

# Premarital Sex in India: Issues of Class and Gender

LEKHA SUBAIYA

This study is aimed at understanding premarital sexual activity in India using data from the third round of the National Family Health Survey. At the national level, reported premarital sex is still fairly low among women and somewhat higher among men. The data show that ever married women are more likely to report premarital sex compared to currently unmarried women. Among unmarried women and men who report premarital sexual activity, the distributions vary by place of residence, occupational status, level of education, and level of household wealth. Unmarried women who are aware of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases are less likely to have had premarital sex. Notably, there is a significant gender dimension in reporting of premarital sexual activity, pointing the way for further research.

In the last two decades, the attention devoted to research on sexuality in India has been on the rise, almost solely due to the advent of AIDS. Until then, sexuality was considered a private matter in traditional, family-oriented India, and sex outside marriage was treated as non-existent in the public arena.

## Introduction

The pattern of the spread of HIV/AIDS in India challenged the widely held belief that there were low rates of multi-partner sexual activities and other risky sexual behaviour in the country. Since then, researchers have paid more attention to non-marital sexuality in India, albeit from the perspective of sexual behaviour as it relates to sexual health (for example, Nag 1996; Verma et al 2004).

However, the issue of premarital sex in India remains a poorly explored topic. Not enough is known about the levels, trends and regional patterns in sexual activity before marriage in India. A review of the literature on adolescent sexuality by Jejeebhoy (2000) showed that anywhere up to 10% of unmarried girls and women and 20-30% of unmarried boys and men have been sexually active. Given the conservative attitude towards non-marital sexuality, even this vague figure for premarital sex is revealing. Further, there are indicators that the numbers are likely to be higher than those reported by women, especially in poor and rural areas. In a community-based study of rural tribal women in Maharashtra, Bang et al (1989) found that nearly half of all unmarried girls were sexually active. The methodology used in this study included women's self-reported clinical histories and physical examinations.

At the same time, in-depth interviews and reports from men suggest that women are likely to under-report premarital sexual activity. Bhende (1994) found that there were higher rates of sexual activity among poorly educated adolescents in a slum area of Mumbai than was directly reported by them. In-depth interviews of medical practitioners and community leaders, along with young boys and girls and their mothers, indicated more activity than was reported by the adolescents and their mothers. Interviews with men also provided indirect evidence that they find sexual partners among the unmarried girls within their own community. Male respondents in a qualitative study in rural Gujarat indicated that unmarried girls in their own village were available for sex (Joshi et al 2004). That women are likely to have under-reported in these studies illustrates that there are strong cultural norms against young girls and women engaging in premarital sexual activity.

The arranged marriage system still dominates Indian culture, and chastity is highly valued within it. According to societal and familial norms, premarital sex is not allowed, and families go to

Lekha Subaiya ([lekha@isec.ac.in](mailto:lekha@isec.ac.in)) is at the Population Research Centre, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore.

great lengths to protect the chastity of unmarried youth, especially girls. In this scenario, it is necessary to understand the linkages to premarital sex. It is important to study sexuality in the Indian context, and changes thereof, because the start of sexual activity coincides with the time that one transitions to adulthood and begins to take on adult roles. Sexual exploration should be entered into with full knowledge and awareness so that individuals can make healthy choices for themselves. In the absence of the ability to make healthy choices through lack of knowledge or lack of power, or both, the consequences can be dire. These include sexual coercion, unwanted pregnancy, abortion and its consequences, and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) (Joshi et al 2004; Mehta et al 2004).

### Premarital Sex in India

In general, Indian men and women are not expected to have sex before marriage. While there is some laxity with regard to men's sexual behaviour, women's chastity is still greatly valued. However, studies show that there is premarital sexual activity in the country, with the rates being higher for men than women in every study. As mentioned earlier, Jejeebhoy's review of studies on adolescent sexuality (2000) showed that the rates for women ranged from 0-10% of unmarried girls and women and from 20-30% of unmarried boys and men, depending on the study. These studies varied in type from self-administered questionnaires in magazines and respondent interviews to reports from clinical examinations. They were not comprehensive and tended to cover sub-populations. The first type of study tended to cover urban upper and middle class populations due to self-selection in readership, while the community studies were mostly of students, and poor and tribal populations.

