Premarital sexual behaviour among unmarried population: Exploring gender differences in India

Background

Perceptions, norms and values towards premarital sex in Indian society is a socio-cultural construct, which differs with age, social class, division of labor, freedom of social life moments, and kinship arrangements, especially by gender. It is widely discouraged not only in India but, in many countries. In many cultures in Asia, pre-marital sex is banned to prevent unwanted pregnancy and better reproductive health outcomes among adolescents. In India, pre-marital sex is culturally unaccepted. However, comprehensive understanding of premarital sexual behavior in India is relatively scarce as sexuality remains a sensitive issue. Urbanization, modernization, and exposure to western culture appear to have led to the erosion of traditional beliefs and values and the importance of virginity on marriage, and contributed towards more permissive attitudes towards sex, especially premarital sex. This study analyzes the social context of premarital sex in a gender perspective that affects patterns and the characteristics of premarital sexual behaviors, which are critical to the development of preventive strategies.

Data and Methods

The basic data used in this paper has been taken from the fourth round of the Indian version of Demographic and Health Survey, called NFHS-4, conducted in 2015-2016 in 601,509 households across 640 districts in the country. The information on premarital sex collected from 169,814 unmarried women and 40,003 unmarried men age 15-49 have been analyzed using Cox Proportional Hazard Model having the following functional form:

$$\lambda_i (t) = \lambda_0(t)\, e^{\Sigma \beta x i}$$

Where λ_i is the rate at which individual i will transition to first sexual intercourse during the risk period, given that he or she was a virgin at time t. On the right-hand side of the equation, λ_0 is the baseline hazard rate at time t for all individuals in the sample when all covariates are 0. In Cox proportional hazard models, λ_0 is undefined. β is a vector of parameters associated with a vector of covariates, Xi, which contain the independent, intermediate and control variables.

Results

Wide gender differences are evident in the case of reported premarital sexual intercourse in India, where never married males are much more likely to have premarital sex (16 %) as compare to their female counterparts (3%)**.** Cox regression analysis portrays that both male and female of younger age groups are significantly more likely to initiate premarital sex at early ages. This means that it has been emerging as a recent phenomenon, where younger generation are more open and able to surpass the socio-cultural bindings and taboos on premarital sex. The power of cultural values and norms, which are the bindings on most of the Indians from premarital sexual relationship are weakening overtime resulting into increasing prevalence of premarital sex among adolescents and youth. Cox regression shows that Muslims men are significantly more likely (HR=1.16 times) to have premarital sex at younger ages. A significant caste differential exists for age at first premarital sex among men in India. Men belonging to schedule tribe and other backward castes are more likely (HR=1.17 and 1.08 times) to have premarital sex at early ages. Regional differences in the prevalence of premarital sex at early ages are also evident remarkable. Men and women from east and central region reported that they have experienced premarital sex at early age as compare to other regions. Significant relation portrays that men from southern region are less likely (HR=0.74 times) to have premarital sex at early ages, while those from central regions are more likely (HR =1.13 times). Respondents either male or female who do not have comprehensive knowledge about HIV/AIDS are more likely to initiate sex earlier than those who do have.

The mean number of partners in premarital sex is strongly related to the length of time since first coitus. Study highlights that adolescents and youth are more prone to have multiple partners in their premarital sexual behavior, where the intensity of risk is much higher among men. Never married men who had started sex at early age (less than 15 years) are likely to have premarital sex with multiple partners (34 to 42%).This proportion is also higher among their female counterparts, which attains a peak in the group 20-24 years (26%).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings culminate that there exist wide gender differences in the prevalence of premarital sex in India. Higher prevalence of premarital sex among adolescent boys and youth is much higher among men, which cuts across their various socio-economic and demographic

