kanade
Pune, India
The aim of the study is to explore sexual initiation experiences and their consequences through secondary analysis of data from a study on the formation of sexual partnerships among youth in Pune, India. The proposal intends to analyse data to address two objectives:
- to understand sexual initiation experiences, both positive and negative, among married and unmarried young men and women, explore gender disparities in these experiences, and determine the factors influencing these experiences, and
- to document, among those married women who report a negative sexual initiation experience, further experiences of physical violence including sexual violence, and explore the correlates of this experience in terms of partner behaviours.

Nigeria: "Child Fosterage promises and trafficking in children for domestic work in Nigeria: Implications for reproductive health"
Okayemisi Makanjuola Osagbemi
Jos, Ibadan, Benin City, Sokoto, Nigeria

The overall aim of this research project is to explore the reproductive health implications of different modes of recruitment of female children into domestic work in urban Nigeria. The study subjects are females aged 10-18 years living with adults other than their biological parents in four urban centres of Nigeria. The proposal juxtaposes the issues of child fosterage and domestic work in the region with that of child trafficking; the investigators provide a social and contextual basis for the practice in the country, and highlight the programme and policy relevance of studying this relatively widespread phenomenon.

The study uses exclusively qualitative methodologies, and will be conducted in four urban areas and eight contiguous rural settlements. The investigators will conduct 40 key informant interviews to explore prevailing opinions, knowledge and experiences in the community concerning recruitment of children into domestic work, and its sexual and reproductive health implications. One hundred and twenty in-depth interviews will also be conducted among domestic female workers to document their experiences as well as reproductive and sexual health concerns with specific reference to recruitment arrangements into domestic work.

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Publications 2007


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