

The Changing Context of Union and Family Formation in Cebu, Philippines

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Abstract

This mixed-method study incorporates qualitative and life history data from the Cebu Longitudinal Health and Nutrition Survey (CLHNS) in Metro Cebu, Philippines to describe the timing and sequence of demographic events for young Filipino men and women. Preliminary findings indicate a disconnect between prevailing social norms for adolescent transitions and reality. For a substantial proportion of the cohort, sex preceded cohabitation and marriage, indicating a deviation from the dominant ideology. Moreover, the data indicate that the life trajectories of young men and women may be differentially influenced by contextual factors, resulting in disparate union and family formation patterns. Findings from this study data indicate that there is a need to identify and address the generational and societal changes that may put adolescents at risk for adverse outcomes, by engaging in 'alternate' patterns of union and family formation.

Introduction

The current environment in the Philippines is characterized by rapid economic development, continued population growth, improved schooling and employment opportunities for women and men, as well as access and input from the global economy through the internet, cell phones, television and global media. Many factors differ from those just a generation ago.

Amidst these rapid changes, new patterns of union formation and childbearing are emerging. Traditional values, such as those promoted by the Catholic Church, no longer reflect norms of behavior. Young adults in the Philippines are making decisions that clearly impact their futures, whether it be choosing a more socially expected lifestyle of marriage and childbearing, or charting a new course, which many (and possibly the majority of) youth seem to be doing, with premarital sex, pregnancy outside of marriage, and cohabitation.

These changes in life trajectories and family formation patterns, however, do not necessarily reflect the prevailing attitudes among Filipino youth and society. The mean age at marriage is rising for both men and women, as well as rates of premarital cohabitation or cohabitation without marriage; however, recent data suggest that most youth are not in favor of cohabitation (Kabamalan M, 2004; National Statistics Office (NSO) Philippines, 2007; Ventura E.R. & Cabigon J.V., 2004; Xenos P & Kabamalan M, 2007).

As might be expected with the higher ages at marriage and rise in cohabitation rates, premarital sex is more common now than in years past. National survey data from 2002 reflect that 31% of males and 15.7% of females, between the ages of 15-24 reported having premarital sex, an increase from 1994 levels (Natividad J. N. & Marquez M.P.N., 2004). A more recent analysis from the Cebu Longitudinal Health and Nutrition Survey (CLHNS) indicates that 67% of males and 47% of females had sex by the time they were 21 years old,

with 98% of males and 91% of females having sex outside of marriage (Upadhyay & Hindin, 2007). Despite these levels, 45.7% of males and 24.2% of females, ages 15-24 approve of premarital sex and a smaller proportion - 30.5% of males and 15% of females - approve of *women* having premarital sex (Ventura E.R. & Cabigon J.V., 2004). An even smaller number - 18% of men and 12% of women - approve of a woman getting pregnant if she is not married to the father (Ventura E.R. & Cabigon J.V., 2004). Moreover, only 21% of young adults used contraception at their first premarital sexual encounter, and nearly 40% who reported using contraception used withdrawal, approximately the same percentage as was reported in 1994 data (Natividad J. N. & Marquez M.P.N., 2004).

Pregnancy outside of unions is not condoned in the Philippines, particularly among youth. Unintended pregnancies are quite common in the Philippines, due in large part to the unmet need for contraception. Overall in the Philippines, modern contraceptive method use is among the lowest in the region—36% of married women between ages 15-49 reported using contraception in 2006. Recent evidence suggests that 60% of women in the Philippines have experienced an unintended pregnancy during their lifetime, and that annually, nearly half of all pregnancies are considered unintended and one-third of these pregnancies end in abortion (Singh S et al., 2006).

Although Filipino society is experiencing rapid changes with respect to its young adult population, prevailing gender roles and expectations persist. As indicated by national level data and data from the CLHNS, males initiate dating and sexual activities sooner than females (Medina BTG, 2001; Upadhyay, Hindin, & Gultiano, 2006). Men are allowed more freedom related to sexuality than women. Many Filipino youth consider it natural for males to have multiple partners. In contrast, social norms about young women's behavior tend to be conservative. Social norms dictate that women must be chaste, pure, and untouched at the time of marriage (Medina BTG, 2001).

