

At what age do women and men have their first sexual intercourse? World comparisons and recent trends

*Michel Bozon**

The age and conditions of sexual debut are a long-neglected focus of study. It was assumed, often rightly for females, that sexual initiation did not occur until marriage. The first surveys of these issues in both developed and developing countries came in the 1990s as a response to various developments. Marriage, or first union formation, is increasingly late in many countries of the world [1], and increasingly informal in developed countries, which sets the stage for a decoupling of sexual initiation from the start of conjugal life. Also the spreading AIDS epidemic prompts interest in the sexual initiation of young people as a risk group.

The conditions of entry into sexual life are a social issue, as they are also evidence of how young people will assume the adult roles assigned to them. Changes in the timing of sexual initiation and its dwindling link with marriage in recent birth cohorts point to a relaxation of direct adult control over young people, but also to the possible emergence of new gender relations.

◆ Comparing male and female experiences

A gender-specific comparison of median ages at first sexual intercourse (see note (a) of table for definition) in about fifty mainly European, African and Latin-American countries can be made through an all-points comparison of a recent birth cohort (age 20-24) with an

older one (45-49) (table and box) in three sets of surveys done in the 1990s: the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) covering approximately 80 developing countries; the Fertility and Family Surveys (FFS), taken in twenty or so European countries; and the AIDS-related sexual behaviour surveys done under national or international projects in many countries [2] [3] [4].

Asking women and men at what age they first had sexual intercourse is not a run-of-the-mill query anywhere. It even remains an unacceptable, not to say "immoral", question in a large part of the world—the entire Arab world, and almost all Asia, including India and China—which are therefore not in the table. Reproductive health surveys in these countries—even those done with the standard DHS questionnaire—omit questions on first sexual intercourse, or put them only to currently married women (so excluding unmarried or divorced women and males). The very few surveys available for Asia show that for women, marriage and entry into sexual life almost invariably coincide; women married at very young ages (as in Pakistan or Bangladesh) may not even become sexually active until some time after marriage. Men frequently have pre-marital experiences in which prostitution plays a significant part. The DHS for Turkey provides insights into the social difficulty of broaching these topics in gender-unequal conditions: the question on age at first coitus was not put to females, whose sexual initiation is automatically equated with marriage, but was to males, who readily admit to sexual initiation on

* Institut national d'études démographiques

average four years before marriage. Some African or Latin-American countries with available data on this were not included, because the reproductive health surveys were done only among women, despite international urging to extend the surveys to men.

In countries where the information was collected, self-reported ages at first intercourse are of uncertain quality for three possible reasons: inability to state an age, mis-recollection for older cohorts, tendency to respond in line with social expectations. Various checks reveal relatively stable proportions of cohort- and gender-specific inconsistency in replies. Also, the greater tendency of older women to claim first coitus coincident with their marriage squares well with the greater importance these cohorts assigned to pre-marital chastity and their higher rate of observance compared to younger cohorts [2].

◆ Three traditional models of sexual initiation

Comparison of the respective male and female ages at sexual initiation in older cohorts reveals three major traditional models of entry into sexual activity.

First is the large group of societies where parental and family strategies are designed to avoid any delay in female entry into conjugal, reproductive and sexual life through pressure to form a union as near puberty as possible with significantly older men, compounding gender domination by age domination. While in such societies male may be later than female sexual initiation, males generally experience a significant period of pre-marital sexual activity. This model is traditionally found in sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Mali, Senegal and Ethiopia), and very likely also in the Indian sub-continent (represented here only by Nepal).

This contrasts with a second group, which includes the Latin and Latin-American cultures, where social control is exerted to delay women's union formation and entry into sexual activity by strenuous efforts to preserve their virginity, pre-marital loss of which breaks a cardinal rule and dishonours the family group and the spouse [5]. By contrast, young males are urged to prove their manhood early on, either with prostitutes or older women, and their sexual initiation takes place well before that of females. This group of countries includes southern Europe (from Portugal to Greece and Romania), Latin America (Brazil, Chile, Dominican Republic), but also Thailand and other Asian societies for which quantitative data are not available. In Brazil, for example, in the 45-49 age group,

the median age gap between first intercourse and first union is seven years for males, but just one year for females. In the two models described, women are under great pressure to conform to social norms, but there are equally strong injunctions for males in due course to behave as "real men".

There is a third group of societies, less homogeneous than the other two, characterized among the older cohorts by closely matched male and female timings of entry into sexual life. This may reflect later marriage and strict supervision of the conduct of young people, including males, as in Singapore or Sri Lanka (and doubtless also China and Vietnam). The trend towards later male and female sexual initiation is found in non-Latin Catholic societies like Poland and Lithuania. Finally, many European societies, like those of northern Europe, but also Switzerland, Germany and the Czech Republic, have for several generations been "gender-equal" in rather early sexual initiation timings.

