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### *Modernisation and Changes in Attitudes towards Sex and Relationships in Young People (Chapter 5), In: Wasti SP, van Teijlingen ER and Simkhada P (Eds), Crabtree SA (Series Ed). The Dynamics of Health in Nepal*

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## Modernisation and Changes in Attitudes towards Sex and Relationships in Young People

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### Summary

Issues related to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) remain the leading cause of ill health among adolescents and young people worldwide and are of growing concern in Nepal. Young people are defined as those between the beginning of puberty and the attainment of adulthood. It is generally agreed that this period is usually associated with problems and challenges as they learn to become young adults, and sometimes struggle to fit into society. In such case, they may start experimenting with drugs, alcohol, tobacco and sex, which can make them vulnerable to various infections such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). It is now recognised that young people have to develop their knowledge and skills to deal with the temptations and dangers associated with being an adult. Limited published literature reveals that Nepali cultures view sexuality as taboo, and it is generally understood that sexual activities outside marriage are not accepted. However, many studies show that a significant proportion of young people take part in pre- and extra-marital and high-risk sexual activities. Young people's sexual health behaviour might also have been influenced by the modernisation currently observed in many Nepali societies. In addi-

tion, many young people do not always use sexual and reproductive health services, and health facilities have failed to provide young people with specialised sexual and reproductive health education and services. Therefore, there is an urgent need for effective comprehensive sex education and young people-friendly sexual health services in Nepal.

## **Background**

In many developing countries, young people are at acute risk of STIs, HIV infection and unintended pregnancies (Speizer et al, 2003; Dahal, 2008). Social scientists also consider young people as excluded risk-taking trouble makers motivated by nothing more than their own self-interests (Miles, 2000). The research on young people is fascinating, not only as it has the potential to tell us so much about what it means to be a young person in modern society, but also because it can tell us about the changing nature of social life in general. It is generally believed that young people represent a rich source for sociological debate and discussion, but the risk lies in pursuing such discussion down avenues that do not accurately reflect young people's experience of social change. Miles (2000) also reminds us that young people are a barometer of social change. Sexuality is widely accepted as a fundamental and important dimension of human life (Thigpen, 2009), and sexual behaviour among adolescent and young people has been one of the important social and major public health issues (Collins et al, 2004; Le and Kato, 2006). There have been major developments in sexual and reproductive health research and programmes, particularly after the 1994 International Conference in Population and Development (ICPD) (Beesey, 2004; UNFPA, 2004; Dehne and Riedner, 2005). Issues related to sexual and reproductive health remain the leading cause of ill health among adolescents and young people worldwide and are of growing concern in Nepal (Jha et al, 2010). It is often argued that young people are an appropriate group to educate about the risk of HIV, and the introduction of appropriate interventions to prevent the spread of HIV (Selvan et al, 2001).

Young people are defined as those between the beginning of puberty and the attainment of adulthood (Agampodi et al, 2008). They fall into the age group 10–24 (WHO, 1997). Francis and colleagues (1994) argued that development of knowledge and attitude takes place during this period. Physical growth during this period is accompanied by sexual maturation leading to intimate relationships

which, if not guided properly, can lead to various problems (Jha et al, 2010). It is also generally agreed that this period is usually associated with problems and challenges as young people learn to become young adults, and sometimes struggle to fit into society. In search of their identity, young people may start experimenting with drugs, alcohol, tobacco and sex, which can make them vulnerable to contracting infections such as HIV (Gaash et al, 2003). In addition, cultural beliefs, including ideologies of masculinity and femininity, may affect individual's sexual decision-making (Dahal, 2008). It is now widely accepted that young people have to develop their knowledge and skills to deal with the temptations and dangers associated with being an adult. Similarly, Beautrais (2000) has noted that young people's problems, including family adversity, individual vulnerabilities, exposure to stressful life events, and social, cultural and contextual factors could also contribute to suicidal behaviour. Many health workers around the world are, therefore, trying to prevent, or at least reduce, risk-taking behaviour among young people: the developmental stage of adolescence is considered a period of turmoil (Mahat and Scoloveno, 2001).

The topic of sexuality generally remains taboo in many Asian countries including Nepal (Stone et al, 2003; Ali, 2004; Agampodi et al, 2008; Adhikari and Tamang, 2009). Sexual and reproductive matters are rarely discussed within the family environment and sexual activities outside marriage are not accepted in most Nepali societies (Mathur et al, 2001). Friendship with people of the opposite sex is still unacceptable in these societies although boys' behaviours in such activities are not closely monitored. Despite these traditional views, a significant proportion of Nepalese young people are engaged in pre-marital and high-risk sexual activities (Tamang et al, 2001; New Era/MOH, 2006; Adhikari and Tamang, 2009). A study carried out in Nepal reported that 15 per cent of young boys had engaged in pre-marital sexual intercourse (FHI, 2004). Another study carried out among school-going adolescents reported that 10 per cent of its sample had experienced pre-marital sex (*The Kathmandu Post*, 2005). A recent study carried out among college students of Kathmandu found that almost 40 per cent of young men reported having pre-marital sex (Adhikari and Tamang, 2009). These findings highlight that young people in Nepal start sexual activities at an early age and also suggest that the prevalence of pre-marital sex among adolescent and young people has been increasing noticeably.

