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Regret about the Timing of First Sexual Intercourse: The Role of Age and Context

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Abstract: Objective: To examine how age at first vaginal intercourse is related to the circumstances of sex and specifically to the nature of the relationship between the partners, levels of autonomy, planning and regret. To quantify the contribution of age at first sex relative to the context and circumstances of sex.

Design: Cross-sectional survey of sexual knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of the Irish population carried out by telephone in 2005/6.

Participants: A nationally representative sample of the population of the Republic of Ireland aged 18 to 64 years (n=7441:3188 men and 4253 women).

Results: The median age of first vaginal sex was 18 for men and 19 for women. Median age at first sex had decreased by 4 years for men and 5 years for women over the last five decades. Sex was a 'spur of the moment' decision for 39% of men and 29% of women who had vaginal sex for the first time when they were aged 20+ compared to 74% of men and 56% of women who had sex at age 15 or less. Less than 1% of men and women whose first experience of intercourse occurred over the age of 20+ were unwilling or forced. These figures were 8% of men and 27% of women among those whose first sex was at age 15 or younger. A substantial minority (14% of men and 19% of women) said they wished that they had waited longer before having their first sexual experience. This increased to 28% of men and 52% of women who had their first sex before the age of 17. Controlling for age of first sex, the context and circumstances remain important predictors of subsequent regret.

Conclusions: Younger age at first sex was associated with weaker planning, lower autonomy, a less stable relationship with partner and higher levels of regret. However, regret after early sexual initiation was not universal and young age *per se* was not responsible for higher levels of regret. Instead, the lower knowledge and skills of early debutants and their impact on levels of planning, preparedness and willingness lead to later regret.

Keywords: First sexual intercourse; willingness; planning; regret

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Introduction

National surveys carried out in Europe, Australia and the United States have shown that there has been a substantial decrease in the age of first sexual intercourse over the last fifty years (1); (2); (3); (4). Research tends to show that the fall in age of first sex has been larger among women leading to convergence between the sexes over that period (2). There has been some stabilisation in the average age of first sex in several countries. Evidence for several European countries suggests that stabilisation occurred in the early 1980s (3), in the United States it occurred in the late 1980s (4) and in Britain, in the mid 1990s (2).

The reasons for the secular trend in age of first intercourse are not fully understood, but at the individual level earlier age of coitus is associated with earlier menarche (5); (2), lower family income and higher deprivation (5); (6) and a younger age of leaving education (3); (7); (1).

Research has shown that early age at first intercourse is associated with a higher probability that the individual will have recently met their partner, that they will experience coercion and that the event will not be planned (5). Young people who begin having sex before the age of 16 have also been shown to take more risks than those who begin having sex at a later age (8). This patterning is likely to contribute to the higher prevalence of subsequent regret among those having early sexual intercourse (9); (10); (2). Research has not, however, differentiated between the impact of young age and other contextual factors in terms of their influence on subsequent regret. Although young age is associated with lower sexual competence (2) and poorer outcomes, it could be argued that it is not age per se, but the knowledge and skills of young people, which should be the appropriate target of the public health response (11). This paper examines the context of early sexual initiation using data from a national survey of sexual attitudes, knowledge and behaviours (the Irish Study of Sexual Health and Relationships). After examining the relationship between age at first vaginal intercourse and levels of planning, autonomy and

relationship status, we then use logistic regression to quantify the independent effects of a number of contextual factors in determining subsequent regret.

Participants and Methods

Study Population

The Irish Study of Sexual Health and Relationships (ISSHR) is a cross-sectional telephone survey of the general population in the Republic of Ireland aged 18 to 64 conducted in 2005/2006. The sample for the survey was selected using the 'hundred banks' method where a telephone number 'stem' is selected at random from within geographical areas and the last two digits varied from '00' to '99' to produce a full set of 100 numbers to be called. This method allows the researcher to stratify telephone numbers within the population so as to gain adequate coverage within specific geographical areas whilst also calling a random sample of telephone numbers overall. Interviews were carried out using computer-aided telephone questionnaires (CATI). Overall 87,440 telephone numbers were called, of which 37,674 were valid numbers. At these numbers there were 12,510 eligible respondents of whom 4,639 refused to take part in the study leaving 7,668 to be interviewed, a response rate of 61.3%. This response rate is identical to that achieved in the French ACSF survey, close to that achieved by the two NATSAL surveys carried out in Britain in 1990 (63%) and 2000 (65%) but less than the Australian Survey of Sexual Health and Relationships (ASHR) that achieved a response rate of 73%. Two-hundred and twenty-seven respondents failed to contribute enough data to be used leaving 7441 valid surveys for analysis.