In the popular media, there is now a sense that sex before marriage is on the rise with the social and economic changes brought about by globalisation. The increasing exposure of youth to western culture is thought to have effected a change in moral attitudes towards sex before marriage. That premarital sex is entering popular culture was reflected in a mainstream Hindi movie which had the protagonists, played by popular actors, living together and having a child before marrying each other. Further, certain trends such as the increase in urbanisation, financial independence among young women through employment, and the age at marriage support this argument, as do studies gauging the attitudes of youth to premarital sexuality. A 1991 study, which surveyed school students who were in the ninth to 11th standards in urban and rural areas of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi through self-administered questionnaires, found that only a marginal majority (51%) agreed with the statement "unmarried people should *not* have sexual intercourse" (FPF and ORG 1992). However, on breaking down the group by gender, the trend towards liberal moral attitudes was more pronounced among male students than female ones.

While these studies focused on establishing the levels of non-marital sexual activity in a socially conservative society to link it with sexual health, and not to determine the correlates of premarital sexual activity, the findings do lend themselves to speculation on the probable motivations. There is some evidence from

qualitative studies that women see a premarital relationship as a last chance at romance and emotional happiness before an arranged marriage removes the ability to focus on their own needs. Researchers who analysed data collected for the Sexual Health Project by the Deepak Foundation in a rural area of Gujarat suggest that the period between the onset of menarche and marriage presents a "window of opportunity" for fulfilling women's needs for love and tenderness through sexual relationships (Mehta et al 2004). The study also found that gifts of trinkets and cash were made to women in non-marital sexual relationships by their partners and that these were desirable, which suggest that economics can be a factor in such relationships.

An ongoing project by the Population Council and the Indian Institute of Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai, is in the process of collecting data on youths aged 10 to 29 in six states – Bihar, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand and Rajasthan. To date, information in the form of fact-sheets is publicly available for Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Jharkhand (Population Council and IIPS 2007). These population-level data reveal that there is premarital sex among female and male youth, but that at the same time, a very marginal percentage of the respondents in each state is engaged in discussions on sexual and reproductive systems, including pregnancy, by their parents. These two trends are suggestive of the situation in India – while sexuality is rarely talked about in the open and often considered to be non-existent, in reality, the situation is different.

Knowledge and awareness of STDs is significantly low in the Indian population. Data from the Reproductive and Child Health Study indicate that only 44% of women and 53% of men are aware of STDs (IIPS 2006). Awareness of HIV/AIDS is higher, with 60% of reproductive age women, and 84% of men in the third National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) having heard of it (IIPS and Macro International 2007). It is notable that while awareness of HIV/AIDS is higher among younger women and men, the youngest age group is the least likely to know about STDs. HIV/AIDS, which has received much attention in the media, is better known as STDs in general.

Premarital sexual activity in a society which sanctions against it can have serious implications for those without the power of self-determination. Societal control of the sexuality of unmarried girls results in a blinding lack of information on issues relating to it. Girls are unable to develop the ability to determine a healthy sexuality for themselves. Sexual expression in the absence of knowledge and the ability to make healthy decisions can result in sexual abuse and exploitation. There is evidence from interviews with men of sexual coercion of unmarried adolescent females despite this group being strictly supervised, or even because of it (Sodhi et al 2004). Other obvious implications for girls who engage in premarital sex and at the same time operate in an environment where it is taboo are unwanted pregnancies and abortions, and the resulting physical and social complications (Mehta et al 2004; Joshi et al 2004). An intervention programme by the group Swaasthya in a settlement in Delhi in 1999-2001 that targeted adolescent girls and women to develop their knowledge and coping skills with regard to reproductive health and sexual risk worked effectively to make them less vulnerable to

negative sexual and health outcomes (Sodhi et al 2004). Such programmes to increase knowledge and awareness of sexual and reproductive health, which enable females to determine their actions, are an obvious place for policy intervention.

To the extent that choice is being exercised, higher levels of premarital sexual activity represent a breaking down of social norms. If moral attitudes towards sex have changed, and young women and men are having sex out of choice, this trend could have long-term implications for a society like India. It would suggest the formation of new gender relations, in which the ability to make decisions is possessed by both. On the other hand, given the class and gender hierarchies that are present in India, the ability to make this decision is likely to be tempered by the position an individual occupies in the social strata. In other words, one's socio-economic class and one's gender is likely to determine how much power one has in making decisions about sex.