This study uses data from the Cebu Longitudinal Health and Nutrition Surveys to capture information on the “new order” of demographic events in the Philippines for young men and women. Demographic information was combined with life event data, providing an opportunity to view the timing and sociodemographic predictors of life events among this young adult cohort. In addition, the collection of qualitative data from a subsample of CLHNS participants provides information on the contextual circumstances in which these processes are occurring. We expect that this study will significantly add to our understanding of early union formation, pregnancy, and the factors that provide insight into how and why the patterns appear to be changing in the Philippines.

Methods

This study incorporates quantitative data from the 2002 and 2005 Cebu Longitudinal Health and Nutrition Surveys (CLHNS). The CLHNS is a longitudinal study of a cohort of mothers and their index children (ICs) born in 1983-84 (Cebu Study Team). The CLHNS is conducted in 33 study *barangays* (communities) from the Metropolitan Cebu area, the second largest city in the Philippines. For this analysis, sociodemographic information from the 2002 survey was merged with 2005 life history matrix data on the timing of young adults life events (e.g., sexual activity, contraceptive use, union and pregnancy status). In addition,

qualitative data were collected from the CLHNS study participants and study *barangay* (community) members in 2007-08.

For the quantitative analyses, we used sociodemographic variables from the 2002 survey to see if they were related to the order of life events reported in the 2005 life history matrix. As some of the numbers were small, we compressed these life events into three categories—abstinence, partnership (marriage/cohabitation) before sexual intercourse, or sexual intercourse following a partnership. Independent variables from the 2002 survey consisted of whether the young adult considered himself/herself religious, the number of years of school attained or current grade, household assets (number of items in the household, and urban/rural residence. We conducted bivariate and multinomial, multivariate analyses, as well as analyses stratified by gender.

In addition to the quantitative data on adolescent life transitions, qualitative data were collected to better understand the context in which these transitions are occurring, as well as the actors and decisions involved in these transitions. Eight FGDs were conducted with single and in-union/married young men and women (ages 21-29) living in 4 of the CLHNS urban study barangays. A total of 66 IDIs were conducted with 20 ICs and 13 partners purposively sampled based on their responses in the 2005 CLHNS survey.

Quantitative Results

Table 1: Life Events by Age 21 Reported by CLHNS Participants

	Men (n = 1037)	Women (n = 920)	Total (men and women) (n = 1957)
Abstinence	36%	53%	44%
Partnership before sex	1%	3%	2%
Sex before partnership	64%	44%	54%

Not unexpectedly, we found that 53% of females as compared to 36% of males were neither sexually active or in a partnership by age 21. For males, the most common pattern was sexual intercourse before a partnership (64%) while for females it was abstinence followed by sexual intercourse before a partnership (44%). Only 3% of females and less than 1% of males reported a partnership before sexual intercourse (Chi-square $p < 0.001$).

Using multivariate multinomial logistic regression with abstinence/no partnership as the comparison category, we found that education was inversely related to having a partnership before sexual intercourse (RRR=0.73 for each additional grade in school attained, $p < 0.0001$) or afterwards (RRR=0.89 for each additional grade, $p < 0.0001$) (See Table 2). Compared with those in the abstinence/no partnership group, those young people who had sex before a partnership were more likely to be urban residents (RRR=1.49, $p < 0.001$). Compared with those who never had sex or a partnership, young women were more likely to be in partnerships before marriage (RRR=3.69, $p < 0.004$) and were less likely to have intercourse before partnerships (RRR=0.52, $p < 0.0001$), as compared to young men.

Table 2: Multivariate Analysis of Young Adult Life Events, Total and By Gender

<i>Total Sample (n = 1935)</i>		
	<u>Partnership before sex</u>	<u>Sex before Partnership</u>
Women	3.69**	0.52***
Religious	1.13	0.84 [†]
Number of years of school	0.73***	0.89***
Household assets	0.97	1.01
Urban residence	0.68	1.49***
<i>Male Sample (n = 1027)</i>		
Religious	1.02	1.04
Number of years of school	0.82*	0.96
Household assets	0.92	1.08*
Urban residence	1.04	2.02***
<i>Female Sample (n = 908)</i>		
Religious	1.04	0.65**
Number of years of school	0.59***	0.73***
Household assets	1.00	0.96
Urban residence	0.52	1.04

*** p ≤ 0.001

** p ≤ 0.01

* p ≤ 0.05

[†]p ≤ 0.10

In gender-stratified multivariate analyses, we see a few differences that were masked by the overall model. Among young men, as compared with those who had not had sex or a partnership, those who had a partnership and then a sexual relationship had fewer years of schooling (RRR=0.82, p<0.03) while those who had sex and then a partnership had higher household wealth in 2002 (RRR=1.08, p<0.02), and were more likely to live in an urban area in 2002 (RRR=2.02, p<0.0001).