Increasing mobile phone use in Ireland, as elsewhere, poses a problem for telephone surveys which call landlines alone. Analysis of national Irish surveys carried out using other sampling methods shows that 88% of individuals live in households with a landline. This figure falls to 86% among men and 74% among women aged 18 to 24 years. Concern about potential exclusions from the survey due to reduced landline coverage was balanced in the survey through the use of sophisticated reweighting procedures. The study used a minimum information loss algorithm to adjust the data on the basis of gender, age cohort, educational attainment, marital status, current employment status and region to national population norms.

Measures

A dedicated section within the ISSHR survey asked a large number of questions about the circumstances of first sexual intercourse. Measures were collected of the characteristics of the sexual partner (age, sex), the relationship of the partner to the respondent, the level of willingness of both partners and the extent of planning. The survey also investigated how long this first sexual relationship lasted for and the respondents' retrospective evaluation of whether this was about the right time, whether they should have had sex sooner or whether they should have waited longer before having sex with anyone. A response that the individual should have waited longer before having sex for the first time is taken as indicating a level of regret.

There has been significant cohort change in the Republic of Ireland in terms of sexual knowledge, attitudes and behaviour. Thus in the multivariate analyses we control for the respondents age using a five-category variable which divides the sample into those aged 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54 and 55-64. Behaviour also varies significantly by sex thus all analyses are carried out separately for men and women. Present marital status is associated with current sexual behaviour and attitudes and could therefore influence the recollection of past events. To control for this in multivariate analyses we use a five category variable dividing the sample into those who are not in a relationship, those who are married, those cohabiting, those in a steady relationship but not cohabiting and those who are in a casual relationship. Age of first intercourse is strongly related to highest level of education. To control for this confounding factor we enter a four level variable: primary education only, lower secondary, higher secondary and third level education.

Results

Of the 7441 respondents who completed the survey 94% reported that they had had vaginal sexual intercourse. The proportion that had had vaginal intercourse was highest among those aged 35 to 44 (98%) and lowest among the youngest age group aged 18 to 24 (83%).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 1 shows that the median age of first vaginal intercourse was 18 for men and 19 for women with 21% of men and 12% of women reporting that they had had vaginal sex for the first time before the age of 17, the legal age of consent in Ireland. Table 1 also shows that there has been a decrease in the age of first vaginal sex across age cohorts. Whereas the median age of first vaginal sexual intercourse for those currently aged 55 to 64 was 21, this fell to 17 for men currently aged 18 to 24. Among women the decrease was larger: from age 22 among the oldest age group to 17 among the youngest, indicating a convergence in behaviour between the sexes over time. This fall in the median age of first sex also resulted in an increase in the proportion having their first vaginal intercourse before the age of 17. Among the oldest age group, 11% of men and 2% of women reported sexual intercourse before age 17. This rose to 31% of men and 22% of women in the youngest age group.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 gives the distribution of three contextual factors at first sex that may shape both the individual's experience of the event and their outcomes: the nature of the relationship, the degree of planning and their reported willingness. Across age cohorts, earlier age at first sex is associated with a lower likelihood that the person will have an existing relationship with the person among both men and women. The proportion who did not have a relationship with their partner increased from 21% of men and 7% of women who had their first experience aged 20+ to 63% of men and 41% of women who had their first experience aged 15 or less ($P < 0.001$ for the difference among both men and women).

The degree of planning around first event also varies with the age of first event. Thirty-nine percent of men and 29% of women who had vaginal sex for the first time aged 20+ report that this was a 'spur of the moment' decision compared to 74% of men and 56% of women who had sex when aged 15 or younger ($P < 0.001$ for the difference among both men and women). Lastly, Table 2 shows that reported level of willingness also decreases with lower age of first sex, particularly among women. Among men the proportion who were less willing than their partner or forced to have sex on that first occasion was less than 1% and among women, just over 1% for those

whose first experience was age 20+. Among those having sex aged at age 15 or younger however, this increased to 8% among men and 27% among women ($P < 0.001$ for the difference among both men and women).