Until now, population-based, national-level data on unmarried men and women have not been available. The NFHS-3 included unmarried women and men in its survey population. This study is aimed at understanding premarital sexual activity in India. A major limitation of the study is that sexual activity per se is limited to actual sexual intercourse, whereas in actuality, the term is wider in scope and includes a range of activities, including petting, hugging, kissing, and oral sex.

**Data and Methods**

The data used for this study are from the NFHS-3 conducted in two phases in India under the aegis of the Demographics and Health Surveys (DHS) programme from November 2005 to August 2006. The DHS are nationally representative, population-based surveys of women and men of reproductive age. Information is collected on various populations and health characteristics, including fertility, family planning, child mortality, maternal and child health, nutrition, and individual and household background characteristics. A final report based on the findings of the NFHS-3 was released in 2007 (IPS and Macro International 2005-06). For the NFHS-3, a total of 124,385 women aged 15 to 49 years and 74,369 men aged 15-54 years from 109,041 households were interviewed.

This analysis includes all women and men, unmarried and married. For the first time, information was collected from both

married and unmarried men and women in the NFHS-3. There were 25,462 women and 25,382 men among the unmarried respondents for whom there was information on age at first intercourse, and 96,000 women and 48,988 men among the married respondents for whom there was information on age at first intercourse and age at marriage. From this information, it is possible to gauge whether the respondents had intercourse before marriage. The methods used in the analysis are solely descriptive in nature, and the aim of this section of the study is to describe premarital sex across all the states by various social, demographic and economic characteristics.

To gauge the reliability of the data, the rates from the NFHS-3 are compared with that from the in-depth study of youth aged 15 to 24 years mentioned earlier. The Youth: Situations and Needs study is being carried out in six states and data for three are publicly available in the form of fact sheets (Population Council and IIPS 2007). Table 4 (p 59) shows the comparable figures. For each state, the rate for the study is reported, followed by the rates from the NFHS-3 for each demographic group. The percentage is of the rate for the NFHS-3 data to that of the youth study. It can be seen that in all cases but one (Maharashtra) the rates from the NFHS-3 data are less than that of the youth study. It can also be seen that for each state, unmarried women were more likely to under-report than married women. This comparison shows that a national-level survey on demography and health as a whole is likely to underestimate levels of non-marital sexuality compared to a survey that targets the sexual and reproductive health of a particular population, in this case, youth.

**Premarital Sex by Gender**

The percentage of women and men who report premarital sexual intercourse are presented in Table 1. The data shows that about 1.8% of all women and 12% of all men report that they had sexual intercourse before marriage. The wide disparity between men and women in the rates of premarital sex indicates that there are different rules for men and women with regard to non-marital sexuality in India.

When breaking the numbers down by marital status, it is apparent that significantly more ever married women (2%) report premarital sex compared to never married women (0.7%), whereas slightly more never married men report premarital

**Table 1: Percentage of Persons Who Report Having Sexual Intercourse Prior to Marriage by Selected Characteristics (NFHS-3, 2005-06)**

		Women	Men
Marital status	Never married	0.7	13.5
	Ever married	2.0	11.2
Age	15-19	0.8	8.8
	20-24	1.5	16.0
	25-29	1.8	14.9
	30-34	2.2	12.5
	35-39	2.3	11.5
	40-44	2.5	9.5
Education	45-49	2.2	10.0
	50-54	–	10.4
	None	2.0	12.4
	Primary	1.8	13.0
Media exposure	Secondary or higher	1.5	11.6
	No or infrequent	2.0	11.2
Occupation	At least once a week	1.6	12.2
	Do not work	1.4	6.7
Residence	Have an occupation	2.3	12.7
	Rural	1.8	12.6
Wealth quintile	Urban	1.7	10.9
	Lowest	2.2	12.2
State*	Second	1.8	13.6
	Middle	1.7	12.7
	Fourth	1.6	11.9
	Highest	1.6	10.1
	Himachal Pradesh	2.2	–
State*	Punjab	2.7	17.2
	Uttarakhand	4.7	–
	Haryana	3.3	16.4
	Uttar Pradesh	–	14.5
	Sikkim	–	25.5
	Arunachal Pradesh	4.0	23.9
	Nagaland	6.1	27.7
	Mizoram	10.2	45.3
	Tripura	4.4	18.1
	Jharkhand	9.8	–
	Orissa	–	12.3
	Madhya Pradesh	–	12.7
	Gujarat	2.6	15.2
	Maharashtra	4.3	12.8
	Andhra Pradesh	–	15.6
Goa	4.7	–	
Kerala	3.3	14.6	
Tamil Nadu	2.8	–	
Total		1.8	12.0
Sample size		124,385	74,369