◆ Universal, but limited, changes in recent decades

In cultures where female is significantly earlier than male sexual initiation, the trend has reversed in two ways over the past twenty years, with a slight increase in female age at first coitus, and a sharp drop in the male age. The female-male timing gap has narrowed in sub-Saharan Africa, as in Senegal, Togo, Cameroon, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Likewise Nepal. A new trend emerging in some countries (Kenya, Gabon and Zambia), is that male ages are now slightly earlier than females. In some societies, finally (Niger, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia), there is barely any discernible change. One common trait in all these trends is that young people are breaking free of a series of traditional controls, males to become sexually active earlier, females to lighten the constraint of early marriage without necessarily relinquishing entry into sexual life. So, in eastern African countries, 40% to 50% of young women have at least two years of sexual activity before their first union [2]. In some AIDS-ravaged countries, campaigns to delay first sexual intercourse may have had an inhibiting effect, particularly among females.

In the group of societies that prize early male and late female sexual activity, any changes have mainly concerned women—their comparatively late age at first intercourse has tended to fall, while the male age has remained unchanged. So, female-male timing gaps have narrowed in Brazil, Chile and Spain, while in other countries—like Bolivia, Nicaragua and the

Table - Median ages at first sexual intercourse, males and females, by country and age group at survey date

	Median age at first sexual intercourse (a)					Median age at first sexual intercourse (a)			
	Cohorts born around:					Cohorts born around:			
	1950 (45-49)		1975 (20-24)			1950 (40-49)		1970 (20-24)	
	F	M	F	M		F	M	F	M
AFRICA					ASIA				
<i>West Africa</i>					Japan (1999) (c)				
Benin (1996)	17.2	18.7	17.2	17.5	Kazakhstan (1999)				
Burkina Faso (1998-1999)	17.6	20.6	17.5	20.1	Nepal (2001) (d)				
Ghana (1998)	17.3	19.4	17.4	19.5	Sri Lanka (1991) (e)				
Guinea (1999)	16.2	20.2	15.9	17.6	Singapore (1989) (e)				
Mali (1995)	15.7	22.2	15.8	18.7	Thailand (1990) (e)				
Niger (1997)	15.0	20.9	15.5	20.3	EUROPE and USA				
Nigeria (1999)	18.1	20.4	18.1	19.8	<i>Central and eastern Europe</i>				
Senegal (1997)	16.5	22.4	18.8	19.0	Hungary (1993) (f)				
Togo (1998)	17.3	19.5	17.2	18.0	Latvia (1995) (g)				
<i>East Africa</i>					Lithuania (1996) (g)				
Ethiopia (2000)	15.8	20.4	18.1	21.3	Poland (1996) (g)				
Kenya (1998)	15.9	17.4	17.2	15.9	Romania (1999) (h)				
Mozambique (1997)	15.8	18.8	15.9	17.2	Slovak Republic (1995) (i)				
Uganda (2000-2001)	16.7	18.7	16.8	19.4	Czech Republic (1996) (f)				
Tanzania (1996)	16.3	18.1	17.2	17.8	Slovenia (1994) (f)				
<i>Central and southern Africa</i>					<i>Western Europe</i>				
Cameroon (1998)	15.5	18.9	16.2	17.0	Western Germany (1990)				
Gabon (2000)	15.8	17.6	16.3	15.9	Belgium (1993) (j)				
Central African Republic (1994)	15.9	18.1	16.0	17.0	Denmark (1989)				
Chad (1997)	15.4	18.9	16.0	18.4	Spain (2001) (k)				
Zambia (1996)	16.1	18.5	16.5	16.0	Finland (1992)				
Zimbabwe (1999)	18.5	19.9	19.1	19.1	France (1992, 1998) (l)				
LATIN AMERICA, CARIBBEAN					United Kingdom (1991)				
Bolivia (1997)	18.8	17.9	19.5	17.0	Greece (1999) (g)				
Brazil (1996)	20.5	17.1	18.6	16.2	Iceland (1992)				
Chile (1998) (b)	20.6	16.9	18.9	17.4	Italy (1995) (c)				
Haiti (1994)	19.0	18.4	18.7	17.7	Norway (1992)				
Nicaragua (1997)	17.8	15.5	18.0	15.8	Netherlands (1989)				
Peru (1996)	18.6	16.9	19.6	17.4	Portugal (1997) (g)				
Dominican Republic (1996)	18.4	16.3	18.7	16.1	Switzerland (1992)				
					USA (1994) (m)				

Notes: (a) the median age at first sexual intercourse is the age at which half the respondents had their first coitus, the other half not yet having done so – (b) older cohort: 1944-1953 – (c) age 20-29 – (d) currently married women, and ever-married men – (e) age 15-24: median calculated on share trend of individuals whose sexual initiation occurred at each age between ages 15 and 24 – (f) age 40-44 – (g) age 45-49 – (h) ages 40-44 for females, 45-49 for males – (i) age 34-43 – (j) age 20-26 – (k) older cohort born between 1956 and 1961, younger cohort born post-1975 – (l) younger cohort born around 1980. The median for this cohort is calculated on the share trend of individuals whose sexual initiation occurred at each age between ages 15 and 19 – (m) younger cohort: ages 18-24.