## Young People and Sexual Behaviour

Research into sexual behaviour among young people has developed rapidly over the past two decades due to the growing incidence of HIV and AIDS (Vanlandingham et al, 1998; Leclerc-Madlala, 2002; Wellings et al, 2006; van Teijlingen et al, 2007). With the advent of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, issues of sex and sexuality have become a major public health concern, with a need to identify people's attitudes, beliefs and behaviour towards sexual and reproductive health (Bhugra et al, 2007). Most sex research has been epidemiological in perspective and has mostly been designed to discern particular risk groups and risky behaviours (Craiel et al, 1995; Vanlandingham et al, 1998). Sexual activity can have both positive and negative outcomes for people of any age (Masters et al, 2008); however, there is much evidence that the number of STIs and unwanted pregnancies is high for people of a young age (for example, Dangal, 2005; Dahal, 2008; NCASC, 2009; Acharya et al, 2010). Perhaps it can be argued that they often engage in risky sexual behaviour. Many previous studies have also documented negative outcomes of sexual activities, such as STIs, HIV and unintended pregnancies. Collins and colleagues (2004) found that unplanned pregnancies were more common among those who begin sexual activity earlier.

Although there was a general (mis)perception that adolescent and unmarried individuals rarely engaged in sexual relationships (Jejeebhoy, 1998), it is now widely acknowledged that a key period of sexual exploration and development occurs during adolescence (Mathai et al, 1997; Tamang et al, 2001). Wellings and colleagues (2006) reported that early initiation is more likely to be non-consensual, less likely to be protected against unplanned pregnancy and infection, and associated with a larger number of sexual partners. Many factors such as earlier onset of sexual maturation, peer pressure, increasing socio-economic problems, glamorisation of sex and delaying marriage have been reported, which directly or indirectly influence sexual activity among young people (Isarabhakdi, 2000; Akker and Lees, 2001; Bhui and Goodson, 2007; Dahal, 2008). Many studies in the past have examined the sexual behaviour of general and high-risk populations, and one of the most notable features of these studies is the striking gender difference in sexual behaviour. Evidence from an Asian study suggests that more men initiate sexual intercourse at an early age than females (Liu et al, 2006). A recent review by Wellings et al, 2006 documented that the median age of girls at first intercourse is low

in regions in which early marriage is the norm (e.g. in South Asia, Central, West and East Africa), and high in Latin America and in some countries of the Middle East and Southeast Asia. The median age at first sexual intercourse was reported as 16.5 for girls in Nepal. Another study carried out among South African adolescents reported that their first sexual encounters occurred at a young age, usually around 13 or 14 years (Wood et al, 1998). Conversely, the median age at first sexual intercourse for girls in Chile was 20.2 years (Wellings et al, 2006). These findings show that girls in poorer developing countries start sexual activities at younger ages.

### **Young People's Sexual Behaviour in the Context of Nepal**

Although data reveals that a significant proportion of Nepal's population is young (Pantha and Sharma, 2003), research on young people is still relatively new, and literature about sex and sexualities in the context of Nepal is fairly rare, which is not unexpected in a society where sexual matters are still considered a taboo (Mathur et al, 2001; Dahal, 2008; Regmi et al, 2008; Simkhada et al, 2010a). In fact, there are very few studies (e.g. Tamang et al, 2001; Puri and Busza 2004; Adhikari and Tamang 2009; Regmi et al, 2010a; Regmi et al, 2010b; Regmi et al, 2010c) in Nepal that provide an in-depth view of sexual behaviour among Nepalese young people. Many studies in Nepal have focused particularly on attitudes towards, and beliefs in, sex and sexuality (e.g. Mathur et al, 2001; Stone et al, 2003; Adhikari et al, 2007; Upreti et al, 2009), and most studies and interventions in young people's sexual behaviour have focused overwhelmingly on young people who attend school/college (Stone et al, 2003; Dhital et al, 2005; Pokharel et al, 2006). This may be a result of easy access to study participants in these settings. However, there is also evidence that a few studies have been carried out with young people who engage in work other than study (Tamang et al, 2001; Puri and Busza, 2004).

Limited published literature reveals that Nepali cultures still view sexuality as taboo and it is generally understood that sexual activities outside marriage are not accepted (Mathur et al, 2001; Okazaki, 2002). Smith (2002) also argued that pregnancy outside marriage in Nepal is catastrophic. Girls involved in such activities become unmarried unless a quick marriage can be arranged, their future is destroyed and they become social outcasts. However, many studies show that a significant proportion of young people take part in pre- and extra-marital and high-risk sexual activities (Tamang et al,

2001; New ERA/MOHP, 2006; Adhikari and Tamang, 2009). A recent national study on higher-risk sex (sexual intercourse with a partner who is neither a spouse nor a cohabiting partner) indicates that <1 per cent of women and 3 per cent of men had two or more partners in the last twelve months (New ERA/MoHP, 2006). Although there is evidence of homosexuality, particularly men having sex with men (MSM) (Dahal, 2008), same sex relationships in Nepal are widely unaccepted. Indeed, public acknowledgement of homosexuality is relatively very recent in Nepal, and its advocacy is spearheaded by a non-governmental organisation (NGO), the Blue Diamond Society (BDS) (BDS, 2008). A verdict from the Apex Court of Nepal also legalised the status of sexual minorities in the country and considered sexual minority groups as 'natural persons'. The Government of Nepal also gave consent to same-sex marriage in 2008 (*The Hindustan Times* 2008). Literature about the discrimination, sexual abuse, social harassment and lack of access to public services of sexual minorities is also rare in the context of Nepal.