\* Only states with higher than average percentage shown.

sex (13.5%) than ever married men (11.2%). Among women, the percentage of those who reported premarital sex increases marginally with age, from 0.8% of those aged 15 to 19 years, to 2.2% among those aged 45 to 49 years. For men, there is no clear relationship with age, with those aged 20 to 24 years (16%) and those aged 25 to 29 (14.9%) reporting higher than average levels.

While there appears to be a strong relationship between education and household wealth and the levels of premarital sex among women, these relationships are less clear for men. The percentage of women who report premarital sexual intercourse decreases with an increase in their level of education as well as with an increase in the wealth quintile their household is in, albeit marginally. But there is no discernible relationship between premarital sex and men's level of education or wealth.

Both men and women show substantial differences by occupational status (whether the respondent has an occupation or not), with more of those who have an occupation reporting premarital sexual activity. Both men and women show little variation whether their residence is in a rural area or not.

Table 1 also lists the states in which a higher than average percentage report premarital sexual activity. More women in the north-eastern and south-western states report premarital sexual activity compared to women in other states, with the highest percentages in Mizoram and Orissa. More men in the north-eastern states of Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim as well as in Punjab and Haryana report premarital sexual activity.

The NFHS-3 collected data on eight cities, and percentages of premarital sexual activity in each city are presented in Table 2. The results show that very few cities report higher than average premarital sexual activity. For women, these are Mumbai (4.2%) and Chennai (3.4%), while for men they are Meerut (11.9%) and Mumbai (11.7%). In only one of the cities is the level of premarital sexual activity higher than the state average, Chennai.

**Premarital Sex by Marital Status**

Table 3 (p 58) shows the level of premarital sex according to social and economic characteristics and marital status. The distributions for unmarried women and men show that the level of premarital sexual activity for both groups varies by place of residence, occupational status, level of education, and level of household wealth. Women who live in rural areas are more likely to have had premarital sexual intercourse (0.9%) than those who live in urban areas (0.4%), those who have an occupation have higher levels of premarital sexual activity (1.2%) than those who do not (0.4%), and the percentage decreases with an increase in the education and wealth quintile. These relationships are also found among unmarried men. More men in rural areas report having had sexual intercourse (14.7%) than those in urban areas (11.9%), those who have an occupation have higher levels of

premarital sexual activity (17.1%) than those who do not (7.2%), and the level of premarital intercourse decreases with an increase in the level of education.

The distributions for married women show little variation by residence, occupational status and level of education, and while it does not vary for men, there is no clear pattern to any of these variables. Also, while the percentage who report premarital sexual activity generally decreases with an increase in the quintile of household wealth for married women and has an inverted u-shape for married men, again, the variation between levels is marginal. In sum, the results of bivariate analysis show that for unmarried women and men there is a variation in the incidence of premarital sexual activity by level of education, employment and level of wealth of the household, while the same is not true for married women and men. These results suggest that economic status is a significant factor for unmarried women and men but not so for married women and men.

At the same time, for three of the five questions on attitudes towards sex roles, unmarried women who give gender equitable responses are less likely to have had premarital sexual intercourse than women who agree that a husband is justified in beating his wife. Again, there is no variation for married women. On the other hand, men who support more equitable gender roles are more likely to report premarital sexual activity. It is notable that for both groups of men, unmarried and married, the pattern of responses to this set of questions is similar.

The distribution by marital status is important for women, because while it varies by social and economic characteristics for unmarried women, it does not vary very much by the same characteristics for married women. So, a closer inspection of marital status and sexual activity is necessary. The comparison of age at marriage and age at intercourse proves to be revealing. Of the 2% of married women whose age at first intercourse came before age at marriage, 1.6% had intercourse in the year before marriage and only 0.4% had intercourse earlier than that. The latter number is closer to the percentage of unmarried women who report that they have had sexual intercourse. This finding suggests that for a significant number of women who have premarital sexual intercourse, sexual activity leads to marriage. Either women marry the person they have sexual intercourse with (or have sexual intercourse with the person they are affianced to) or they get married subsequently. Thus sexual intercourse transitions into marriage for a portion of women.

