

## **Marrying Young: Transitions in the Filipino Adolescents' Life Course**

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The study examines the context within which first marriage takes place in the life course of young Filipinos who marry in their teens. Context is defined as the timing and sequence of events surrounding first marriage among adolescents. Marriage may be legal or consensual and is examined in confluence with, or as a progression of, related events or transitions such as the first romantic relationship, first sexual intercourse, first pregnancy, and first use of contraception.

The sequence of events and pace of transitions related to marriage have important theoretical and practical implications. The idea of marriage as a process rather than a single event taking place at a single point in time is one that is not commonly applied in demographic studies. Furthermore, from a policy standpoint, it is important to determine the sequence of events that lead to early marriage to obtain insights into how personal events and relationships are dealt with by adolescents and to formulate appropriate programs and interventions for them. The young adult years is said to be a “demographically dense” period, meaning that several transitions occur in succession or simultaneity at this time more than in other stages of the life course (e.g., leaving school, entering the labor force, leaving home or migrating, marriage, childbirth, etc.). For teenagers marrying, the succession of transitions could be too many and too soon, at a time when their physiological and psychological development is crucial. For various reasons, therefore, teenage marriage is considered problematic to the individual and society, hence scientific investigation elucidating on this phenomenon, in different cultural contexts, needs to be undertaken.

This study gives focus on gender differences in the timing and context of early marriage. While age at first marriage has risen universally for both sexes, it still is true that teenage marriage is more prevalent among women than men. Furthermore, a recent national survey of Filipino youth has shown that, as in other cultural settings, personal and intimate interactions take on different meanings and, therefore, elicit different responses in men and women.

The data for the study are taken from the ongoing Cebu Longitudinal Health and Nutrition Survey (CLHNS) conducted in Metro Cebu, the second largest metropolitan area in the Philippines. A collaborative undertaking of the Office of Population Studies in Cebu City and the Carolina Population Center of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the CLHNS has been following up a birth cohort of children born between May 1983 and April 1984. At the start of the CLHNS in 1983-1984, there were some 3,000 newborn children recruited into the study. In 1991-1992, there were 2,261 of these children, then 7-9 years old, who were available for follow up; in 1998-1999, 2,089 of these children, already 14-16 years old were interviewed. In the latest survey of 2002, 2,051 adolescents were interviewed. Migration has been the major cause of attrition of the CLHNS sample.

In the 2002 survey, event history data was collected from the CLHNS children who were then 17-19 years old. The “life history matrix” contained information on the timing and sequence of events in relation to: a) education, b) employment, c) residence, d) romantic relationships, e) sexual experience, f) fertility, g) family planning and h) marriage. Information was recorded for each age of the respondent. If several events occurred in the same age, the order of occurrence within that age was likewise recorded. No precise dates in months and days within the year had been provided. Nevertheless, from this information, transition patterns of married and unmarried respondents, by sex, can be identified and analyzed. There is considerable difficulty, however, in linking the timing of these events to pertinent time-varying parental and household characteristics which were not collected in the life history matrix but in prospective surveys conducted at different intervals in the children’s life course.

The 2002 CLHNS interviewed 1,089 males and 962 female adolescents; 80% of these adolescents were 18 years of age, 19% were 19 years old, and 1% was 17 years of age. 5.8% of the men and 15.4% of the women had experienced marriage (legal or consensual), but only a negligible fraction (0.2% and 2.1%, respectively) were legally married. Cohabitation or a live-in arrangement was, therefore, the most prevalent type of marital experience among Filipino teenagers. Few cohabitations had advanced into legal unions (3.6%), more in fact ended in separation (15.8%).<sup>1</sup>

Of those who had married or cohabited, 80.6% had engaged in premarital sex. This proportion was higher for men (92.1%) than for women (75.7%). Moreover, 27.0% of married men and 37.2% of married women had a premarital pregnancy. Less than half of those who had premarital sex (39.7% of men and 19.6% of women) had used contraception. In fact, among married adolescents, 42.9% of the men and 54.7% of the women have never tried family planning.

Of the 89.7% of adolescents who had not married, 17.0% had experienced sexual intercourse (26.6% of men and 4.9% of women). Half of those with sexual experience tried some form of contraception, 13.1%, however, had gotten pregnant (8.4% of the men’s partners and 45.0% of women)<sup>2</sup>.

With respect to family planning use, withdrawal was the most common method first tried by adolescents (55.3% of ever users); the condom ranked second (24.6%) and the pill a distant third (12.1%). Among both married and unmarried adolescents who had sex but did not use contraception, the five most commonly cited reasons for non-use were: 1) insufficient knowledge about family planning (22.1%), 2) did not like to use (16.3%), 3) wanted to get pregnant (15.9%), 4) family planning never came to mind, and 5) sex was not planned.

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<sup>1</sup> This does not take into account right-censoring of the data.

<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to collect accurate pregnancy information from men; 5 male adolescents reported being unsure of whether their sexual partner had gotten pregnant or not.

The foregoing information should not obscure the bigger picture describing Filipino adolescent life course transitions. The pattern of events experienced (or not experienced) by adolescents 17-19 years old does emphasize the fact that a large majority (74.5%) of these teenagers has not experienced sex. Nearly a quarter of these adolescents did not even have a romantic relationship. While about one-half did have a romantic relationship, it did not include sexual intercourse.