Sexual behaviour patterns have not yet been studied in Nepal. A recent study among male college students in Kathmandu reported that more than half the respondents (57 per cent) had experienced kissing, and more than one third (35 per cent) reported that they placed their hand on a girl's genitalia. Almost 40 per cent of men in this study reported pre-marital sex (Adhikari and Tamang, 2009). Another study carried out among school-age adolescents reported that 10 per cent had experienced pre-marital sex (Kathmandu Post, 2005). This suggests that young people in Nepal start sexual activities at an early age, and this trend also suggests that the prevalence of pre-marital sex among adolescents and young people has increased noticeably.

There is also a view that opportunities for pre-marital sex have increased for young people due to a delay in marriage caused by young people pursuing educational and employment goals (Dahal, 2008). A study carried out in 2000 (Nepal Adolescent and Young Adult Survey) reported that only 15 per cent of young boys engaged in pre-marital sexual intercourse which was also lower than in other Asian countries (Thailand 40 per cent, Philippines 31 per cent), and pre-marital sex among Nepali girls was rare (Choe et al, 2004). This pattern of a large gender difference in the prevalence of pre-marital sex raises some questions, particularly about who the partners in these pre-marital sexual relationships are. One likely explanation



for the gender difference in the reported prevalence of pre-marital sex is that these boys may visit commercial sex workers. It is also possible that girls in sex-related surveys under-report their pre-marital sexual activities (Moore et al, 2007) and boys exaggerate their sexual activities (Brewer et al, 2000).

Research on young people's sexual behaviour has often focused on identifying critical factors such as peer pressure, parental involvement, drug use, and multiple partners, which are all considered risky sexual behaviours (Han et al, 2001; Puri and Busza, 2004). Many young people in Nepal are also vulnerable due to their risk-taking behaviours. Limited routine studies (New ERA/MoHP, 2001; New Era/MoH, 2006) and research reports (Sanzero and Mahat, 2003; Dahal et al, 2005; Acharya et al, 2010) document that a significant proportion of Nepal's young people are at risk of HIV, engage in high-risk behaviour and have high adolescent fertility. Perhaps young people's behaviour may be affected by culture, traditions and governmental and financial policies.

Marston and King (2006) argue that strong social and cultural forces shape sexual behaviour. Modern contraceptive prevalence rates in Nepal have risen steadily; however, levels still remain low. Among the 15-24 age groups, only 26.9 per cent women currently use any modern contraceptive methods (New Era/MoHP, 2006) although married women in this age category have a slightly higher contraceptive rate (41.6 Per cent). This also indicates that the majority of young people in Nepal are not using any contraceptive method, which contributes to high adolescent fertility. In some cases, there could also be a risk of transmitting HIV and other STIs. Reasons for not using contraceptives have been well discussed in the Nepal Demographic Health Survey 2001 and fertility-related reasons are frequently reported (New ERA/MoHP, 2001; New ERA/MoHP, 2006).

### **Modernisation and Young People**

Studies of modernisation and development have been at the forefront of the social sciences for the last three decades at least and many of their assumptions have guided much of the research in economics, sociology, political science, and social anthropology (Eisenstadt, 1974). However, it is also true that the concern with modernisation and development, in the narrow sense of the words, is relatively recent, having emerged mainly after World War II as part of the interest in problems of development in new nations or the Third World (Eisenstadt,



1974). The theory of modernisation has been developing for over a century (Inglehart, 1997); however, the proximate origins of modernisation theory may be traced to the response of American intellectuals and the political elite to the international setting of the post-Second World War era, and there has also been debate among social theorists. For example, Marx emphasised economic determinism, arguing that a society's technological level shapes its economic system, which in turn determines its cultural and political characteristics. Weber emphasised the impact of culture. The recent revision made by Inglehart (1997) claims that the relationships between economics, culture and politics are mutually supportive. Indeed, it is now widely accepted (as per modernisation theorists from Karl Marx to Daniel Bell) that economic development brings pervasive cultural changes (Inglehart and Baker, 2000). This argument also predicts the decline of traditional values and their replacement with modern values.

It is generally accepted that the dynamics of modernisation theory consist of mechanisms such as the introduction of urbanisation and the spread of mass communications and literacy which are also required for rapid social change (Bernstein, 1971). Indeed, "modernity' now refers to the modes of social life or organisation, which emerged in Europe from about the seventh century onwards and which consequently became more or less worldwide in their influence' (Giddens, 1990). Feldman and Hurn (1966) also argue that modernisation changes society and these social changes often generate other institutions and organisations such as those found in advanced societies. The central claim of modernisation theory is that industrialisation is linked with specific processes of socio-political change that apply widely. Economic development is particularly linked with a change that includes not only industrialisation, but also urbanisation, mass education, occupational specialisation and communication development, which in turn are linked with still broader cultural and social changes (Inglehart, 1997).

Economic development is associated with pervasive, and to some extent predictable, cultural changes (Inglehart and Baker, 2000). This suggests that perhaps modernisation and globalisation, particularly in many developing societies, are contributing to rapid socio-cultural changes. These developments are often related to the expansion of communication media, the growing access of the major groups in society, by such central communication media, and the wider participation of these groups in the cultural activities and organisations cre-

ated by the centrally placed cultural elites (Eisenstadt, 1974). Young people's behaviour related to sex and relationships might also have been influenced by the modernisation currently observed in many Nepali societies. Perhaps many young people now ignore traditional beliefs and cultural norms and are becoming more liberal. In many societies, these developments are blamed for weakening traditional values (Olukoya et al, 2001). The findings of this study in relation to modernisation theory are further considered in the discussion section of this chapter.

