



## Perceived gender role that shape youth sexual behaviour: Evidence from rural Orissa, India

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### A B S T R A C T

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The study attempts to understand the association of perceived gender role with youth sexual behavior using qualitative data such as focus group discussions ( $N = 8$ ), in-depth interviews ( $N = 42$ ), and free listing ( $N = 50$ ) of rural married youths from Orissa, India. Data collection was conducted during July 2006–April 2007. Atlas.ti and ANTHROPAC packages have been used for the analysis. Youths in general are expected to adhere to the roles ascribed for them based on their biological construct and any deviation is not warranted for, more so for young women. Moreover, for many young men perceived gender role coupled with poor self risk perception result into unsafe sexual activities, putting them as well as their partners at the risk of STI/HIV and unintended parenthood.

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### Introduction and background

Gender roles are the social behaviors, lifestyle, and personality characteristics that women and men are expected to exhibit (Burnette, 2006). It includes the rights and obligations that are normative for the sexes in a given society (Brinkerhoff & White, 1988). Sexuality on the other hand is a dynamic construct involving bodies, behaviors, meanings, social norms, institutions and conflicts (Weeks, 1986). Sexual behavior is an expression of socially constructed sexuality and is largely shaped, conceived and constrained according to norms within different societies. Moreover, societies that dictate different attitudes towards men and women with respect to youth sexuality further contribute to risk taking behavior (Hardee, Pine, & Wason, 2004; Miller & Whitaker, 2001).

Gender role differentials widen during adolescence (Bruce, Lloyd, & Leonard, 1995; Devasia & Devasia, 1991), as boys enjoy privileges reserved for men such as autonomy, mobility and opportunity while girls find their mobility and education restricted (Greene, 1997). Gender disparities and double standards have a considerable influence on the sexual and reproductive health and lives of young people (Tangmunkongvorakul, Roslyn, & Kaye, 2005). Inequitable gender norms and related behavior influence violence, HIV/STI, and sexual and reproductive health of young men and their intimate partners (Pulerwitz & Barker, 2008). Furthermore, the dominant norms of masculinity that is the most traditional beliefs about manhood adopted by young men, predicted the highest level of risk taking and of involvement in behaviors such as high-risk sexual activity (Courtenay, 2000).

In the age of AIDS and in a country like India where talking about sex continues to be a taboo (TOI, 2009), understanding the sexual behavior especially of the youths holds an important and crucial place. Youths (15–24 years) who largely define the

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socio-economic and political future of a population are about 20 percent of the Indian population (RGI, 2001). Although the present generation is relatively more urbanised and better educated, social vulnerabilities persist and transitions to adulthood are often marked by abrupt and premature exit from school, entry into the labour force and strongly held gender norms (Jejeebhoy & Sebastian, 2004). National Aids Control Organization (2006) and Verma et al. (2004) are of the view that young people form a significant segment of those acquiring sexually transmitted infections and those infected by HIV/AIDS. Small-scale studies conducted in different parts of the country further highlights the existence of eve teasing, non-consensual sex, and sexual violence within and outside the marriage (George, 2003; IIPS & PC, 2007; Jaya & Hindin, 2007; Mathew, 2005). Nonetheless, an important factor influencing young Indian men's HIV risk is early socialization in notions of masculinity that endorse inequitable gender-related attitudes and behaviors (Verma et al., 2006).

Gender differences are significant in the differential opportunities that boys and girls have in terms of access to information and in the exploration of their sexuality. These gender roles internalized by boys and girls are reflected in their social interactions, attitudes and views regarding marriage and sex, and in the nature and extent of their sexual experiences (Abraham, 2004). Evidence shows that young people are more likely to report sexual behaviors in culturally specific interactive interviews than in face-to-face interviews (Jaya, Hindin, & Ahmed, 2008). Boys are often socialized to engage in sexual activity so as to express their masculinity (Abraham, 2002; Das, 1988; Dube, 1988; Jejeebhoy et al., 2004). Again, the prevailing norms of masculinity and expectations from young men to behave in a stereotypical manner are generally strong and operate in a variety of subtle yet profound manners (Verma et al., 2008). Unequal gender norms and power imbalances further appeared to characterize the sexual relationships of the majority of married youths, both within and outside marriage; underscoring young women's inability to negotiate safe sexual practices with their husbands and their pre- as well as extra-marital partners (Santhya, Jejeebhoy, & Ghosh, 2008). On this backdrop, the present study attempts to understand the association of perceived gender role with sexual behavior. Specifically, it explores youths' perception about 'real man and woman' and how do this perception shape sexual behavior in Puri district of the state of Orissa, India.

#### *Context of study area*

Puri, one of the districts of the state of Orissa, India is located on the shore of the Bay of Bengal. More than 85 percent of the people in the district are rural inhabitants and less than one percent (0.30 percent, the lowest in the state) is scheduled tribes (RGI, 2001). Hindus constitute about 97 percent of the district's population. At the literacy front, 89 percent and 68 percent respectively of the men and women aged seven years and above are literates (RGI, 2001). The sex ratio as well as child sex ratio of the district is respectively 968 and 930, which is below the state figures of 972 and 950 (RGI, 2001). It has also been found that only eight percent of the women in the district are working as against 52 percent of the men (RGI, 2001).

A glance at the sexual and reproductive health situation in the district reveals that about 90 percent women reportedly have consummated their marriage before 24 years of age (IIPS, 2006). The same study shows that about two-third of the women have awareness about all the modern methods of contraception and almost similar percent are using some form of contraception. Nonetheless, about 16 percent of the women have unmet need (includes both unmet need for limiting and spacing) for contraception. In addition to this, 38 percent of the married women aged 15–24 years have at least one self-reported symptoms of RTI/STI, which is higher than the state average of 30 percent (IIPS, 2006). Moreover, risky sexual behavior among the youths seems high in the district (Collumbien, Das, & Bohidar, 2001; Verma & Lhungdim, 2004).

#### **Methods**

A cross-sectional study, comprising a pre-survey qualitative phase, a survey and post-survey qualitative phase, was conducted among young married women aged 15–24 years and young married men aged 15–29 years in 20 villages of Puri district in the state of Orissa, India. Data collection was conducted during July 2006–April 2007. Marriage age distributions that shows a relative paucity of married young men aged up to 24 years (RGI, 2001) along with the average inter-spousal age differences which observed at about 5–6 years in Indian context (Sharma, 2001), required that the age limit for young men be relaxed to 29 years. The findings of the present study are however based on the qualitative data collected during the pre-survey qualitative phase and post-survey qualitative phase of the larger study. Specifically, the findings are based on eight focus group discussions (four each among young men and women) and 42 in-depth interviews (20 and 22 interviews respectively among young men and women) of youths. The results from the free listing exercise with a total of 50 youths (26 young women and 24 young men) have also been presented.

In the pre-survey qualitative phase, focus group discussions (FGDs) separately with young men and women in selected villages had been conducted. FGDs had been conducted with the help of a pre-decided guideline. The FGDs had been carried out to understand community's perception about the gender role, sexual and reproductive rights, marriage, and inter-spousal relationship, besides the sexual behavior of the youths. The selection of those villages for FGD was done at random in the tehsil (administrative unit of the district) selected for the main survey. Youths for the FGDs had been selected keeping in mind the age, education, and marital duration.

A total of 50 youths had been asked to provide a list of terms describing 'real man' and 'real woman'. The purpose behind the free listing exercise was to get acquainted with local vocabulary or terminology of youths' perception of a 'real man' and 'real woman'. Concisely, the following questions were asked:

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