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

The decrease in level of planning, relationship stability and autonomy with younger age of first sex may be associated with a higher likelihood of later regret. Table 3 gives the proportion reporting that they should have waited longer before having sexual intercourse on the first occasion by sex, age at first sex and current age group. This shows that within all age groups and for both sexes, having sex before age 17 was associated with a higher likelihood of subsequent regret. Men and women having sex before age 17 were 2.9 and 3.6 times more likely, respectively, to believe that they should have waited longer. Women who had early intercourse were 1.8 times more likely than men who had early intercourse to feel that they should have waited longer. Among women who report sex before age 17, those who are currently aged 25 or more are more likely to express regret at the timing of sex than women aged 18 to 24, although this difference is only mildly significant ($P = 0.068$).

Whereas women who had sex before age 17 in the two youngest age groups were 2.8 and 2.5 times more likely than their female peers who waited until after age 17 to express regret, the relative risk increases to over four among women aged 35 to 54 and to 6.5 among women aged 55 to 64. The increase in the proportion across cohorts having sex at an earlier age means that there has been an increase across cohorts in the proportion of men and women who report that they should have waited longer, although the pattern of increase is not uniform. Among both men and women, those aged 25 to 34 were more likely to express regret than the youngest age group, even though the proportion of the latter having sex before the age of 17 was higher. This pattern is the result of the lower proportion of the youngest age group expressing regret following sex under the age of 17.

Analyses so far have shown that sexual intercourse at a younger age is associated with lower autonomy, planning, stability of relationship and subsequent regret. However, to what extent is regret a direct response to younger age at first sex or a response to

the specific circumstances of first intercourse and subsequent experience? Table 4 gives the results of separate logistic regression equations which examine the influence of specific circumstances controlling for the age at which first vaginal intercourse took place. The odds reported are thus adjusted for the impact of age of first sex, plus the influence of current age group and marital status.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Table 4 shows that controlling for current age group and marital status, age at first vaginal intercourse has an important influence on subsequent regret. Having sex before at age 15 or younger leads to a seven-fold increase in the odds of later regret among men and a twenty-fold increase among women. The odds ratio for expressing regret relative to those having sex after age 20 roughly doubles with each subsequent decrease in age group.

The remaining effects are reported net of the influence of first sex. Table 4 shows that not having an intimate relationship with one's first sexual partner at the time of first vaginal sex leads to a significant increase in the odds of regret relative to being married or cohabiting, particularly if the partners had just met for the first time. Here the odds increase twelve-fold for men and twenty-two fold for women. Controlling for other factors, the age difference between the partners proves not to be a significant predictor of later regret. If the first sexual experience was a spur of the moment decision, this increases the odds of regret (relative to both partners having planned) by over 300% among men and 500% among women. Only one partner planning among men and neither partner planning among women were also associated with an increase in the odds of regret.

Among men, both the respondent or partner being less willing leads to an increase in the odds of regret, although the odds of regret for the respondent being 'less willing' are almost double those for when the partner is less willing. This would suggest that having a partner who is less willing is less likely to lead to a person having regret than when they are less willing themselves at the time of their first sexual intercourse. Among women, the respondent being less willing leads to a five-fold increase in the odds of regret. Analysis of the interactions between age of first sex and willingness

(not shown) show that the odds of regret increase hugely for those who had sex under the age of 17 and who cannot remember whether they were willing or not. Further analysis shows that not being able to remember the first occasion of vaginal intercourse was strongly related to use of alcohol.

Table 4 shows that the shorter the subsequent relationship following sex, the higher the odds of subsequent regret. Those men who never had sex with their first partner again were 4.5 times more likely to report regret than men whose subsequent relationship with the first partner lasted five years or more. For women the impact of relationship duration was even larger. Those women who did not have sex with their first partner again were almost 13 times more likely to report regret. Analysis of the interaction between age of first intercourse and the duration of the subsequent relationship (not shown) showed that the odds of regret were substantially decreased for those who had sex before age 16, but who then went onto have a relationship of more than six months, but less than a year. The extent of decrease does not though fully compensate for the impact of early sexual intercourse and relatively short relationship duration, both of which strongly increase the odds of regret.