### **Partnership Formation, Sexual Debut and Sexual Behaviour in Nepal**

Although there is a great deal of literature available on partnership formation and dating cultures in Western society (Tang and Zuo, 2000; Ciairano et al, 2006; Greca and Mackey, 2007; Smiler 2008; Lau et al, 2009), literature about this phenomenon is rare in the context of Nepal. Indeed, research organisations that conduct research are often able to survey only small samples at a time (Francoeur and Noonan, 2004). The research available about sexuality and sexual health among young people in Nepal is also quite limited in scope. The formation of romantic partnerships with people of the opposite sex is not a new phenomenon in Nepal, the expression of romantic love partnerships with those of the opposite sex can also be found in many old Nepali folk songs, poems and stories (Ahearn, 2001); however, dating is considered a new phenomenon in Nepal, and there is no single study of dating and its relationship to young people's sexual behaviour, despite issues around young people and their sexual behaviour regularly attracting the attention of the media in Nepal, as well as that of policy makers, the general population and health researchers (Thapa et al, 2001; Stone et al, 2003; UNFPA, 2004; New ERA/MoHP, 2006).

The development of sexuality and the formation of heterosexual relationships are important features of the maturation process of young men and women (Chilman, 1980). There are also different views of friendship between the genders among young people. It is suggested that girls should not do things alone, nor is it a good idea for a girl to have male friends. Once a girl is noticed or seen with a boy, questions are raised immediately about the nature of their relationship. Burbank (1994) reports that Nepali parents do not encourage their daughters to meet or talk with boys. Similarly, Waszak and colleagues (2003, 83) also argue that '[girls caught talking to

boys in public are criticised and sometimes even punished by their parents and the community for being characterless'. However, with increased exposure to global TV and radio networks, films and the general modernisation of society and culture, the young urban generation has taken a definite turn in terms of its attitudes towards (sexual) relationships. There is a view that young men and women in Nepal are now more comfortable in each other's company.

There is also a growing trend towards pre-marital sexual activities among young people in Nepal (Prasai, 1999; Gubhaju, 2002; Adhikari and Tamang, 2009). There is a belief that many young people in Nepal are liable to engage in risky behaviour due to the influence of media (Dahal, 2008), but that is too simplistic a view. The limited anecdotal evidence also supports the view that attitudes towards sex and sexuality mainly come from the ancient texts of Hinduism, e.g., the Veda, Ramayana, and Mahabharata, and Buddhism (Francoeur and Noonan, 2004). These texts also reveal moral views on sexuality and marriage and that sex is a mutual and private affair between a married couple, where the husband and wife pleasure each other equally. In Nepal, various sexual materials including many pictures and statues can be seen within temple premises and in historical buildings; however, there is little literature which explains the effect of such pictures and statues on the sexual values of young people. Skipper and Nass (1966) also recognise the many important roles of dating, including as recreation and socialisation. Dating in this study is defined as meetings between young men and women for romantic and sexual purposes. These could be either chance meetings leading to short-term relationships with the opposite sex or planned meetings to explore and develop longer-term partnerships.

In the past, the transition from childhood to adulthood was associated with early marriage and childbearing. This has dramatically changed in many developed and developing societies and has resulted in an extended period of adolescence before marriage (Arnett, 2002; Gubhaju, 2002; Choe et al, 2004a). The 'emerging adulthood' theoretical approach argues that in a globalised world transitions to fully fledged adulthood are occurring at a later age than in the past (Arnett, 2002). With the social and cultural changes occurring in Nepal, this theory can help frame the developments mentioned above in a global and historical perspective. Similarly, Bott and colleagues (2003) also suggest that many South Asian boys and girls spend more years in education and marry later. Boys and girls are now more comfort-

able being around each other and dating at a much earlier age and more frequently than in previous decades (Rana, 2004). This may also create more opportunities for them to spend more time in intimate (sexual) relationships before marriage. Evidence suggests, however, that such opportunities may result in forced sexual activities, aggression, unwanted pregnancies, induced abortion, STIs and HIV (Burke et al, 1988; Hettrich and O'Leary, 2007; Muñoz-Rivas et al, 2007). Perhaps it can be argued that globalisation and modernisation have had some influence, particularly through the mass media. Until 1995, the government-owned Radio Nepal and Nepal Television used to be the most prevalent form of mass communication, delivering a limited amount of informative and entertainment programmes. From 1995, private radio stations, television channels and newspaper publishers entered into the mass communication business, and it is noted that these media often deliver various types of programmes that young people may find useful. There is also an increase in sexual images in the media, such as that in many television programmes from India, and includes Western programmes (Francoeur and Noonan, 2004). It is widely believed that these programmes are admired by the young people in the cities.

Traditionally, although pre-marital and extra-marital sex have been discouraged in Nepal and most of Asia (UNFPA, 1998; Puri and Busza 2004), studies conducted in different geographical settings have shown that unmarried adolescents in Nepal are becoming more sexually active (New Era/MoH, 2001; Gubhaju, 2002; Choe et al, 2004) and also increasingly vulnerable to STIs and HIV infection due to changing values, norms and independence. Studies conducted in different geographical settings show that the proportion of sexually experienced unmarried young people is high and this figure varies with different socio-economic groups (Dahal et al, 2005). An early study showed that 24.1 per cent of males and 14.9 per cent of females had engaged in pre-marital or extra-marital sex (Gurubacharya and Subedi, 1994). In sexual and romantic relationships, men are usually expected to be the initiators and women are expected to remain faithful to their partners, but many husbands appear to have extra-marital sexual relations. In particular, men who travel for their work or education may seek out sex workers during their travels (Francoeur and Noonan, 2004). Another study carried out with male college students revealed that about 10 per cent of the study participants visited female commercial sex workers (Shrestha and Gurubacharya, 1996).