Compared with young women who were not sexually active or in a partnership by age 21, those who had a partnership and then sexual intercourse had less education (RRR=0.59, p<0.001). Those who had sex before a partnership were less likely to consider themselves religious (p<0.01) and had fewer years of schooling (RRR=0.73, p<0.001).

Qualitative Results

The qualitative data indicate that although the ‘ideal’ time to get married is around age 25, both male and female FGD participants felt that, ‘nowadays it is rare’ that a couple gets married before they are pregnant. As one female FGD participant said, *“Before people depended on the phase of the moon to choose a time to marry, but now it depends on the size of the woman’s stomach.”* Both male and female informants said they felt there is greater temptation now to initiate sex earlier, to engage in premarital sex, and to follow what their peers are doing. In the FGDs, participants indicated that adolescents are ‘curious’ about sex and engage in premarital sex due to lust (*biga*) or being hot (*kumag*). According to one participant, *“They only think about sexual desires and not the consequences or their future.”*

The qualitative informants also indicated that many times, initiating sex may be a sudden action, without a formal decision to engage in sex, without any prior discussion, and may be affected or precipitated by the use of alcohol. The context in which sex is initiated may also preclude the use of contraception to protect against pregnancy or STIs/HIV, as described below by a 23-year-old, female IDI informant whose first, unprotected sexual encounter resulted in a pregnancy:

Interviewer: Did you use any [contraception]?

Participant: No

Interviewer: A method?

Participant: No, because honestly we did not intend to do it. It was sudden. We did not plan to do it because it was all sudden. We were in his place at that time before we ran away. We did not plan to do it.

Interviewer: What do you mean that you did not plan, to have sex with him?

Participant: That's it. It all happened suddenly maybe because it was just us at that time. You know how teenagers get hot sometimes. We were in his room. We did not plan it. We did not talk about sex. It came very sudden. You just begin to feel that you want to do it.

The Rapidity of Transitions

Although IDI and FGD participants felt it best if individuals are economically stable and mature enough to take on 'adult responsibilities' before getting married, the occurrence of a pregnancy would often hasten the decision to get married or to cohabit. Oftentimes, once the young woman told her partner, they would then inform their families. Although our IDI informants described a variety of situations, in most cases, the families of the young man and woman would meet to agree on the fate of the couple and would often initiate the 'pamalaye' or marriage process immediately to protect the family's honor (*kauwan*). The following excerpts illustrate the speed with which these transitions often occur:

"It's difficult when you have an unwanted pregnancy. It's so sudden... suddenly you make a family. The time is not right. No preparation, no engagement, nothing. It would be better if you're engaged, and then you prepare for your wedding the way you wanted it, then you marry. That is the proper [marriage]... Ours is not like that. We lived together because of our child. We were forced to marry because we already had a child. But I don't want to be married." -24 year old woman, separated, with 2-year old daughter

"We were introduced, and then he courted me, and I immediately consented to be his girlfriend. Then we had sex right away. Then I got pregnant immediately. It happened very fast." -24 year old woman, single, with 3 children

"I never realized that I was already married because it was so sudden. I was 22 and had a girlfriend for 6 months. Sometimes what motivates a man to marry a pregnant woman even in the absence of love is that you pity the child. You are forced into marriage."

- Married male FGD participant

The rapidity of this process is also reflected in our quantitative data. In the life history matrix, the CLHNS participants were asked to report the exact month and year in which each transition occurred; however, for several participants, these transitions were reported as occurring simultaneously (i.e., in the same month and year).

As the aforementioned attitudinal data seem to suggest, the prevailing societal norm in the Philippines is to get married before getting pregnant. However, both male and female focus group participants indicated that some young adults prefer to 'test' their partner to see if they are fertile before marrying them. In fact, pregnancy before marriage seems rational, given the illegality of divorce in this setting, as well as the perspective of several qualitative informants indicating that procreation is the 'reason' for marriage.

The qualitative data collection also provided insight into the types of partnerships that young adults are forming. Of the 13 index children who were participants in our study and were in partnerships at the time of the interview, only 1 couple had a church wedding ceremony, while the other 12 were cohabiting or living separately from their partners. Although a formal marriage was often viewed as ideal, the cost of and requirements for a formal marriage ceremony versus cohabiting were perceived to be above the means of many of our CLHNS informants. This 24-year-old female living with her partner and 2 children described her reasons for not having a formal marriage:

IC: His aunts always tell me to get married either in church or by a judge, for the children. But I find it very tedious because of the many requirements needed...

