

## Survey Sheds New Light on Marriage and Sexuality in the Philippines

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The recently completed Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFS-II) provides information on dating, marriage, and the onset of sexual activity in the Philippines. Survey results suggest that relationships between young couples tend to pass through a continuum of increasing commitment, usually leading to some form of traditional or formally sanctioned marriage. Most sexual activity takes place within the context of a committed—rather than a casual—relationship. Reported levels of premarital sex are higher than many have assumed, but most premarital sexual activity, particularly for women, appears to be initiated at some point during a process that leads to formal marriage. Indeed, the very definition of what is “premarital” is not always entirely clear.

This emerging picture of marriage as a process or continuum has important implications for reproductive health and family planning programs. This issue of *Asia-Pacific Population & Policy* summarizes survey results on the incidence of premarital sex and some of the factors associated with sexual activity among young people in the Philippines. More detailed information will be published in a full survey report.

### ABOUT THE SURVEY

Conducted in 1994, YAFS-II was the first nationally representative survey of youth

in the Philippines that covered both men and women. An earlier Young Adult Fertility Survey (YAFS-I), conducted in 1982, included only women. YAFS-II was conducted by the University of the Philippines Population Institute together with a network of nine regional research centers throughout the country. The project was supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The East-West Center's Program on Population collaborated in the survey, with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

YAFS-II represents all young men and women, age 15 to 24, living in households. A total of 10,879 young people were interviewed, with separate questionnaires for men and women and for married and unmarried respondents. In addition to information on individuals, screening data were collected on all households visited and on the 959 sampled local communities. Several sequences of questions were designed to elicit information on social patterns, sexual experience, and marriage.

### DIRECT QUESTIONS ON PREMARITAL SEX

Respondents were asked about their premarital sexual experience at three different points in the survey questionnaire. In the context of a sequence of questions about dating, men and women were asked if they had ever been on a date, either in a group or as a couple. Those who reported

having been on a date as a couple were asked a series of questions about their dating experience culminating in a question about sexual intercourse on their first date. In a separate section of the questionnaire, respondents who reported that they currently had a boyfriend/girlfriend, or had ever had one, were asked a similar series of questions. In still another section of the questionnaire, all single respondents were asked, "Have you ever had sexual intercourse?" All married respondents were asked "Did you have sexual intercourse before you were married?" Those who answered in the affirmative were asked several more questions about their first and their most recent sexual experience. Men were also asked whether they had ever had sex with a commercial sex worker.

Reports of sex on a first date were rare (Table 1). Reports of sex with the current or most recent boyfriend/girlfriend were more frequent but still uncommon. A much larger number of respondents answered the general question on premarital sex in the affirmative. A few responded inconsistently, giving a positive answer to one of the first two questions but a negative answer to the general question. The survey team defined a respondent as having had premarital sex if he or she gave a positive answer to any of the three questions.

Responses to these questions revealed two striking patterns. Men were much more likely than women to report premarital sexual experience, and respondents who were married were much more likely to report premarital sex than those who were unmarried.

How can so many more men have had premarital sex than women? Although it is possible that the men exaggerated their sexual experience, the survey provided no clear evidence of such exaggeration. Some—but clearly not all—of the difference in reported levels of premarital sex could be attributed to men's experience with commercial sex workers. Among

Table 1 Premarital sex: Respondents reporting premarital sexual experience, by sex and by marital status, Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFS-II), Philippines, 1994

Type of premarital sexual experience	Percentage reporting premarital sex			
	Men		Women	
	Single	Married	Single	Married
Sex on a first date?	2	3	0	1
Sex with current boyfriend/girlfriend? <sup>a</sup>	4	14	1	8
Did you ever have sex before marriage?	22	58	2	35
Did you ever pay for sex?	7	12	—	—
Total reporting premarital sex on any of the above questions	22	59	2	35

<sup>a</sup>Married respondents were asked whether they had had sex with their spouse before marriage.

single men, the proportion who had ever paid for sex rose steadily with age, from 0 percent among 15-year-olds to 22 percent by age 24. Among married men the pattern was different: the proportion who reported having ever paid for sex peaked at age 21 (at 18 percent) and then declined with age, to 10 percent by age 24. Few married men reported any recent experience with commercial sex.