**Class and Gender Dimensions**

Economic class and gender are two dimensions of socio-economic inequality in India which interact with each other, and have to be examined separately as well as in relation to each other to

**Table 2: Percentage of Persons Who Report Having Sexual Intercourse Prior to Marriage by Selected City and State (NFHS-3, 2005-06)**

State/City	Women	Men
Delhi	0.5	10.3
Delhi city	0.8	10.9
Uttar Pradesh	0.8	14.5
Meerut	0.3	11.9
West Bengal	0.7	7.8
Kolkata	0.6	3.2
Madhya Pradesh	0.3	12.7
Indore	0.2	8.9
Maharashtra	4.3	12.8
Mumbai	4.2	11.7
Nagpur	2.2	10.7
Andhra Pradesh	0.1	15.6
Hyderabad	0.1	6.2
Tamil Nadu	2.8	9.7
Chennai	3.4	9.2
Total % within cities sampled	2.0	9.6
Total number in city sample	20,508	16,518
Total %	1.8	12.0
Total size	124,388	74,368

understand their influence on sexual health. There are large differences in access to economic resources as well as to information and care in the health system by economic class, including sexual and reproductive healthcare. Gender refers to the cultural values, roles, practices and characteristics that are ascribed to each sex. In each society, there are different expectations of boys and girls, which have an impact on sexual behaviour, sexual responsibilities,

and the ability to access information about sex and healthcare (Rao Gupta 2000). Sexuality in India has to be understood in terms of economic class and gender differentials, since each dimension influences an individual's behaviour through the power he or she has to acquire information as well as make decisions.

The percentages of premarital sexual activity among unmarried and married women found in the NFHS-3 raises an interesting question: how much of the pattern in the relationships between premarital sex and age, education, and wealth status were caused by these factors, and how much by biases in reporting, primarily because of gender and class issues.

It is more than likely that the data that has been collected on sexual intercourse before marriage has been seriously under-reported, especially by women. Even though the anonymity of the interview was a required component of the survey procedure, anecdotal evidence from the field indicates that there was resistance to questions about sexual intercourse, albeit in the domestic violence module. In each instance, community leaders and officials had to be placated with assurances that the questions on sexual intercourse were part of a health survey before the survey was allowed to proceed. It is also notable that unmarried women interviewers said they were greatly embarrassed at having to ask questions about sexual intercourse. If these are examples of overt resistance to the open mention of sexual intercourse, it is likely that the responses from the interviewees was also inhibited. All this indicates that the understanding of the gender dimension operates even at the point of data collection, leave alone at the level of reporting.

The higher rates of response from married women are suggestive of biases in reporting. Of course, married women include women of all ages, and there are more women in the older ages in the married group than in the unmarried group. However, a comparison of women by marital status and age group suggest that in the younger ages (15 to 24), the rates are more similar between the two groups, though somewhat higher for married women. The higher rates in the older ages could be either due to the "ability" to report on a sensitive topic like premarital sex or due to the higher likelihood of premarital sex among the older cohort and those with a later age at marriage. If there is no error in reporting the two measures, it might also be because it is easier for married women, who are expected to have had sex, to talk about it and admit to premarital sex.

It is assumed that class has an influence on an individual's ability to access resources, including information and care in sexual and reproductive health. A person with more economic resources is more likely to have access to knowledge, and be more able to make healthy decisions about sex than a poor person. At the same time, when it comes to sex and women, gender operates within the context of a complete and enduring silence. As such, the interlinkages between class and sexual choices are complex in a culture with strong unwritten rules and regulations on women's bodies. So, the pathways through which class affects women and the negative consequences of ill-informed decision-making are an important aspect of sexuality in India, which need careful analysis and in-depth discussion. However, the overwhelming effect of gender on reporting makes it difficult to do a comprehensive class analysis. At the same time, the incidence of premarital sex among

**Table 3: Percentage of Women and Men Who Report Sexual Intercourse Prior to Marriage by Selected Characteristics (NFHS-3, 2005-06)**

