Extended Abstract

Predictors of Premarital Sexual Initiation among Adolescents in Nigeria.
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Background

Studies in reproductive health have paid considerable attention to initiation of sexual

activities among adolescents. This is predicated on findings that the timing of first sexual

intercourse is highly associated with use of contraception, pregnancy and pregnancy

complications, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and AIDS, and

precancerous changes of the cervix associated with human papilloma virus (HPV).

Several multifactor studies in North America have identified the predictors of early

initiation of sexual intercourse among adolescents. However, the constitution of

influences likely to affect adolescent sexual behavior in developing and transitional

countries, is likely to be different based on social, economic and cultural contexts. In the

face of unprecedented growth of the population of young people in developing countries,

and the contentious challenge of teen sexual behavior and its consequences for morbidity

and mortality, studying sexual initiation and associated behavior is an important public

health issue.

Studies that focused on the subject in Nigeria (with a population of 130 million,

63% under 25 years of age and an increasing HIV/AIDS burden, particularly among

adolescents) have mostly been constrained by limited coverage. Some are based on data

collected from adolescents in schools, leaving out non-school youths estimated to

consitute over 60 percent of all youths in the country; others are limited to urban Nigeria

neglecting the rural areas where an estimated 65 percent of the population lives; and

others that utilized nationally representative data are constrained by focus on ever married women or female adolescents, ignoring the males and the need to understand their needs, perceptions and motivations in reproductive health matters. Moreover, the social reality of daily living in most developing societies particularly in the African context is that considerable authority is vested in men in respect to initiating and maintaining sexual relationships. Precisely, none of the studies in Nigeria have simultaneously addressed premarital sexual initiation of males and females at the national level. This study builds on this gap to contribute up-to-date evidence about the behavioral factors associated with sexual debut among adolescents in Nigeria.

Objectives and Significance

This study seeks to assess the multifactor predictors of premarital sexual initiation among adolescents in Nigeria. Its significance lies in identifying behavioral risk factors that can easily be targeted by intervention programs. Methodologically this study seeks to balance the emphasis on females and reproductive behavior by simultaneously incorporating the experience of male adolescents in the analysis.

Data and Methods

This analysis uses the nationally representative data from the 2003 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey. A total of 2,497 male and female adolescents aged 15-24, were selected for analysis. The outcome measure for the study is whether adolescents initiated sexual activity before marriage. To explore the multifactor predictors of premarital sexual behavior, the study controlled for individual, community and national level variables:

age, gender, and educational attainment, religious affiliation, marital status, nature/status of employment, adolescent living arrangements, household wealth status, place of current residence and place of childhood residence and ethnic origin. A binary logistic regression is executed to estimate the net effects of independent variables on the likelihood of engaging in premarital sexual initiation. The binary logistic model is written as:

$$\text{Log} (P_i / (1 - P_i)) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 \ldots + \beta_p X_p + \varepsilon$$

Where, P_i is the probability of premarital sexual initiation for an individual i and $(1-P$ is the compliment). β_0 is the base log odd of the reference categories of Xs and β_j is the estimate of log odds of premarital sexual initiation due to the net effect of a given category of the explanatory variables X_j. ε is the error term associated with regression.

Results

The outcomes of the analysis point to a rise in the level of premarital sexual initiation among adolescents by 13 percent in four years. There is also a continued downward slide in the age of premarital sexual initiation particularly among female adolescents. The median age for female sexual initiation is 15, while that for males is 18. While 41 percent of adolescent males have initiated premarital sex, 46 percent of adolescent females have done the same.

There is a positive association between levels of educational attainment, status and nature of adolescent employment and initiation of premarital sexual activities. Adolescents in formal employment and manual workers (more likely to work away from home and outside parental influence and control), indicate higher propensities for

premarital sexual initiation. Their job is most likely to provide resources necessary to finance sexual exploration.

Ethnic origin and religion are significant predictors of adolescent initiation of premarital sex, with Muslims less likely to initiate premarital sex than Christians. Ethnic groups in the South-South and, South-West and the South-East in descending order of magnitude, indicate higher propensies than those from the three geopolitical zones in northern Nigeria.

Adolescent transition to independent living enhances premarital sexual initiation, with adolescent heads of households more likely to have initiated premarital sexual activities when compared to adolescents living with parents or relatives. This may be speaking to the role of adult authority in the control of adolescent behavior which may be lacking when young people form their own households.

There is a curvilinear association between household economic status and premarital sexual initiation, with those from the richest and poorest households exhibiting similar high propensities for premarital sexual initiation. While seeking for livelihood may be a plausible explanation for the behavior of adolescents from very poor households as other studies suggest, the behavior of adolescents from richest households needs a closer and critical interpretation. It may be related to an affluent lifestyle and exposure to the stimulating environment associated with modernization. In the final analysis, the interpretive aspects of these outcomes and the mechanisms in operation and their overall implications will be part of this ongoing study.

In conclusion, while age of premarital sexual initiation continues to fall, the knowledge of reproductive issues like ovulation, attitudinal and behavioral changes necessary for protection from the dangers of STIs and HIV/AIDS, as well as the potential unwanted pregnancies and consequent desperate and clandestine abortion among other adverse reproductive outcomes, remain low. This point to the gaps that will need to be filled by policies and programs in behavioral and attitudinal changes needed for protecting the reproductive health of Nigeria's next generation.