Survey findings on premarital conception rates suggest that most of the male/female difference in reported premarital sexual experience was due to underreporting by women. The proportion of single women who reported a premarital conception was half the proportion who reported premarital sex. If these reports were accurate, they would suggest an abnormally high conception rate. Rather, they strongly suggest that an additional proportion of women actually had premarital sexual experience but did not report it.

Reports of premarital conceptions by married women lead to a similar conclusion: they suggest that at least 52 percent of married women had sex before marriage, rather than the 35 percent who reported premarital sex when questioned directly. Indeed, this figure for married women closely approximates the level of premarital sexual experience (59 percent) reported by married men.

Why do married respondents report a higher level of premarital sex than respondents who are single? It is clear from several earlier studies that survey respondents in the Philippines, particularly women, are more willing to report their premarital sexual experience after they are married. In addition, premarital sex tends to initiate or accelerate the process of marriage. If respondents tend to marry soon after their first sexual experience, then most of those who reported premarital sexual experience would have been married by the time of the survey.

Survey respondents who reported ever having had premarital sex were asked about their first sexual partner. Among both married and unmarried respondents, men were much more likely than women to describe their first partner as an acquaintance or friend. Women were much more likely to describe their first partner as a boyfriend. Very few respondents described their first partner as a fiancé or commercial sex worker.

Among married respondents, 57 percent of men and 51 percent of women reported having had sex with their spouse before they were married. Of these, very few of the women (3 percent) reported having had any additional partners, whereas 37 percent of the men reported additional premarital partners. This last figure is certainly an understatement,

Table 2 Serious relationships and sex: Single men and women in different types of relationship reporting sexual experience, by age group, Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality (YAFS-II) Study, Philippines, 1994

Relationship status	Percentage reporting sexual experience		
	17-year-olds	20-year-olds	24-year-olds
<b>Men</b>			
Never been on a date as a couple	4	10	22
Never had a girlfriend	2	13	25
Has had a serious relationship	26	46	64
<b>Women</b>			
Never been on a date as a couple	1	3	0
Never had a boyfriend	0	1	4
Has had a serious relationship	7	5	13

however, because 63 percent of the same married men reported that their first sexual experience was not with their spouse. While specific percentages may be imprecise, the survey findings strongly suggest that men, far more often than women, are involved in sexual networks before marriage that include their future spouse among other partners. Of all the married men in the sample, about 21 percent had premarital sexual relations with multiple partners including their future spouses.

### PREMARITAL SEX AND SOCIAL PATTERNS

The YAFS-II survey included several questions on social patterns such as dating and "having a boyfriend/girlfriend." A comparison of responses to these questions with responses to questions on premarital sex suggests that many young people in the Philippines become sexually active within the context of a "serious" boyfriend/girlfriend relationship—the type of relationship that is likely to lead to marriage.

Single respondents were defined as having had a "serious relationship" if they had ever been on a date as a couple, rather than in a group, and if they had ever had a

boyfriend or girlfriend. To these were added: (1) any respondents who specifically mentioned dating a boyfriend, girlfriend, or fiancé; (2) those who had ever planned a wedding date; and (3) those who described themselves as engaged. By this definition, about 20 percent of single women and 28 percent of single men had been in a serious relationship by the time they were 17. By age 20, 44 percent of single women and 63 percent of single men had been in a serious relationship. By age 24, the proportion reporting a serious relationship was 60 percent for single women and 68 percent for single men.

Table 2 compares the sexual experience of single respondents who had or had not been in a serious relationship. This comparison shows a strong association between serious relationships and premarital sex, particularly for women. Virtually no single women reported having had premarital sex outside a serious relationship. The association between premarital sex and serious relationships was also strong for single men. Among 24-year-olds, however, about one-fourth of the single men who had never been on a date as a couple or had a girlfriend reported some sexual experience. Such experience is likely to have occurred with casual partners or commercial sex workers.

## THE MARRIAGE PROCESS

Altogether, 24 percent of the women and 10 percent of the men interviewed during the survey described themselves as married. Among all the women who said they were married, only 47 percent had been married in a church. Another 26 percent had been married before a judge in a civil ceremony. The remaining 27 percent reported that they were currently living with a partner (in Tagalog, *kasalukuyang may kinakasama*). Among currently married men, 47 percent had been married in church, 21 percent in a civil ceremony, and 32 percent were living with a partner.

