Race and First Sexual Intercourse: A Case Study of Two Cohorts of Females in Belo Horizonte, Brazil

Several studies of Latin American and Caribbean populations have pointed out that the first sexual intercourse is happening earlier among youngest generations of females. In Brazil, the 1996 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) shows a decline of 9% in the median age at first sexual intercourse among 25 to 29 year-old females, if compared to the 45 to 49 year-olds (DHS, 1996). Many scholars have already pointed out that age at sexual debut among females is an important aspect of their reproductive behavior, with far-reaching consequences in many dimensions of their lives. For instance, the likelihood of having unprotected sex, acquiring sexually transmitted diseases, and having an unintended pregnancy is higher among young females who experience sexual initiation earlier (POPULATION HANDBOOK, 1992; GUPTA, 2000). Likewise, the younger a woman starts her sexual life, the smaller is her agency within the relationship (MOORE, 2004). Furthermore, in many cases, marriage comes earlier for those females who wait until the wedding day to have their first sexual intercourse, since those who have their sexual debut out of the wedlock are seen as girls for dating but not for marrying (MIRANDA-RIBEIRO, 1997).

A comparison of whites and *negros* (browns + blacks) in Brazil, according to the Racial Atlas of Brazil (UNDP, 2005), suggests that there is a huge gap between the two racial categories. Therefore, the racial component should be included in every study of social life in the country.

Considering the aforementioned context, the objective of this paper is to investigate the age of first sexual intercourse of white and *negro* (black + brown) females, from 20 to 29 years-old and 50 to 59 years-old, in the city of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, in 2002. The objectives are twofold. Firstly, it aims at verifying the changes in the age of first sexual intercourse, comparing the role race/skin color in the observed differences of the two birth cohorts. Secondly, it intends to investigate the differences in the norms and values encompassing age at first sexual intercourse when females from different cohorts, race/skin colors and educational levels are compared.

Data come from the survey "Saúde Reprodutiva, Sexualidade e Raça/Cor" (SRSR), conducted by Cedeplar, in 2002, and from seventeen focus groups meetings carried out by

the first author in Belo Horizonte, in 2003 and 2004. The SRSR is one of the most recent Brazilian surveys about sexual and reproductive health and among the few which are representative at the *município* (city) level. A three stage stratified sample was used for collecting data. At the first level, the National Census Bureau Record was used for stratifying and selecting a sample of 70 census tracts in each city. The sectors were selected through systematic sample, with proportional probabilities to the size, being the total number of households, found in the last Demographic Census (2000), used as a measure of size. For each sector, a sample of 29 and 26 households was selected, respectively, in Belo Horizonte and Recife. Those households were visited by the interviews for registration of their residents and identification of the eligible population. A draw was performed in those households having more than one eligible female (15-59 years-old). Thus, the probabilities of being selected were pproximately the same for all households. At the end, 1,302 complete interviews with 15 to 59 years old females were accomplished, representing the female population of the city (MIRANDA-RIBEIRO & CAETANO, 2003).

Three hundred sixty one interviews were made with 20 e 29 years-old women and 173 with those belonging to the 50 to 59 year-old cohort. Together, these two cohorts include 534 women. Excluding those who declared themselves as being yellow and indigenous – which are not part of the target population of this study –, 521 females who declared themselves as being white, brown or black were included in this investigation.

Although not representative at the city level, data generated by focus group discussions bring some insights into norms and values encompassing female's age at first sexual intercourse, information that would be extremely difficult to obtain otherwise. Considering that life experiences, to some extent, may vary according to specific socio-economic, cultural and demographic characteristics, focus groups meetings were organized to incorporate different dimensions that could influence the age at sexual debut among females. Considering that, three variables were taken into account: birth cohort (being the youngest cohort those women born from 1978 to 1982, and the oldest cohort those born from 1943 to 1952), educational level (measured dichotomously as low-educational level and high educational level), and race/skin color (white and *negra*). There are three main reasons for analyzing females according these categories. First, *negras* are more likely to have their sexual debut at a younger age than white females (PERPÉTUO, 2000). Second, less educated women usually start their sexual life earlier than those with higher educational

levels. Finally, the 1996 DHS has indicated that younger cohorts of women are initiating their sexual lives earlier than did women from the past generations. These results indicate that females with different socio-demographic characteristics are engaging in differentiated sexual behavior. Each meeting was organized with females from the same cohort, with the same level of education, and race/skin color.

SRSR data analysis provides basic descriptive information about the selected sample and also yields the necessary data for estimating survival curves via Kaplan-Meier estimates. Log-rank tests are used to compare these curves.

Quantitative results suggest intra cohort differences in age at first sexual intercourse. It also shows that the difference in the age of sexual debut was greater for white and *negro* females of the oldest cohort. White and *negro* females of the youngest cohort have the same median age at first sexual intercourse. Qualitative results reveal contradictions among norms and behaviors regarding age at first sexual intercourse among females. For example, although the majority of the youngest cohorts values virginity until marriage, it does not happen in real life. First sexual intercourse is understood as an event that encompasses responsibility, maturity and may jeopardize subsequent events, such as marriage.

The main contributions of this study are found in two fronts. Firstly, it is based on representative quantitative data on the city level, which can inform city-level public policies – most studies do not go down to such level. Secondly, it is a far-reaching approach about female sexual behavior to the extent that it brings together quantitative and qualitative data, improving the understanding of social, cultural and demographic factors related to this behavior.

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