Adolescent Sexuality in Asia: New Focus for Population Policy

POPULATION policies in developing nations have typically focused on fertility control and family planning. While this central focus continues, in East and Southeast Asia a new concern is also beginning to emerge. There are signs of a shift toward policies more broadly concerned with young people, families, and intergenerational relationships.

Growing numbers of Asian youth are delaying marriage, causing the number of unmarried young people of ages 15-19 to increase rapidly in all countries of the region. This population group has not been a target of family planning programs in the past, and it has sometimes been explicitly excluded.

Family planning programs have achieved impressive results among married couples, and have been successful in reducing fertility rates. Now, as the age at marriage continues to rise, the fertility behavior of unmarried teenagers is receiving more attention from population policymakers. The growth of cities and the spread of economic development is bringing new attitudes and living arrangements. A new youth culture is emerging, and the sexual behavior of young people is changing.

East and Southeast Asia have led the developing world in the pace of fertility reduction and the successful implementation of population policies. Attention to young people and to adolescent fertility in this region, therefore, may be followed by similar attention in South Asia and other parts of the developing world in the future.
Population Policy and the Young

The behavior of youth before marriage has not been a traditional concern of population policies. At first, family planning programs focused on preventing further births to married women in their thirties and forties who had already given birth to two children or more. Later, they promoted the benefits of child spacing to younger women, and worked to spread the availability and accessibility of family planning information and services to all married people who desired them. In Asia, these population policies enabled most countries to make great progress in reducing fertility rates.

As population policies have expanded to include younger people, their objective has remained fertility reduction through family planning. Today, however, governments in East and Southeast Asia are beginning to take a more complex view of population policy, and a broader interpretation of family planning.

"The societies of Asia are edging their way toward true family policies—that is, goal-directed government actions designed to mold the family system in light of perceived national needs," reports East-West Population Institute Research Associate Peter Xenos.

Xenos coordinated workshops in 1986 and 1987 that examined research on adolescent sexuality in Asia. Participants were from Hong Kong, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and the United States.

The fact that family planning programs in East and Southeast Asia have led to dramatic declines in fertility rates has allowed policymakers there to broaden the scope of their programs. Population planning is now discussed in relation to national needs and social goals, including such matters as the population’s growth rate, age structure, educational quality, and skills.

The Growing Single Population

In the next 30 years, the world’s population of ages 15-19 years will grow by 30 percent, according to the United Nations. All of this growth will occur in developing countries; the 15-19 age group will actually shrink in size in the developed world.

For Asia as a whole, the size of the 15-19 age group is projected to increase by only 8 percent, less than in other developing regions. Within the Asian region, there will be great diversity because of different fertility experiences. In South Asia, the size of this age group will grow much more rapidly than in Southeast Asia or East Asia. But in most countries the youth bulge is temporary.

Almost everywhere in Asia, however, the number of single youth is growing much more rapidly than the total youth population. This trend will be permanent. The trend toward delaying marriage means a growing share of all young people will remain single much longer than in the past. By the year 2010, for example, India is projected to have nearly 70 million single teenagers between the ages of 15 and 19, or 188 percent more than in 1980. (See table.)

The role of young people in Asian societies and the relationship between the sexes may change fundamentally. Traditionally, women have married earlier than men in Asian societies, but that trend is rapidly changing. In the future, the number of single young women will be increasing faster than the num-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region and country</th>
<th>Number (thousands) 1980</th>
<th>Number (thousands) 2010</th>
<th>% change 1980-2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South Asia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>24,064</td>
<td>69,286</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>4,256</td>
<td>14,765</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>13,059</td>
<td>18,140</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>4,804</td>
<td>7,667</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>6,838</td>
<td>7,775</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Korea</td>
<td>5,321</td>
<td>7,618</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As the age at marriage rises in Asia, the fertility behavior of unmarried teenagers is receiving more attention from policymakers.
number of single young men, as the marriage age for women rises faster than for men.

Adolescent Sexuality: Country Responses

Virtually all societies regulate the behavior of young people. In many developing nations today, the rising age at marriage has combined with rapid urbanization, improved status for women, and more educational opportunity to alter both the behavioral norms of young people and the traditional means of social control over youth.

In Asia “the extreme cases are the Philippines and Korea, where pre-transitional fertility was high, the shift from early to late marriage has been dramatic and rapid, and women have participated disproportionately in both the education revolution and urban migration,” according to Xenos. Least influenced are countries where the marriage and educational transformations are not yet very far along, including Indonesia and all of South Asia except Sri Lanka.