Lastly, men who did not use any contraception at first vaginal intercourse were 1.9 times more likely to wish that they had waited longer. Non-use of a condom among men increased the odds by 1.9. For women the odds increase by 2.1 with non-use of contraception and 2 if a condom was not used.

Discussion

The decline in median age of first vaginal intercourse reported here for the Republic of Ireland mirrors declines reported elsewhere (3);(4);(2). Unlike other countries however, the age of first vaginal sex in Ireland has not stabilised as yet. This may reflect the fact that the decrease in Ireland may have started later than in other countries where secularisation and liberalisation around sexual issues began relatively earlier. However, it is not clear as yet that the median age of first sex in Ireland will converge with that for Britain and stabilise. As found in Britain (2), the change in behaviour over the last five decades in Ireland has been greater among women and this has led to a convergence in the age of first intercourse between men and women.

Research has shown that there has also been a convergence over time in the sexual attitudes of men and women in Ireland (12).

Although published figures are not strictly comparable due to differences in sample characteristics, methods of data collection and categorisation, the proportion of Irish men and women who reported being less willing to have sex than their partner in 2006 were very close to those published for Great Britain for 2000 (2). Figures for forced sexual intercourse were lower for the ISSHR sample than those reported for the British NATSAL survey or the New Zealand sample (9), at 0.8% across all women compared to 2% in Britain and 7% in New Zealand. Given the standard error of the ISSHR sample, the British and Irish rates of forced sex are not significantly different. It is still striking, nonetheless, that men and women gave substantially different accounts of their level of willingness for sex on the first occasion in the ISSHR survey. Almost 13% of women reported being less willing or being forced compared to 3% of men. Among those women who had sex before the age of 16, this proportion rises to over 27%. Although levels of regret following first vaginal intercourse were higher among those having sex at an earlier age, comparisons to Britain (2) show that Irish levels of regret are roughly comparable, with levels of regret in both countries lower than those found for New Zealand.

As in other countries (9), the Irish results showed substantial differences in experience and subsequent regret between the sexes. It is notable for instance that 88% of men, but just 68% of women report that they were as equally willing to have sex as their partner on that first occasion. Interpreting this finding is problematic since mutual willingness may have been higher among some groups than others, such as where both partners are inexperienced (9). Young women were around twice as likely as young men to subsequently regret their first sexual intercourse if this occurred before age 17, but the levels of regret are closer for older age groups. This suggests that young women are not as successful as young men in meeting their needs in early sexual encounters and/or that young men have lower expectations of sexual events. Evidence for this emerged in the logistic regression analysis where the odds of regret for young women who did not have a pre-existing relationship with their partner were roughly double those of young men in the same position. Similarly, young women who did not ever have sex with their first partner again were almost 13 times more

likely to express regret than those who had a subsequent relationship of five years or more.

Our analysis of the predictors of subsequent regret showed that not having a relationship with their first partner, weak planning and low levels of willingness were all strongly associated with subsequent regret among men and women, even controlling for the age at which first vaginal sex occurred. Though the likelihood of subsequent regret increased as age at first sex increased, only a quarter of Irish men (28%) and half of Irish women (52%) having sex before the age of 17 reported that they wished that they had waited longer. Though younger cohorts of Irish people are having sex earlier, they are more likely to use contraception when they do so and when having sex before age 17, were less likely than their older peers to subsequently regret the occasion.

Conclusions

Younger age at first sex was associated with weaker planning, lower autonomy, a less stable relationship with partner and higher levels of regret. However, regret after early sexual initiation was not universal and young age *per se* contributed to higher levels of regret, but was not solely responsible. Logistic analysis showed that less planning, lower autonomy, a less stable relationship with partner and a shorter subsequent relationship with first partner all contributed to higher subsequent regret irrespective of age of first intercourse. This would suggest that it is the lower knowledge and skills of early debutants and their impact on levels of planning, preparedness and willingness that leads to later regret rather than age alone. If so this has implications for sexual health promotion among young people. Our results suggest that regret is more likely to occur when individuals do not feel prepared for sex, feel coerced into it (a situation more likely to be experienced by young women) or when their relationship with their partner is not suitable and all these factors could be tackled by enabling and encouraging young people to be more articulate in expressing their views to their partner about what feels comfortable and right for them at their own level of sexual development. Merely waiting until a later age before engaging in sexual intercourse will not, in itself, improve these skills.