	Unmarried Women	Married Women	Unmarried Men	Married Men
Age				
15-24	0.7	1.3	11.9	14.0
25-34	0.9	2.1	20.3	12.0
35+	1.7	2.4	23.4	10.2
Age at marriage (women/men)				
Below 15-18 years	–	0.7	–	6.1
14 to 18 years/19 to 21 years	–	1.8	–	11.4
19+ years/22+ years	–	3.5	–	13.1
Education				
None	1.6	2.1	18.6	11.3
Primary	1.2	2.0	17.0	11.7
Secondary	0.5	2.0	12.7	11.5
Higher	0.3	2.0	11.5	8.3
Occupation				
Do not work	0.4	1.7	6.2	12.1
Have an occupation	1.2	2.5	17.3	11.1
Attitude to sex roles: Beating one's wife				
Justified if wife goes out without permission	0.9	2.1	12.8	10.4
No	0.7	2.1	16.5	13.8
Justified if wife neglects the children	0.7	2.3	12.4	10.1
No	0.7	1.9	16.4	14.0
Justified if wife argues with her husband	1.1	2.2	12.3	10.4
No	0.6	2.0	17.3	13.4
Justified if wife refuses sex	1.5	2.0	13.2	10.8
No	0.7	2.1	20.6	15.6
Justified if wife burns the food	1.0	2.3	13.1	10.8
No	0.7	2.0	16.8	14.0
Knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases				
Heard of STDs	0.6	2.0	14.1	11.8
No	1.2	2.1	8.1	8.4
Heard of HIV/AIDS	0.5	2.1	14.1	11.8
No	1.3	2.0	8.6	8.8
Exposure to TV				
No or infrequent exposure	1.1	2.0	14.5	10.6
Almost every day	0.5	2.0	12.5	11.8
Residence				
Rural	0.9	2.0	14.7	11.6
Urban	0.4	2.2	11.9	10.2
Wealth quintile				
Lowest	1.6	2.2	16.3	10.8
Second	1.2	1.9	16.6	12.2
Middle	0.8	2.0	13.8	12.0
Fourth	0.4	2.0	12.9	11.2
Highest	0.3	2.1	11.0	9.5
Total %	0.7	2.0	13.5	11.1
N	25,462	96,000	25,382	48,988

unmarried women in India shows that there is a class dimension which needs to be addressed. For instance, the level of premarital sex is significantly higher among the lowest wealth quintiles, perhaps also indicating better reporting among them. On the contrary, among married women, such class dimensions are not observed (Table 3).

**Conclusions**

At the national level, reported premarital sex is still fairly low among women (1.8%) and somewhat higher among men (12%). The data show that ever married women are more likely to report premarital sex compared to currently unmarried women. A comparison of the age at intercourse and the age at marriage for married women reveals that the majority of women who had premarital sex report the start of sexual activity to have taken place in the year before marriage, suggesting that it is likely that sexual activity

**Table 4: Comparison of Reported Premarital Sex among Youth between Ages 15 and 24 Years in the NFHS-3 with Youth Study**

	Unmarried Women	Unmarried Men	Married Women	Married Men
Jharkhand				
Youth study	8.2	11.6	8.9	24.4
NFHS-3	3.0	10.9	6.8	11.1
%	36.6	94.0	76.4	45.5
Maharashtra				
Youth study	3.0	14.8	2.9	18.4
NFHS-3	0.1	10.7	3.5	12.5
%	3.3	72.3	120.7	67.9
Tamil Nadu				
Youth study	1.3	7.4	3.8	17.9
NFHS-3	0.3	2.5	1.4	9.7
%	23.1	33.8	36.8	54.2
Total NFHS-3	(0.7)	(11.9)	(1.3)	(13.1)
	23,588	20,721	23,640	11,880

Sample of married men are between ages 15 and 29 years.

takes place during the transition to marriage. Among unmarried women and men who report premarital sexual activity, the distributions vary in accordance with their level of education and household income. It is notable that gender equitable attitudes in men are associated with higher levels of premarital sexual activity, while the opposite is true for women. The present study found that unmarried women who were aware of HIV/AIDS and STDs were less likely to have had premarital sex. If the awareness of the consequences of risky sexual behaviour is combined with the better ability to determine safe and healthy outcomes among both women and men, then this is one avenue for public policy to ensure better sexual health in the population. Last, but not least, the study concludes that there is a significant gender dimension in reporting of premarital sexual activity in the NFHS-3, pointing the way for further research, analysis and discussion.

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May 31, 2008

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