

Determinants of Gender-Specific Standards in Attitudes about Pre-Marital Sex and Sexuality among Rural and Urban Young Boys in Western Tamil Nadu State, India

Introduction

Issues related to sexuality and sexual behaviour (especially pre-marital sex) are increasingly being studied over the last 20 years due to the global HIV/AIDS pandemic. With this development, in India too, matters related to sex and sexuality, which were hitherto forbidden, have become focal points of study during the last decade. It is now often argued that the views of young Indians towards pre-marital sex and related issues are becoming more liberal. However, there are evidences to show that they lack adequate knowledge about sexuality, contraception and STDs, including HIV/AIDS and thereby, the likelihood of pre-marital sex is increasing. Earlier research showed that “young males as well as females accept and in many cases even justify double standards in sexuality, pre-marital and extra-marital sex. Males, for example, are widely perceived to need sexual experience and a variety of partners; women are not” (Brown et al., 1999). However, these remain poorly understood. With this backdrop, in this study, an attempt is made to find out the level of gender-specific (double) standards based on selected responses (about attitudes towards sexuality and pre-marital sex by gender) by constructing a single variable among young boys residing in two selected districts of western Tamil Nadu, India, in addition to examining differentials if any, in the gender specific attitudes (index) across their background characteristics and its principal determinants.

Data and Methodology

Data for the present paper was drawn from a large research study “*Sexuality and sexual behaviour among unmarried young boys of rural and urban areas in Tamil Nadu*”, carried out during 2005-2006. Coimbatore and Erode districts form the sample frame for this study, which were selected purposively. For rural sample, the young boys were enumerated from 10 villages (clusters of 200-250 households) of 4 Community Development Blocks (2 from each district). For urban sample, the young boys were enumerated from 10 clusters of Wards (streets / part of streets) out of 74 and 62 Wards of Coimbatore and Erode cities, respectively. Both the villages and wards (clusters) were selected on the basis of simple random sampling technique. The sample from each village and ward (clusters) is

approximately 50. In all, a total of 1964 young boys form the sample, of which, 976 were from rural areas and 988 from urban areas.

The analysis is carried out at three stages. Firstly, the magnitude of young boys' gender-specific attitudes towards pre-marital sex and related issues have been analysed with the help of uni-variate analysis. At the next stage, the differentials in the percent of unmarried young boys' mean scores of gender-specific double standards towards sex (pooled scores of 4 items) across their background characteristics are analysed based on bi-variate analysis and one-way analysis of variance. At the final stage, in order to find out the principal determinants of young boys' gender-specific attitudes towards pre-marital sex (index), multiple regression analysis technique is adopted. All these analyses are done for total, rural and urban boys, separately. For this purpose, the explanatory variables used are mostly continuous in nature, except a few ones like type of occupation, parents' religiosity, career option in near future, and place of residence, which are dichotomous and/or dummy variable type.

Results and Discussion

Based on the uni-variate analysis, it is observed that in the case of four statements, "wearing of dresses as they like, so as to expose their body", "reading / watching pornographic material", "inviting of and force used for sexual contact", and "talking openly about sex", the percentage of young boys with liberal attitudes for boys, but conservative attitudes for girls account for 56, 54, 35 and 30, respectively. When the responses for these four items scored and indexed together (two categories of answers for each item – Conservative for both boys and girls – 1 and Otherwise – 0), it is observed that the mean score of gender specific (double) standards in attitudes related to pre-marital sex was 2.36 and such score is moderately higher (2.42) among rural boys than their urban counterparts (2.35) and the chi-square results are turned out as moderately significant ($p < 0.05$).

Differentials in the mean scores of young boys' gender-specific attitudes towards pre-marital sex and sexuality (index) across their background characteristics revealed that, on the whole, such score was significantly higher, that is, higher in expressing gender-specific standards, when the respondents belonged to higher income brackets, who spent more time in

leisure activities, participate in risk-taking behaviour, had more number of peers participating in risk-taking behaviour and higher level of knowledge about reproductive and sexual health. Conversely, the mean scores decreased with the young boys' educational status. Scores were also noted to be lower among those who engaged in business and white collar works as career option in near future, and who had more number of boy and girl friends; higher scores among those who have 3-4 boy friends and one girl friend than those less / no friends and more number of friends. With a few exceptions, similar significant differentials, at different levels of significance, appeared in the average scores of gender-specific attitudes among rural and urban boys; more conspicuously among rural boys in a majority of cases.

Findings based on multiple regression analysis showed that the young boys' level of gender-specific attitudes towards pre-marital sex and sexuality significantly ($p < 0.001$ or $p < 0.01$) increased (liberal towards boys, and conservative for girls) with an increase in their time spent on various leisure activities, frequency of participation in risk-taking behaviour (index), level (index) of knowledge about reproduction, sexuality and sexual health and level of exposure to mass media (index – $p < 0.05$). It was also higher among young boys who belonged to non-scheduled castes ($p < 0.05$) than their scheduled castes counterparts. On the contrary, the overall gender-specific standards diminished significantly, at different levels of significance, with young boys' level of education ($p < 0.05$), current age ($p < 0.05$) and number of peers participating in risk-taking behaviour ($p < 0.05$). Such overall level of gender-specific standards was also found lower when their parents' were very religious ($p < 0.01$) and among those who aimed for better career in the near future ($p < 0.10$) than their counterparts. Interestingly, though urban boys as against rural boys, by and large, affirmed less gender-specific attitudes about sexuality, the results did not turn out as statistically significant. Analogous findings, as noted in the case of total sample, were also observed among rural and urban boys with certain exceptions (which would be discussed in the final paper). Specific efforts for wiping out the widespread double standards by involving parents, close relatives, neighbours and socialization of young ones, in addition to interactive and informed programmes focusing on awareness about the adverse effects of pre-marital sexual behaviour are the major programme implications.