

## Investigating nonconsensual sex: Silence threatens adolescents' health and rights

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**A**lthough there is increasing evidence of risky consensual sex among adolescents in developing countries, less attention has been paid to non-consensual sexual experiences. As a result, reproductive health programs for young people implicitly assume that all sexual activity is voluntary. Yet existing data, while limited, present a disturbing picture of coerced sexual activity among adolescents, especially girls. Anecdotal evidence, crime data, and findings from small case studies indicate that a significant number of girls and, to a lesser extent, boys have experienced coercive sex.

While nonconsensual sex may occur at any age, the context is likely to differ significantly between young people and adults, requiring a special focus on adolescents' experiences and needs. Moreover, the implications of nonconsensual sex for young people's rights, their physical and mental health, and their social development are multifaceted. Because adolescents are at a formative stage of social and physical development, nonconsensual sex at a young age can set patterns that damage long-term physical and mental health.

### Current research and program efforts

Nonconsensual sex among young people in developing countries is clearly an important subject with wide-ranging implications (see, for example, National Research Council



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and Institute of Medicine 2005). Indeed, the subject is of concern in multiple sectors, including adolescent health and development, sexual and reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, gender relations, and human rights.

In September 2003, the Population Council's India office, in collaboration with the World Health Organization/Family Health International YouthNet Project, convened a meeting in New Delhi that brought together leading researchers and program implementers to discuss the needs of young people aged 10–24 affect-



*Perpetrators of nonconsensual sex are most often individuals with whom the young victim is acquainted.*

ed by nonconsensual sex. Topics included experiences of young men and women, prevalence, forms and contexts, roles of the legal system, interventions to prevent coerced sex, support and treatment for victims, and research design and methods. Participants agreed that effective programs must consider the factors underlying adolescents' ability to engage in safe sex and their ability to choose whether or not to engage in sex.

Researchers from the Council, WHO, and FHI have assembled the evidence presented at this meeting and will soon publish their evidence-based findings from a number of countries in Asia, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa. This volume summarizes what is known about nonconsensual sexual experiences of young people in developing countries. Articles shed light on patterns, risk factors, and outcomes of sex without consent. The evidence underscores the need for measures to address young people's vulnerability to unwanted sexual advances (Jejeebhoy, Shah, and Thapa, forthcoming).

### **Insights**

Despite the heterogeneity of socio-cultural settings, study populations, study designs, and definitions of nonconsensual sex, researchers have noted several consistent findings. For example, while young females, married and unmarried, are most at risk, young males are also vulnerable to unwanted sexual experiences. Early marriages,

especially in settings where arranged marriage is common, are frequently characterized by forced early marital sex.

In many aspects, data on nonconsensual sex in developing countries mirror the findings of studies in developed countries. Research suggests that perpetrators are overwhelmingly an acquaintance, such as a friend, a peer, or an authority figure. Also, a small but disturbing proportion of forced sexual experiences occur in settings assumed to be safe and nurturing, namely home and school. Gang rape of young women by young men is increasingly observed in diverse settings and is perceived as a form of male bonding as well as a display of masculinity and power.

Researchers point to a number of factors that are thought to place young people at risk. At the individual level, inadequate negotiating skills, lack of communication about sexual matters, and a lack of awareness of rights and opportunities for recourse can put an adolescent at risk. At the family level, the nature of interactions between young people and their parents and other trusted adults rarely permits discussion of sexual health matters in a supportive environment. Institutional indifference—at the community, school, legal, and health sector levels—inhibits victims and others who may seek counseling on how to confront a threatening situation. Indeed, studies underscore consistently that double standards and power imbalances between sexes perpetuate a sense of entitlement among young men to force sex while holding their female victim responsible for “inviting” or provoking the coercive incident.

Evidence also points to a variety of outcomes associated with nonconsensual sex: risky subsequent behaviors in consensual relationships, including early consensual first sex, unprotected sex, multiple partners, drug and alcohol abuse, and, in extreme cases, prostitution. Early experience of unwanted sex is also associated with an increased risk of later sexual and physical abuse in consensual relationships. For example, young boys who experience coerced sex are more apt to perpetrate sexual and physical abuse in subsequent relationships.

Mental health consequences, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, have been attributed to

nonconsensual sex. Physical health threats include the risk of unintended pregnancy, unsafe abortion, and sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS (Jejeebhoy and Bott, forthcoming).

Finally, the social consequences of nonconsensual sex range from poor educational achievement and withdrawal from school to the inability to build adult partnerships, loss of marriage prospects, and rejection or loss of support by family and friends.

### Areas for future work and advocacy

Existing research on nonconsensual sex among young people is of limited scope, thereby restricting our ability to generalize findings. A more holistic and realistic approach would address the underlying factors—most notably, unbalanced gender norms and traditional notions of masculinity—that pervade youth culture. Greater communication and negotiation among young people on sensitive matters should be encouraged. Efforts are also needed to support victims and sensitize parents, families, providers, and others to the consequences of sexual coercion and the need to provide a supportive and nonjudgmental environment. Finally, it is critical that the legal and advocacy approaches are strengthened and that awareness is built about the rights of young people, including the rights of young women within marriage.

Researchers from the Population Council, WHO, FHI, and other organizations have outlined an ambitious research agenda that focuses on both substantive and methodological issues (Jejeebhoy, Shah, and Thapa, forthcoming). Research is needed to delineate the range and context of nonconsensual sex experienced by young men and women; to explore the role of young men as victims and perpetrators; and to further our understanding of power in youthful sexual relations.

Researchers need to explore the roles of parents, teachers, and health care providers in precipitating or protecting against nonconsensual sex. They should document obstacles to sexual negotiation and help-seeking behavior and assess the causal relationships between nonconsensual sex and health outcomes. Documentation of interventions that show the way forward— including



*The experience of nonconsensual sex in adolescence is associated with a range of subsequent risky behaviors in consensual relationships.*

those aimed at young people, their parents, teachers, and health care providers—is urgently needed.

### References

- Jejeebhoy, Shireen J., Iqbal Shah, and Shyam Thapa (eds.). Forthcoming. *Sex Without Consent: Young People in Developing Countries*. London: Zed Books.
- National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. 2005. *Growing Up Global: The Changing Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries*. Panel on Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries, ed. Cynthia B. Lloyd. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

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