Similarly, among young factory workers in Kathmandu 35 per cent of unmarried boys and 16 per cent of unmarried girls have experienced sex, and among them, love and curiosity were the most frequently reported reasons for their first sexual intercourse (Puri and Cleland, 2006).

Empirical evidence of motives for sexual behaviour among young people in Nepal is rare since most studies focus on knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about sex and sexuality issues, and most of the studies in recent years focus on HIV and AIDS. One study shows that sexual behaviour in Nepal is affected by factors such as age, sex, education, ethnicity, culture and religion (Dahal et al, 2005). There is also evidence that early sexual experimentation, multiple partners and low and irregular use of condoms are not uncommon in Nepali society (WHO, 1999; Puri and Cleland 2006; Simkhada et al, 2010a), and it is now widely accepted that unsafe sexual behaviour is one of the most common means of transmission of HIV and other STIs in Nepal. Dahal and colleagues (2005) report that almost one-quarter of sexually active unmarried young people were involved in risky sexual practices and unexpected opportunity is the most commonly described reason for risky sexual behaviour. Although most studies demonstrate the respondent's high awareness of condoms and their role in preventing HIV, there is also evidence that condom use among young people during sexual intercourse is irregular and low (Puri, 2001; Upreti et al, 2009). There are still misconceptions about condoms among Nepalese young people. Poor knowledge and poor services are the reported reasons for not using condoms. Lack of availability, partners not being prepared to use them, and lack of pleasure are the main reasons for not using condoms among young people (FHI, 2004; Dahal et al, 2005; Puri and Cleland, 2006). Stone and colleagues (2003) also found that a significant proportion of respondents (57.8 per cent boys and 47.6 per cent girls) believed that condoms could be used more than once.

A qualitative study conducted among injecting drug users shows that most of the respondents have experienced unsafe sexual practices (multiple partners, female sex workers, group sex) (FHI, 2004). This should be taken into account since most of the respondents were aged 10 to 25. This study also documented that most of the respondents enjoyed sex when they are under the influence of drugs. Studies conducted in other settings (Matteelli and Carosi, 2001; Choe et al, 2004) also found positive associations between drugs, alcohol and

sexual behaviour. Another study conducted with the young men in border towns in Nepal found that young men who reported alcohol consumption had almost four times higher odds of having casual sex than young men who did not consume alcohol (Tamang et al, 2001). In such conditions their decisions about safe sex might be affected by the influence of drugs and alcohol. Young people recognise that alcohol reduces social and sexual inhibitions and concerns about disease prevention and safe sexual behaviour (FHI, 2004).

Nepal is a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society (Regmi et al, 2008). The 2001 census identified 100 ethnic and caste groups (Dahal, 2003). Its different cultures and castes have their own norms and values which can have an important influence on unsafe sexual practice. Dahal and colleagues (2005) also note high and risky sexual activity among young people in rural areas where, for example, pre-marital sex among young people is disregarded by the local culture. This demonstrates that Nepal still entertains some cultural taboos which directly or indirectly influence young people's sexual health and behaviour. In some situations, it creates a supportive environment in which to access sexual health information and services. It has an enormous impact on young people's lives, particularly on their sexual and reproductive health (UNFPA, 2006). In many societies, culture also defines who is entitled to access sexual and reproductive health services through social control, laws and policy restrictions (Villarreal, 1998). The use of family planning services by unmarried young people is not accepted by the community in Nepal although contraceptive provision has not been officially restricted to married couples (Aryal and Adhikary, 2003). In such situations, there could be a chance of engaging unsafe sexual practices.

Important socio-economic, cultural and attitudinal changes arising in part from modernisation could contribute to rising sexual activity before marriage although expectations of sexuality vary along gender lines. It is also argued that young people's risk-taking behaviour is more common in communities that have more permissive norms (Choe et al, 2004; Udry and Chantala, 2004). The process of urbanisation and the increasing influence of Western culture affect many population groups, but especially the young, and are also seen to be responsible for the breakdown of other traditional customs. In this sense, the increase in pre- and extra-marital sex is seen by many as a consequence of the introduction of Western norms and values (Villarreal, 1998). There may also be a strong influence from popular culture (TV, films,

internet) on their sexual behaviour and attitudes. Evidence from the United States suggests that sexual content in the media in general encourages adolescents to initiate all types of sexual activity, including sexual intercourse (Collins et al, 2004), and this could equally be applicable in Nepali society since most young people residing in urban areas are exposed to Western television (Geary et al, 2006).

### **Dating and Pre-marital Romantic Partnerships**

Erikson (1968) described human life as a cycle involving seven developmental stages: infancy, toddler, early childhood, school age, adolescence, young adulthood, and maturity. It is now widely believed that dating constitutes an important activity in at least two of these developmental stages: adolescence and young adulthood (Tang and Zuo, 2000; Munoz-Rivas et al, 2007). In modern Western societies, the dating relationships of young people have gathered significant interest (Ciairano et al, 2006). There is also an older view that dating makes a silent contribution to the individual's socialisation into the adult roles of society, eventually leading to marriage and the establishment of home and family (Skipper and Nass, 1966). Tang and Zue (2000) also argue that dating and romantic relationships play a very important function for young people. Jaya and Hidden (2009) found that young people had a wide variety of expectations from their romantic partnerships, from casual relationships to physical intimacy and plans to get married. Indeed, at different points in time, dating has been organised around social desires for security, sexual conformity or socialisation (Adelman and Kil, 2007). Regardless of its form, meaning or motivation, dating has consistently been a key aspect of the institutionalisation of heterosexuality (Adelman and Kil, 2007).