This last designation—living with a partner—usually describes a traditional Filipino marriage form in which commitment is public and life-long, rather than delimited or conceived as a trial arrangement. Elopement (*tanan*) is another widely recognized marriage institution in the Philippines, most common among low-income families but recognized and practiced across all social classes. A couple typically elopes because their parents are opposed to their marriage. They disappear for a short time, perhaps a few days, and then return to seek their parents' approval. Under the threat of public embarrassment, the parents are likely to accept the situation. After a couple elopes, they may live together for a period of time or indefinitely. In a few cases the elopement is followed immediately by formal marriage in a church or civil ceremony.

Among all respondents who described themselves as formally married (*kasal*) at the time of the survey, about half reported that they had lived with their spouse before marriage, and about 29 percent said that they had eloped. Elopement virtually always appears to involve a period of living together, but many respondents reported that they had lived together but had not eloped.

Table 3 breaks down the marriage process according to the ultimate form of marriage reported at the time of the survey. Half of the respondents who had been married in church reported some prior stage in their marriage process—either an elopement, a period of living together, or both. Among those who had been married in a civil ceremony, prior stages of marriage were even more common. Looking at these data from a different angle (not shown in the table), 34 percent of all the women who had either eloped or lived with their spouses had been married in church by the time of the survey, 23 percent had been married in civil ceremonies, and 41 percent still designated their marital status as “living together.” Responses were similar for men: 34 percent who had either eloped or lived with their spouses had eventually been married in church, 19 percent had been married in civil ceremonies, and 45 percent were still “living together.”

Among the respondents who were already formally married, the period of living together before their marriage was short. Seventy percent of respondents who had lived with a partner before a church or civil marriage had lived together for three months or less. Only six percent reported living together for two years or longer. Among men who reported having lived with a partner but who were not formally married at the time of the survey, the time spent living together averaged 23 months; for women in this category the average time spent living together was 29 months. Because this survey only covers respondents up to 24 years old, it understates the proportion of couples living together who will eventually marry in a church or civil ceremony (by leaving out all those who marry at age 25 or above). Similarly, by omitting all experience after age 24, the survey understates the average period during which couples live together.

**Table 3 Marriage as a process: Currently married men and women reporting previous marriage stages, Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality (YAFS-II) Study, Philippines, 1994**

Current marital status	Percentage reporting previous stages of marriage				
	Eloped only	Lived together only	Eloped and lived together	Eloped or lived together	Did not elope or live together
<b>Men</b>					
Married in church	3	31	17	51	49
Married in civil ceremony	6	34	24	64	36
Living with partner	1	59	39	100	0
<b>Women</b>					
Married in church	5	26	16	48	52
Married in civil ceremony	5	28	26	59	41
Living with partner	0	58	40	99	1

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

During the 1994 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFS-II) in the Philippines, 22 percent of single men and 2 percent of single women age 15–24 reported sexual experience. Among married respondents in the same age group, 59 percent of men and 25 percent of women reported sexual experience before marriage. These results probably underestimate the premarital sexual experience of young women, particularly those who are single.

Survey questions on marriage, dating, and sex show a pattern of committed relationships, with sexual activity beginning at some point on a continuum leading to marriage. Most of the sexual activity reported by young men and virtually all of the activity reported by young women occurred within a committed relationship. In a clear shift from past policies, the most recent formulation of the Philippine government's family planning strategy, while acknowledging that the issue is controversial, nevertheless promises reproductive health information and services for unmarried youth.

The results reported here reinforce the government's initiative by demonstrating that “marital status” is a rather poor ba-

sis for deciding whether to provide or withhold family planning and other important services. Many young people officially designated as single are actually living with a partner or are involved in a committed relationship that functions as a marital union. By reducing the likelihood of accidental pregnancy, the provision of reproductive health services will allow these young people to move through the process toward formal marriage more thoughtfully and with greater volition. The resulting increase in personal control will be especially important for young women.

The risk of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases raises another concern. A significant minority of young men reported sexual activity outside committed relationships. Twenty-five percent of the 24-year-old men who “never had a girlfriend” reported sexual experience, and 22 percent of those still single at age 24 reported that they had visited a commercial sex worker. These young men, and their current and future partners, will benefit from the provision of condoms and counseling on disease risk.