With respect to the experience of premarital sex and pregnancy in conjunction with marriage, the patterns reveal the following distribution: 1) 13.2% of adolescents had sexual experience but not pregnancy and marriage, 2) 2.1% experienced pregnancy but not marriage, 3) 6.8% had no premarital pregnancy but had gotten married, and 4) 3.5% had premarital pregnancy and got married. There are substantial gender differences in these distributions, however. Males were more likely than females to have sex or pregnancy without marriage, while females were more likely than males to be married, regardless of premarital pregnancy experience.

If the patterns or sequence of events (i.e., 1<sup>st</sup> romance (**R**), 1<sup>st</sup> sex (**S**), 1<sup>st</sup> pregnancy (**P**), 1<sup>st</sup> FP use (**F**), 1<sup>st</sup> marriage/cohabitation (**M**), or none of these events(--)) are examined separately for ever-married and never-married adolescents, the following dominant patterns emerge:

Males	Females	Both
Ever-married:		
R-S-F-M (14.3%)	R-S-P-M (20.9%)	R-S-P-M (17.5%)
R-S-M (11.1%)	R-S-M-P (11.5%)	R-S-M-P (11.4%)
R-S-M-P (11.1%)	R-S-M-P-F (11.5%)	R-S-M-P-F (9.5%)
R-S-F-M-P (11.1%)	R-M-S-P (8.1%)	R-S-F-M-P (8.1%)
R-S-P-M (9.5%)	R-S-F-M-P (6.1)	R-S-M (7.1)
Never-married:		
R (48.4%)	R (65.8%)	R (56.1%)
-- (25.0%)	-- (29.2%)	-- (26.8%)
R-S-F (11.0%)	R-S-F (1.6%)	R-S-F (6.8%)
R-S (10.0%)	R-S-P (1.4%)	R-S (6.1%)
R-S-F-P (1.6%)	R-S (1.1%)	R-S-F-P (1.2%)

Although more rigorous statistical testing is required (next phase of the study), the patterns suggest that premarital sex and pregnancy are common antecedents of teenage marriage. This observation is consistent with the norms of Philippine society which prescribe sex and childbearing to be within the purview of marriage. Premarital pregnancy is a particularly compelling reason to marry among young women. However, the fact that most teenage marriages are live-in arrangements and not legal unions, and that cohabiting unions typically imply less commitment of couples should raise important questions on implications of this normative response by teenagers.

The patterns also reveal that fertility control prior to marriage is more commonly practiced by men than by women, regardless of whether they are now married or not.

However, the observation that there are relatively more unmarried but sexually active men and women who used contraception compared to their married counterparts (who used contraception prior to marriage) implies that premarital contraception helps to deter early marriage. The problem with contraception among teenagers is not just low prevalence but also the effectiveness of method used and, possibly, consistency of use.

Another important aspect to consider in the transitions occurring in adolescence is the timing or pace of these transitions. Among Filipino teenagers 17-18 years old, the average interval between: 1) first romance and first sex was 1.4 years for men and 2.0 years for women; 2) first romance and first pregnancy was 2.4 and 2.2 years, respectively; 3) first romance and first marriage was 2.5 and 2.3 years; 4) first sex and first pregnancy was 0.9 and 0.4 years; 5) first sex and first marriage was 1.0 and 0.4 years; and 6) first pregnancy and first marriage was 0.02 years for men and 0.09 years for women.<sup>3</sup>

The “compactness” of transitions among Filipino adolescents is obvious from the data. Particularly noticeable is the rush into marriage owing to pregnancy and sexual experience. The interval between sexual initiation and pregnancy (among those who did get pregnant) is quite alarming. All this information, however, needs careful interpretation so as not to lose sight of the large percentage of teenagers who did not get pregnant, or get married, or even have sex (censored cases). And even among those who did experience most of these transitions, a longer interval is not always advantageous compared to a shorter one; it could simply mean that first romance, or sex, or pregnancy, was experienced much earlier by the individual and it is uncertain what benefits, if any, this early experience brings to the individual.

With respect to covariates of early marriage, the bivariate analysis shows that the adolescent’s level of education and his/her mother’s educational attainment are negatively associated with marriage. Some risk-taking behavior like smoking and drug use are positively correlated with early marriage. Alcohol consumption among men, but not among women, is similarly correlated. Teenage marriage, especially cohabitation, may actually be considered as risk-taking behavior. Finally, a close nurturing relationship with parents can be a deterrent to early marriage.

The application of a hazards model in the next phase of this study is expected to uphold and qualify the results from the descriptive analysis. Sexual initiation is expected to be a significant determinant of marriage among teenage men and women, as is the first pregnancy. Pregnancy, however, will be a more compelling reason for marriage in women than in men. Contraceptive use, and consequently the avoidance of pregnancy, particularly among men, is expected to delay marriage.

Individual, parental and household characteristics will likewise be incorporated as potential confounding factors in the analysis. Education and employment status of adolescents will likewise be important factors to consider in the transition process.

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<sup>3</sup> Intervals are based on age, not calendar years. Intervals were computed only for teenagers who had experienced the two events paired.