It is generally believed that dating and romantic relationships are normative in adolescents (Carver et al, 2003; Collins, 2003). There is also a simple view that these relationships usually begin to develop around 14 to 15 years of age and take on increasing importance during adolescence (Collins, 2003). Carver and colleagues (2003), for example, also argue that by age 16, most adolescents report having had a romantic relationship. A study carried out with 781 adolescents (57 per cent girls) also found that most adolescents were romantically involved (Greca and Mackey, 2007). This highlights the fact that dating relationships generally start in adolescence (Munoz-Rivas et al, 2007), which is also a transitional development stage, and many changes, both emotional and physical, occur during that period. Perhaps it can



be argued that the declining age of puberty and the increasing age of marriage have created a growing window of opportunity in which young people may engage in pre-marital romantic relationships (Alexander and Colleagues, 2007). Young people's romantic relationships and dating behaviours are perhaps the most frequent subject of novels (Furman, 2002). Indeed, issues of romantic relationships and dating practice among young people have long been a centrepiece of media culture. Collins (1997) argues that participation in activities such as dating and romantic relationships are welcome developmental mileposts. There is substantial evidence that romantic relationships become increasingly important for young people's functioning over time. Young people often mention their romantic partner as an important person in their lives (Engels et al, 2007). '*Romeo and Juliet*' and '*Beatrice and Dante*' are considered classic love stories that have delighted generations of individuals (Furman et al, 2007). But visual media such as television and films have transformed our conception of life (Schwartz et al, 1980). Today's films are full of tales such as those of '*Jack*' and '*Rose*' in the movie *Titanic* or '*Raj*' and '*Simran*' in the Hindi movie *Dil Wale Dulhaniya Lejayenge* (*The Big Hearted Will Take the Bride*). Scientific investigation of this phenomenon had remained rare until fairly recently. Although research into the issues of young people's romantic relationships and dating practices have increased significantly in the past decade (Chen et al, 2009), almost all of the studies have been conducted in Western societies.

It is generally agreed that young people today have more strong positive emotions about the opposite sex than about family or same sex peers. It is no surprise to say that most young people pay less attention to, or even neglect, their close friends in order to spend time with a romantic partner (Roth and Parker, 2001). Indeed, most young people in many Western societies spend their time in various social environments outside school and home, such as at sports, in bars, discos, parties or at friends' homes (Engels et al, 2007). In such situations, many young people are liable to form partnerships with friends of the opposite sex. Simon and colleagues (1992) found that many young girls say that they expect to be in love all the time. Perhaps young men and women initiate opposite-sex friendships because they believe that such relationships offer companionship, good times, conversation and pleasure (Bleske-Rechek and Buss, 2001). Partnership formation between people of the opposite sex is now being facilitated through media such as the internet or telephone. Close and

Zinkhan (2004) also argue that the wide availability of dating sites for almost every conceivable region, religion or cultural background provides a virtual opportunity for consumers to interact and, in the process, re-invent dating patterns, rituals, scripts and motivations.

In most South-Asian societies, the mobility and social engagements of young people, especially girls, are observed by family members. This highlights the fact that young people in these societies have very few opportunities to form opposite-sex partnerships before marriage. For example, a study carried among college students in India documented that girls occasionally visit each other's homes during festivals or go to a film for someone's birthday (Abraham, 2002), although many young people in urban areas take advantages of such functions every day. It has been reported that events such as 'ribbon day', 'friendship day', 'chocolate day', and 'rose day' are used to express interest in initiating a relationship with members of the opposite sex (Abraham, 2002). Indeed, many authors have noted that the formation of partnerships is possible through friends, and it is important to note that many young people start relationships with their friends or classmates or with those with whom they have frequent meetings. Alexander and colleagues (2006) found that young men were significantly more likely than young women to report a fellow student or colleagues as their first partner. About one-fifth of all respondents reported that their first partner was a friend, usually someone they met at a bus stop, on the way to college or work or at a wedding or other function. Bleske-Reчек and Buss (2001) report that boys and girls prefer opposite-sex friends who were honest, intelligent, sensitive, funny and dependable. An American study also found that girls are more likely to have a romantic partner than boys (Greca and Mackey, 2007). 'Romantic partner' in this study was defined as 'someone you are physically attracted to, have had intimate contact with (e.g., hand-holding, kissing), you consider to be more than a friend, and go out on 'dates' with' (Greca and Mackey, 2007).

Researchers have increasingly noted the important and long-lasting emotional and behavioural impact of romantic relationships on adolescents (Collins, 2003). The effects of romantic relationships on adolescents and young people have also increased significantly in the past decade (Chen et al, 2009). Many advantages of dating and romantic relationships have been acknowledged. In many geographical settings, young people often report that support, friendship and intimacy are the major advantages of such relationships (Seiffge-Krenke,