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Table 1: Median and Mean Age of First Vaginal Intercourse and Proportion Having Sex Before Age 17 by Age Group and Sex

	Median Age of First Intercourse (years)	Mean Age of First Intercourse (years)	Proportion having Sex Before Age 17 (%)
Men (N=3188)			
Age 18 to 24	17	16.9	31.3
Age 25 to 34	18	18.0	26.6
Age 35 to 44	18	19.2	20.2
Age 45 to 54	19	19.9	14.5
Age 55 to 64	21	22.0	10.8
All	18	19.1	21.3
Women (N=4253)			
Age 18 to 24	17	17.4	22.3
Age 25 to 34	18	18.5	18.7
Age 35 to 44	19	20.2	8.3
Age 45 to 54	21	21.2	5.7
Age 55 to 64	22	22.5	2.2
All	19	19.8	12.0

Table 2: Nature of Relationship, Degree of Planning and Willingness by Age of First Vaginal Sex

Nature of Relationship by Age of First Vaginal Sex

Men	Age at First Vaginal Sex				
	≤15	16-17	18-19	20+	All
Just met for the first time	13.7	9.3	8.1	5.0	8.1
Knew each other, but no relationship	48.9	35.8	28.4	15.5	28.5
Steady relationship at the time	37.4	54.9	61.4	43.7	50.7
Engaged to be married	0.0	0.0	1.0	6.8	2.6
Married or cohabiting	0.0	0.0	1.1	29.0	10.2
N	100	100	100	100	100
	305	816	788	1,016	2,929

Women	≤15	16-17	18-19	20+	All
Just met for the first time	2.8	2.5	1.2	0.7	1.3
Knew each other, but no relationship	38.3	19.0	12.4	6.3	12.3
Steady relationship at the time	55.9	76.2	69.0	38.5	56.5
Engaged to be married	1.6	1.1	9.1	11.8	8.2
Married or cohabiting	1.4	1.2	8.4	42.8	21.7
N	100	100	100	100	100
	148	819	1,154	1,823	3,944

Degree of Planning by Age of First Vaginal Sex

Men	Age at First Vaginal Sex				
	≤15	16-17	18-19	20+	All
One partner planned	2.0	3.5	3.3	4.5	3.6
Both partners planned	14.7	27.9	27.1	46.9	32.6
Neither partner planned	9.3	7.1	9.5	9.3	8.7
Spur of the moment decision	74.0	61.6	60.1	39.3	55.1
N	100	100	100	100	100
	307	816	785	1,012	2,920

Women	≤15	16-17	18-19	20+	All
One partner planned	0.4	2.7	3.4	4.9	3.8
Both partners planned	38.6	36.3	45.2	58.1	48.6
Neither partner planned	5.0	6.8	7.1	7.7	7.2
Spur of the moment decision	56.0	54.2	44.3	29.3	40.4
N	100	100	100	100	100
	148	819	1,154	1,823	3,944

Reported Willingness by Age of First Vaginal Sex

Men	Age at First Vaginal Sex				
	≤15	16-17	18-19	20+	All
Self more willing	3.3	3.8	3.7	4.1	3.8
Both equally willing	88.1	90.6	92.8	93.1	91.7
Self less willing, but persuaded	6.9	4.6	2.0	2.2	3.4
Self Forced	1.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1
Can't Remember	0.6	1.1	1.4	0.6	1.0
N	100	100	100	100	100
	308	816	791	1,012	2,927

Women	≤15	16-17	18-19	20+	All
Self more willing	0.6	0.8	0.8	0.4	0.6
Both equally willing	68.4	81.3	85.7	89.9	85.8
Self less willing, but persuaded	21.2	16.8	12.0	8.4	11.9
Self Forced	6.2	0.7	0.7	0.5	0.8
Can't Remember	3.7	0.5	0.8	0.8	0.9
N	100	100	100	100	100
	153	819	1,155	1,818	3,945