Sources: For Africa, Latin America and part of Asia, the DHS surveys using the 25-29 age groups for the 1999 and 2000 surveys. For Europe, the Fertility and Family Surveys (FFS) (Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Czech Republic, Slovenia) and sexual behaviour surveys [3]. Other sources: Chile (Cosecon survey, 1998), Japan (Japanese Sexual Behaviour, NHK, 1999), Spain (Conducta sexual de riesgo ante el VIH, 2001), Slovakia (Bianchi, Sexual Behaviour and HIV/Aids, 1995). For Sri Lanka, Singapore and Thailand, WHO surveys [4].

Dominican Republic—they are unchanged. In Portugal and Romania, sexual initiation timings are highly gender-specific, as in Italy, where female age at first intercourse has actually risen in the last decade. Even as virginity at marriage becomes a receding ideal and reality, high gender-differentiation remains. Where male remains much earlier than female first inter-

course, initiation by prostitution remains a significant factor, as in Central America and Thailand. But prostitution as a vehicle for first coitus declines where timing gaps narrow, as in Japan, where they have dropped from 26% in older cohorts to 11% in younger cohorts.

Where male and female ages at first intercourse were already close, they have fallen simultaneously: in

Box

Defining first sexual intercourse

Sexual initiation is addressed here on the basis of a question asked in many surveys: "At what age did you have your first sexual intercourse?". First sexual intercourse is not often explicitly defined, but where it is not, first intercourse (the "first time") tends to be identified by those concerned as the first vaginal penetration, an event symbolizing the entry into adult sexual life.

In studies of younger age groups, it is important not to exclude from the statistics—by classing them as non-responses—those who report having had no coitus so far, and who may represent a substantial proportion of the cohort; this is an unfortunate but classic error that artificially underestimates ages at first intercourse. The figure which must be used is the median age at first intercourse (see table, note (a) for definition) which accounts for the "late starters".

But sexual activity does take place before first coitus in the form of sexual experimentation through sexual contact without vaginal penetration, both in traditional societies where preserving female virginity is essential, and in modern developed countries where adolescence is seen as a time for discovery of others and oneself, leading only gradually to genital sexual activity. Qualitative surveys show that for those involved, these practices form part of the world of adolescent experiences ("petting") and are not regarded as real first sexual intercourse.

many European countries and the United States, they have dropped by approximately a year in the last two decades, although age at first union—now very distinct from age at marriage—has trended upwards over the same period [7]. That this fall is not sharper may be due to a stabilizing and synchronizing effect of spreading secondary education on sexual initiation timings, which now occur within an increasingly shorter interval towards the end of secondary education. They mark the end of adolescence and entry into an age of personal free agency—youth—rather than transition to an increasingly later adulthood. The Scandinavian countries, especially Iceland, have become the "earliest" of developed countries, to the point where in some (Norway, Denmark), females enter their sexual life before males.

◆ France, a Latin country moving towards northern Europe

French males and females aged either side of 50 in 2000 (birth cohorts 1944 and 1953) averaged their first coitus at ages 17.9 and 18.9 respectively. The most recent available survey—the 1998 Baromètre santé jeunes (young people's health survey)—shows that ages at

first intercourse converged—17.4 for males and 17.6 for females—in the cohorts born around 1980 [6]. While the behaviours of French cohorts that entered into sexual activity around 1950 were akin to those of Latin countries (wide gender age gap at first intercourse), they have now grown closer to those of northern Europe.

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Age at first intercourse is an indicator which is hard to collect and must be interpreted as it relates to other factors. Because sexual initiation is increasingly earlier than first union, it heralds for almost all males and to a growing (but still lesser) extent for females a period of pre-marital sexual activity that reflects the growing personal free agency of young people. The world trend towards narrowing male and female sexual initiation timing gaps does not reflect an equally marked similarity in the way in which males and females engage with these first experiences. In non-contracepting societies, the consequences of sexual activity are a material factor in preserving for young women more than for young men the traditional connection between first sexual intercourse and entry into reproductive life. In contracepting societies, sexual initiation is still a gender-differential event: for men it remains a relatively non-committal experience, whereas women put much importance on the choice of first partner—who is often older and more experienced—and the relationship formed with him.

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