2003; Furman et al, 2007). In addition, romantic experiences may also promote autonomy, as it can be argued that young people who are in such relationships are less likely to rely on their parents. The teenage years are characterised by considerable shifts in orientation from family to peers. Contrary to the childhood period, adolescents spend much more time with their peers, and as a result many build longer-lasting and stronger relationships with each other (Engels et al, 2007). Furman and colleagues (2007) also found that people who date were higher in social acceptance, friendship competence, and romantic competence. In most of Western society, dating is regarded as a means of personality development, a search for personal identity and individual worth, and striving toward maturity (Tang and Zuo, 2000). A relationship with a romantic partner is viewed as a sign of successful interpersonal maturity (Erikson, 1968). Indeed, dating is considered an opportunity to learn many skills. For example, a quarter of a century ago, McCabe (1984) argued that through dating American boys and girls learn cooperation, consideration, responsibility and other various skills which help them to interact with other people. In many South Asian societies, however, young people who engage in such relationships are often neglected by society. Many young people in these societies, especially girls, often find it difficult to share their willingness to form partnerships with opposite-sex friends (Regmi et al, 2010c). Abraham (2002) also argues that both boys and girls find it difficult to initiate friendships with the opposite sex although that there are many ways in which young people overcome these barriers. For example, Abraham (2002) found that young people in college often start their relationships with friends of the opposite sex by exchanging books or notes.

Young people's romantic relationships are not always linked with positive outcomes: their involvement in romantic relationships has also been associated with adverse consequences. In fact, romantic breakups are one of the strongest predictors of depression, suicide attempts and suicide completion (Doyle et al, 2003). Chen and colleagues,(2009) found that romantic involvement had a significant effect on young people, as engagement in such activities could bring both emotional and behavioural problems. There is also evidence that sexual abuse is possible in dating and romantic relationships (Burke et al, 1988). The documentation of violent behaviour in dating relationships among young people has been one of the focal points of many researchers because such aggression is often a precursor to aggression

in later, more stable relationships (Munoz-Rivas et al, 2007). Other authors have noted that dating in early adolescence is associated with lower academic achievement, greater alcohol and substance abuse and earlier involvement in sexual activities in American adolescents (Haynie, 2003; Davila et al, 2004). Doyle and colleagues (2003) found that young people who had experienced, or were currently involved in, romantic relationships had committed more delinquent acts, used more illegal substances and were more sexually active. It is also argued that adolescents who date early may experience more guilt and other negative emotions with friends. Teen pregnancy and STIs are also risks that come with romantic experiences, as having a romantic relationship is the strongest predictor of intercourse and its associated risks (Alexander et al, 2006; Furman et al, 2007). There is also evidence that there is a low prevalence of condom use amongst young people who are involved in romantic relationships. A study by Alexander and colleagues (2006) to explore issues around pre-marital partnership formation, romance and sex among young Indian people found that condoms were used by 38 per cent of rural and 44 per cent of urban young men on their first sexual encounter, whereas just over 25 per cent (irrespective of residence) reported regular condom use with their romantic partners.

Romantic relationships are generally seen as a primary context for the development of sexuality, and that young people first have intercourse with someone with whom they are going steady, know well, or like a lot. However, there is also evidence that young people engage in sexual relationships with non-dating partners (e.g., friends and ex-partners) and boys more often than girls have non-dating sexual partners (Manning et al, 2006). Dating can be subdivided into at least three stages: random dating, going steady, and being pinned/engaged (McDaniel, 1969). Random dating occurs when a boy/girl is dating but not with any one special person; going steady occurs when they are dating a special person but have not made any commitment to marry; and being pinned/engaged occurs when they are dating a special person and have made a commitment to a long-term relationship or to marry (McDaniel, 1969). Research into peer relations has grown exponentially over the past three decades. One of the reasons for the initial interest in research in this area came in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Researchers noted that aggression and antisocial behaviour almost never occur in social isolation but rather in the context of interactions with a friend or larger peer group (Coie and Dodge, 1998).

Although Sullivan (1953) stressed the importance of peer groups as being vital to the development of a sense of social well-being, there is also a view that failing to find a group of peers to associate with could lead to concerns about one's own social competence and desirability as a person and it may also develop into psychological problems such as severe loneliness or depression that can impair functioning in school. Erikson (1968) theorised that finding a peer group with which to affiliate is a key developmental task of adolescence, leading to a sense of identity and feelings of independence from parents. However, Adelman and Kil (2007) argue that friends and peers sometimes play a significant role in young people's dating violence. Thus, peers can be considered as having both positive and negative aspects.

Views of dating and romantic relationships are different in developing and developed societies. Many communities in developing countries, particularly in Asia, have more conservative attitudes towards dating culture. In China, for example, parents traditionally have an unfavourable view of adolescent dating. These activities are usually considered inappropriate behaviour by parents and teachers and are subject to parental discipline (Chen et al, 2009). Young people also have a belief that parents in such societies are likely to disapprove of their relationships (Alexander et al, 2006). Conversely, dating and romantic relationships among young people are usually accepted in many Western societies. A study of young people of Denmark showed that 69 per cent of parents accepted the boy-girlfriend relationships of their young sons and daughters. Similarly, 79 per cent of young females and 60 per cent of young males reported that their parents had accepted their romantic relationships (Singla, 2006). Interestingly, girls in Western societies still have less freedom than boys; this study documented that young females had three times as many serious conflicts about this issue with parents than did young males (Singla, 2006).

