How do perceptions of gender roles shape the sexual behaviour of Croatian adolescents?¹

Background

Croatian parents are reluctant to discuss sexual matters with their adolescent children. The lack of school-based sex education programmes in Croatia further contributes to adolescents’ poor understanding of sexuality. As a result, many Croatian adolescents have misperceptions about sexuality; this can expose them to risky sexual behaviour.

Adolescents in Croatia generally have inadequate communication skills to negotiate safe sex. They also have insufficient knowledge of ways to protect themselves from risky behaviour and the consequences of unsafe sex.

In 2001–2002, a study was carried out at four sites in Croatia to explore adolescents’ perceptions and attitudes toward gender roles, ways in which gender norms and beliefs shape their sexual experiences and expectations, perceptions of risk and responsibility in sexual encounters and relationships, and use of contraceptives (especially condoms) during sexual encounters.

Study design and sample

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with adolescents from three types of secondary schools (academic, vocational, and technical) in Zagreb. Six same-sex FGDs were held with a total of 17 adolescent girls and 16 adolescent boys.

A survey was conducted among 995 adolescents (523 boys and 472 girls) aged 15–18 in 12 secondary schools in four cities (Zagreb, Split, Osijek and Rijeka).

Major findings

A majority of adolescents perceive that domestic and public life is dominated by men

Adolescents of both sexes hold similar perceptions about power imbalances in political and economic spheres. In the survey, both boys (83%) and girls (87%) agreed that men exercised more power in politics than women. “When it comes to professional advancement, I think that it is easier for men, because when a woman is in a high position, it is often thought to have been achieved through ‘improper’ means.” (girl, FGD).

The majority of participants reported traditional divisions of labour within their families. However, adolescents differed sharply in their gender role preferences. For example, more girls (71%) than boys (48%) said that men and women should spend equal amounts of time doing housework.

Peer networks and communication on sexual matters differ among girls and boys. Adolescents report difficulty in communicating about sexual matters with the opposite sex, so most peer group discussions of sexual matters are sex segregated.

Girls’ networks provide exchange of information on matters of sex, discussion of sexual experiences and advice on relationships.

¹ This brief was prepared by Axel Hamprecht, Amir Hodžić and Ina Warriner. It is based on the study “The significance of gender in the attitudes and sexual behaviour of Croatian adolescents” by Amir Hodžić and Nataša Bježić (2003) and the document “Systematic sexuality education in Croatian schools: Recommendations and a proposal for sexual health education pilot program”, by Amir Hodžić. For further information, contact Amir Hodžić, Haulikova 3, 10 000 Zagreb, Republic of Croatia, email: hodzic@policy.hu or Iqbal Shah, Department of Reproductive Health and Research, World Health Organization, 1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland, e-mail: shahi@who.int
Boys’ networks provide opportunities for reinforcing traditional perceptions of masculinity and boasting about and exaggerating sexual experiences. Information seeking is rare; boys fear that revealing ignorance will be interpreted as a sign of inexperience and will undermine their image of being tough and sexually savvy.

While communication about sexual matters is poor, adolescents who reported communicating with their partners about safe sex practices early on in the relationship were significantly more inclined than others to use condoms in their relationships.

Sexual experiences are influenced predominantly by perceptions of gender roles

- Half (51%) of the boys and one-third (27%) of the girls reported sexual experience. First experience of sexual intercourse tended to occur around ages 15–16 for both sexes; however, only 47% of boys compared to 80% of girls reported one sexual partner ever.
- Boys and girls reported different motives for having sex. Nearly half of the boys (44%) perceived physical pleasure as a priority in sexual relations. Girls, in contrast, stressed the importance of emotional pleasure (32%) or a combination of emotional and physical pleasure (32%) as priorities.
- Gender influences the nature of risky behaviour related to first sexual intercourse (Table 1). Boys were much more likely to report sex with a casual partner for their first experience as well as the use of drugs and alcohol in that experience. However, a slightly greater number of boys than girls reported the use of condoms during their first sexual encounter. Some risky behaviours applied equally to both sexes: nearly one in three adolescents did not use any contraception during their first sexual encounter.

Table 1. Characteristics of first sexual intercourse among Croatian secondary school students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Girls (%)</th>
<th>Boys (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of relationship</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious relationship</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-night stand</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contraception at first sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condoms</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coitus interruptus</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consumption of alcohol and drugs at first sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions and policy recommendations

- Sexual experiences reflect gender disparities. A considerably larger percentage of adolescent boys than adolescent girls have had sex. Male adolescents are more likely than girls to have a one-night stand, and girls are, in contrast, more likely to have had only one partner and are less likely to have used alcohol and drugs during the first sexual encounter.
- Condom use declines in long-term relationships as girls turn to coitus interruptus or no contraceptive use. Additional findings from the study showed that although over half of the adolescents reported condom use for first sex, condom use becomes increasingly erratic in long-term relationships.
- Adolescents find it difficult to communicate on sexual matters with their partners. Hence, they need information and advice in matters of reproductive health and sexuality. As the majority of 15–18 year old adolescents attend school, school-based education programmes for sexual and reproductive health should be established. These should emphasize communication with parents and peers, questioning stereotypical gender-based sexual expectations, and negotiation skills for safe sex.