**Table 3: Proportion Reporting Regret - that they
'Should Have Waited Longer' Before Having
Intercourse on the First Occasion by Sex, Age
Group and Age of First Sex**

Men	Aged ≤16 (%)	Aged 17+ (%)	All (%)	Sample N
Age 18 to 24	25.1	11.7	16.7	633
Age 25 to 34	34.1	11.2	17.6	667
Age 35 to 44	23.9	9.0	12.0	622
Age 45 to 54	22.3	9.8	11.8	543
Age 55 to 64	38.0	7.1	10.7	468
All	27.9	9.7	13.8	2,933
Women				
Age 18 to 24	46.1	16.5	24.5	734
Age 25 to 34	54.6	21.6	28.0	917
Age 35 to 44	56.7	12.6	16.3	979
Age 45 to 54	52.2	12.3	14.5	728
Age 55 to 64	60.0	9.2	10.0	556
All	51.5	14.3	19.0	3,914

Table 4: Logistic Regression of Factors Predicting Later Regret About First Vaginal Sexual Intercourse*

	Men				Women			
	OR	P Val.	95%CI		OR	P Val.	95%CI	
Age at first sex^{*1}								
≤15	7.3	<0.001	4.6	11.5	19.8	<0.001	12.1	32.2
16-17	2.9	<0.001	1.9	4.4	7.5	<0.001	5.3	10.7
18-19	1.9	0.002	1.3	2.8	2.7	<0.001	2.0	3.6
≥20	1.0				1.0			
Nature of Relationship								
Just met for the first time	11.9	<0.001	3.4	42.0	22.2	<0.001	8.8	56.0
Knew each other, but no relationship	9.5	<0.001	2.9	31.1	15.5	<0.001	8.8	27.2
Steady relationship at the time	6.4	0.002	2.0	20.6	4.9	<0.001	2.9	8.2
Engaged to be married	5.6	0.022	1.3	24.6	3.2	<0.001	1.7	5.9
Married or cohabiting	1.0				1.0			
Partner's age								
Partner >5 years older	1.2	0.555	0.7	2.1	1.2	0.191	0.9	1.7
Partner 3-5 years older	1.1	0.502	0.8	1.7	1.0	0.795	0.8	1.2
Partner same age or within 2 years	1.0				1.0			
Partner 3-5 years younger	0.8	0.638	0.3	2.0	0.5	0.252	0.1	1.7
Partner <5 years younger	0.8	0.744	0.2	2.9	1.1	0.942	0.2	7.6
Degree of planning								
One partner planned	2.3	0.024	1.1	4.8	1.3	0.437	0.7	2.5
Both partners planned	1.0				1.0			
Neither partner planned	1.4	0.29	0.7	2.7	2.3	<0.001	1.5	3.5
Spur of the moment decision	3.3	<0.001	2.4	4.7	5.0	<0.001	4.0	6.4
Reported Willingness^{*2}								
Self more willing	2.4	0.003	1.4	4.1	2.1	0.152	0.8	6.0
Both equally willing	1.0				1.0			
Self less willing, but persuaded	4.2	<0.001	2.7	6.5	5.1	<0.001	3.9	6.5
Can't Remember	1.4	0.474	0.5	4.0	1.1	0.865	0.3	3.7
Length of sexual relationship								
Never had sex with this partner again	4.5	<0.001	2.9	7.2	12.8	<0.001	8.8	18.7
<1 month	2.7	<0.001	1.7	4.4	10.3	<0.001	6.4	16.3
≥1 month, but <6 months	2.3	<0.001	1.5	3.5	3.7	<0.001	2.6	5.2
≥6 months, but 1 year	1.4	0.172	0.9	2.4	2.5	<0.001	1.6	3.8
≥1 year, but <5 years	1.4	0.154	0.9	2.3	1.9	<0.001	1.4	2.6
≥5 years	1.0				1.0			
No Contraception at First Sex	1.9	<0.001	1.4	2.5	2.1	<0.001	1.6	2.7
No Condom at First Sex	1.9	<0.001	1.4	2.6	2.0	<0.001	1.5	2.6

* Controlling for age group, marital status, highest education and age of first sexual intercourse

*¹ Controlling for age group, marital status and highest education.

*² No respondents who reported being forced responded to the question on subsequent regret.

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