characteristics. The empirical observations also suggest out a fact that women in contemporary society are far more empowered and are ready to embrace their sexuality. However the counterpart male mindset has hardly changed. Above discussions, reveals that unmarried females with higher education, attaining legal age residing in urban areas and who belong to richest wealth quintile, those exposed to regular mass media are more fascinated of multiple sexual partners. Despite concerted efforts and a number of vertical programmes and policy implementation of the government of India, condom use in premarital sexual behaviour still remained low in both male and female. The desire to find similar temperament partner who supports emotional, physical, and sexual desires has increased in the want to experiment and indulge oneself in premarital relations. Embarking on a relationship does not mean youngsters have marriage on their mind. Whether it is a one-night stand, a causal relationship or a live-in, commitment does not have to be on the agenda. The study demands for the empowerment of younger population, through enhancing their reproductive and sexual rights education to promote safe sexual behaviour in premarital sexual encounters.

Table : Gender differences in mean age at first premarital sex and results of Cox Regression indicating factors associated with age at first sexual initiation

Background Characteristics	Mean Age at first premarital sex			
	Male	Hazard Ratio for male (95% CI)	Female	Hazard Ratio for Female (95% CI)
Age (Years)				
15-19	16.1		16.1	
20-24	19.0	0.23***[0.21-0.26]	18.7	0.21***[0.17-0.27]
25-29	21.4	0.09***[0.08-0.10]	21.0	0.09***[0.07-0.12]
30-34	23.2	0.05***[0.04-0.06]	22.2	0.06***[0.04-0.09]
35-39	24.3	0.04***[0.03-0.05]	22.6	0.04***[0.02-0.07]
40 and above	24.0	0.04***[0.03-0.04]	21.4	0.04***[0.02-0.08]
Education				
No education	19.5		17.9	
Primary	19.3	1.00 [0.85-1.18]	18.2	0.85 [0.50-1.45]
Secondary	19.2	1.04 [0.91-1.19]	18.0	1.01 [0.66-1.54]
Higher	20.5	0.94 [0.81-1.09]	19.8	0.78 [0.49-1.23]
Residence				
Urban	20.0		19.3	
Rural	19.3	1.01 [0.94-1.08]	18.1	0.89 [0.73-1.09]
Caste				
SC	19.4		18.0	
ST	19.3	1.17***[1.06-1.29]	19.0	0.89 [0.67-1.21]
OBC	19.3	1.08**[1.00-1.17]	17.8	0.82 [0.64-1.06]
Others	20.3	0.99 [0.91-1.09]	18.9	0.80 [0.58-1.11]
Religion				
Hindu	19.5		18.0	
Muslims	19.1	1.16***[1.05-1.29]	17.9	1.18 [0.85-1.66]
Others	20.3	0.98 [0.89-1.07]	19.6	0.92 [0.69-1.21]
Region				
East	18.8		17.7	
West	19.6	1.06 [0.94-1.19]	18.1	0.99 [0.65-1.66]
North	19.4	1.07 [0.97-1.19]	19.0	0.93 [0.65-1.31]
South	22.2	0.74***[0.64-0.85]	18.6	0.88 [0.53-1.48]
North-East	20.3	1.01 [0.88-1.16]	19.8	0.89 [0.53-1.48]
Central	18.7	1.13**[1.01-1.26]	17.7	0.96 [0.67-1.37]
Wealth Index				
Poorest	18.3		17.2	
Poorer	19.0	0.96 [0.86-1.06]	17.7	0.79 [0.58-1.07]
Middle	19.6	0.95 [0.85-1.05]	18.8	0.83 [0.57-1.15]
Richer	20.0	0.89** [0.79-0.99]	19.1	0.71**[0.51-0.99]
Richest	20.4	0.88** [0.79-0.99]	19.7	0.77 [0.54-1.11]
Regular exposure of media				
No	19.1		17.3	
Yes	19.6	0.96 [0.81-1.15]	18.7	0.93 [0.67-1.28]
Comprehensive Knowledge of HIV/AIDS				
No	19.5		18.5	
Yes	20.0	0.95 [0.90-1.01]	19.7	0.93 [0.78-1.11]
Total	**19.6**		**18.5**	