### **Extra-marital Romantic Partnerships**

Definitions of marital behaviour and extra-marital behaviour are socially constructed. These definitions are heavily influenced by religious teachings, which almost universally condemn extra-marital sex, and they are reinforced by the legal system, which restricts sexual behaviour to that within marriage (Atwood and Seifer, 1997). They also argue that extra-marital sexual practice may be viewed as either a cause or consequence of marital problems. Although it is believed that extra-marital sexual partnerships exist, literature around extra-marital

partnership and their sexual behaviour is rare. Previous studies documented the major reasons for extra-marital sex and they are mostly sexually based. Humphrey (1987) noted that the main causes of extra-marital sexual relationships being initiated included disagreements over the frequency of intercourse, over sexual fatigue due to career, or failure to engage in sex due to household and child care responsibilities, a wish to learn new sexual techniques, being drunk, becoming pregnant, earning money and absent marital coitus. The literature also reveals that men are more likely to engage in such relationships, such as the review by Allen and colleagues (2005) which found that men were more likely to engage in extra-marital involvements or have more extra-marital partners than women. The authors also argued that higher education often encourages such relationships; perhaps as educated people tend to have more permissive norms. This study also showed that higher levels of pre-marital sexual activity or first intercourse at a relatively young age are also related to greater rates of extra-marital involvement (Allen et al, 2005). In general, people who emphasise independence from their spouse, feel insecure in the primary relationship, or endorse a need for relationship variety and intimacy with others, have higher rates of extra-marital involvement. This review also documented that men characterised their extra-marital involvement as more sexual than women. Similarly, men support more sexual justifications for extra-marital involvement, whereas women report more intimacy reasons for extra-marital involvement (Allen et al, 2005). Some of these findings, particularly related to age at sexual debut, are similar to those in a study carried out by White and colleagues (2000). This study showed that age at sexual debut was associated with the probability of extra-marital sex later in life. This study found that those men who postponed their sexual debut until the age of 20 or later were less likely to report extra-marital intercourse than men who reported a younger debut age. In addition, men with five or more pre-marital partners were significantly more likely to report extra-marital intercourse (White et al, 2000).

### **Changing Picture of Sexual Behaviour and Attitudes in Young People**

There has been a shift towards delayed marriage in most Asian countries (Pachauri and Santhya, 2002); perhaps better socio-economic and educational opportunities may have led to an extended period of adolescence for both young males and females. Jaya and Hindin (2009) ar-



gue that urbanisation has led to increased opportunities for education for young people. Alexander and colleagues (2006) demonstrate that a larger proportion of young people than ever before are in schools and colleges, healthier and better nourished, with access to a wide range of media and the benefit of new technology. They are also exposed to new ideas and information about their roles and rights. It can, therefore, perhaps be argued that education has created more time and opportunities for young people to be involved in intimate (sexual) relationships before marriage (Pachauri and Santhya, 2002). Many South Asian young people spend more years in education and therefore marry later (Bott et al, 2003); however, the proportion of ever-married adolescent females is much lower in Southeast Asia. Among Southeast Asian countries, the proportion of ever-married female adolescents is as low as 8 per cent in the Philippines and Vietnam, and as high as 17 per cent in Indonesia and Thailand. In contrast, early marriage continues to be the norm in South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, India and Nepal (Pachauri and Santhya, 2002). At the same time, the practice of delayed marriage also appears to be on the rise in Nepal (New Era/MoHP, 2001; Aryal and Adhikary, 2003; New Era/MoHP, 2006). The attitudes of young Nepalese people towards sexual relationships have steadily changed with the modernisation of society and culture.

There is also a view that young men and women in Nepal are now more comfortable in each other's company. Newly established urban malls, shopping centres, transport and information facilities in many urban areas of Nepal may provide young boys and girls with public spaces which are facilitating social and sexual relationships. Villarreal (1998) tells that changes in contemporary societies have had major effects on sexualities. These changes can have profound consequences for the reproductive and sexual health of young people. Opportunities for sexual partnership may also result in forced sexual activities, aggression, unwanted pregnancies, induced abortion and STIs (Burke et al, 1988; Muñoz-Rivas et al, 2007).

Globally, research aimed at investigating sexual behaviour and assessing interventions to improve sexual health have increased in recent decades (Wellings et al, 2006); however, there is very limited literature in the field of young people's sexual health in many South Asian countries, including Nepal. Findings of sex- and sexuality-related surveys are also largely unpublished. Evidence from the available literature on young peoples' sex and sexuality suggests that most research has focused on knowledge about, and attitudes towards,



sexual and reproductive health, including HIV and AIDS, sexual behaviour and the use of sexual health services. In recent years, research into the involvement of young people in romance and dating activities is also growing.

### Final Thoughts

Research into relationships and sexual behaviour, particularly in Western societies, is well described, and indeed, sex- and sexuality-related research has increased in recent decades, particularly after the growing incidence of HIV and AIDS. There is limited literature in the field of young people's sexual health in many South Asian countries including Nepal, which is not unexpected as these issues are still a taboo in these societies. However, dating and romantic behaviour among young people are common in most developed societies and they are also a primary context for the development of sexuality. Although the impact of modernisation and mass media on romantic relationships, sexual behaviour and partnership formation mostly among young people is generally accepted, girls particularly, in Nepal and other rural areas of developing countries, still face challenges in forming partnerships with friends of the opposite sex. Surprisingly, the limited research that exists also reported that sexual activities outside marriage have also increased gradually in recent years in Nepal. Perhaps delaying marriage for educational and employment reasons has opened a window of opportunity for partnership formation and sexual initiation. Similarly, there is evidence that factors such as geographic residence, biological issues, economic conditions, personal characteristics and peer influence have some impact on partnership formation and sexual initiation. Many young people in Nepal do not always use sexual and reproductive health services, and health facilities have failed to provide young people with specialised sexual and reproductive health education and services. Since a significant proportion of Nepal's young people are at risk of HIV due to their high-risk sexual behaviour, there is an urgent need for comprehensive sex education and young people-friendly services.

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