I: What are these requirements?

IC: Birth certificates. Then when I got my birth certificate, again there were so many requirements. My father also told me that they would really like me to get married formally because I was the female, but they would not force me to get married because I might change my mind regarding my partner, maybe we just wanted to get married because there were others who were also getting married. He said he would just let us decide when we would like to get married. He explained to us that he would be the aggrieved party because I am the female, but he would just leave us to decide for ourselves. He did not force the issue, and so, I also did not do anything.

As noted earlier, the process of moving in together was often hastened by a pregnancy. Young couples indicated that it was often several months before they would become aware of the pregnancy, then they would inform their families. Without immediate and adequate resources for a formal wedding, parents would often encourage the young couple to solidify their relationship by moving in together, particularly before the pregnancy became obvious to others. The hastening of this process was seen as a means of reducing gossip in the communities and mediating potential shame for the family and the young couple, particularly if the young woman's partner had not already taken responsibility for the pregnancy.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this analysis indicate that there is significant discordance between the predominant norms regarding young adult lives and the reality. Through both quantitative data and rich narrative from young adults in the Metro Cebu area, we provide insight into the rapid changes that are occurring in young adults' lives with respect to sex and partnership formation. These changes are occurring without larger, societal shifts in the

acceptance of these new patterns. Moreover, the CLHNS life history data is unique in that it provides substantial insight into the timing and sequence of life course events with respect to one another.

The quantitative analysis revealed two key findings. First, and not surprisingly, there are significant differences in the patterns of union formation between young men and women. Young men were more likely to engage in sex before partnerships, as compared to young women in this study. Second, the factors associated with these union formation patterns were different for young men and women. Similar to the findings from other studies, religiosity and educational attainment seemed to play a role in women's trajectories, yet not for men (Williams L, Kabamalan M, & Ogena N, 2007). As compared to other young men, urban men and men with higher household wealth were more likely to engage in sex before a partnership. This effect remained after controlling for education, indicating that there may be factors associated with living in more affluent households or in an urban environment that may make sex before partnerships more attainable or less restricted for these young men. The sociological literature discusses the role that societal expectations and gender norms may have on the upbringing and socialization of young girls and boys (Medina BTG, 2001); however, these findings point to specific subgroups that may be particularly likely to adopt these non-traditional patterns.

Through the qualitative data, the realities of young adult lives and reasons for these patterns of union formation are better understood. The interviews provided insights in to the rapid social changes that are occurring in Cebu (and throughout the Philippines) and the concurrent increase in the levels of premarital sex and cohabitation (Xenos P & Kabamalan M, 2007). Many of our participants, although prompted by curiosity and desire to engage in sex, did not use contraception even though they were not "ready" for a pregnancy. For some participants, unprotected sex led to a mistimed or even undesired pregnancy, and a rapid cascade of events including cohabitation and parenthood. As noted by Xenos, the demographic rise in premarital sex in the Philippines is likely to initiate or to further accelerate the process of marriage (Xenos P, Raymundo C, & Berja J, 1999). As noted in these interviews, however, there are also pervasive social pressures to conform to a particular "ideal" family formation pattern and, in the case of pregnancy, to protect the honor of the young couple and their families through rapidly arranging marriage or cohabitation.

Although adolescent sexuality is a contentious topic in settings throughout the world, there is increasing acknowledgement of the need to address adolescents' motivations for sex, including sexual desire, in efforts to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Ott MA, Millstein SG, Ofner S, & Halpern-Felsher BL, 2006). In the Philippines, limitations in the provision of sexual and reproductive health education and services are well-documented (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2006; Cohen J, 2004; Mello MM, Powlowski M, Nanagas JM, & Bossert T, 2006). These restrictions may be placing young adults in a particularly precarious position as they transition into sexual partnerships and union formation. Given the realities of young adult lives, however, there is a need to identify and address the generational and societal changes that may be putting adolescents at risk for potentially adverse life events (e.g., unintended pregnancy and induced abortion, hastening marriage without socially acceptable options for cohabitation or divorce). In addition, the increase in 'alternate' patterns of union and family formation may have

detrimental impacts on other health outcomes (e.g., mental health) and the subsequent life course events for young adult Filipinos.

Citations

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