The rationale for population planning and the character of population policies are closely related to how far a country has moved along the transition from high to low fertility, according to Xenos. He argues that “the further along, the more the population is seen in terms of micro-policies to mold family life and influence youth behavior, as well as macro-policies aimed to reduce aggregate fertility levels.”

In most countries of East and Southeast Asia many people express concern that economic development will weaken parental authority over children, that family planning services may encourage sexual irresponsibility in youth, and that changing social norms and values could lead to sexual promiscuity and unwanted pregnancies. These concerns, however, typically are not based on factual information.

Only in a few countries have there been studies of contemporary teenage values, sexual behavior, and their relationship to population policies that might substantiate these concerns. These studies frequently do not support conventional views—either the fears of widespread delinquency or the hopes of continued allegiance to traditional values.

- Philippines: The first large-scale survey of adolescent sexuality in the Philippines took place in 1982, and a second survey is planned for 1990. Whereas heterosexual contact once took place almost completely in the context of family and community, today an independent youth culture exists, couples date freely, and there is ample opportunity for sexual contact. These changes have occurred primarily in urban areas, but are found increasingly in rural areas.

- Thailand: Thai society allows considerable latitude for individuals to choose their marriage partners, and opportunity for sexual contacts before marriage abounds. Recent studies show that, unlike the Philippines, there is little conservative resistance in Thailand to the family planning movement or to extending contraceptive services to young unmarried people.

- Taiwan: Taiwan’s family planning program is one of the most effective in the world. Yet, policies toward adolescent sexuality have been limited by social conservatism. Surveys of adolescent sexuality conducted as part of family planning surveys provide evidence that as Taiwan’s economy has developed, the traditional Chinese family system has changed profoundly. The age at marriage has risen, and behavior related to dating and choice of spouse has become much more liberal.

- Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Family Planning Association, a private organization, has taken an aggressive stance toward studying and releasing information about adolescent sexuality since 1981, when it conducted a major survey within the schools. The tolerance of the government and the public was tested when a 1986 survey revealed that the level of premarital sexual activity was higher than expected and that more young Chinese men were using prostitutes than had been believed.

Policy Perspectives

Among developing countries, those in East and Southeast Asia have relatively long experience with the legal and organizational aspects of population planning. Now, as policymakers in these nations also become the first to deal with issues of adolescent sexuality, several policy issues are of particular importance:

- Access to services: Throughout Asia, the legal age at majority is around 21. Only two countries worldwide—Thailand and Hong Kong—allow access to contraceptives by youths of all ages, whether married or not, according to a study from the early 1980s. Such legal restrictions constrain family planning programs. Nonetheless, increasing numbers of single youth are requesting family planning services. In light of the growing population of single youth and their changing social attitudes, population policies should consider issues of access to family planning services by unmarried people below the legal age of majority.

continued on page 4
Coping with adolescence: In some countries, delayed marriage simply extends adolescence. In Thailand and the Philippines, for example, social institutions and cultural values exist to guide adolescent behavior because relatively late marriage has been common for many generations. However, in societies where the marriage age has been very low, adolescence is a completely new phase. Indonesia and most of South Asia are examples of countries where new social institutions to deal with changing social patterns and roles for single youth within the culture may be required.

Understanding Adolescent Sexuality: In some societies, premarital sexual relations typically are followed by marriage. In the Philippines, studies found that “those who are still single rarely report sexual experience, yet those currently or formerly married commonly report pre-marital experience,” Xenos reports. Nevertheless, in urban areas of developing countries, the incidence of casual sex appears to be increasing. There is a need for more extensive studies of adolescent sexuality.

The Scope of Family Policy: Most countries face similar questions in formulating policy for families and youth. These include: To what extent can government create policies that successfully manage the sexuality of young unmarried people? Should all economic, social or cultural groups be treated equally in formulating family policy, or is there justification for treating population sub-groups differently? What approach should be taken toward commerce in sex? Finally, what is the proper role for government to play in guiding young people through adolescence into marriage and in regulating their family life?

These policy issues are relatively new. Many developing countries still face major challenges in reducing population growth rates, disseminating information about modern contraceptive methods and providing full access to family planning services. Eventually, however, as marriage ages rise and modernization occurs, the traditional relationships between society and its youth will change in these countries. Population policymakers may benefit from the experience of East and Southeast Asia.

Asia-Pacific Population & Policy

Asia-Pacific Population & Policy reports research of interest to policymakers and other professionals concerned with population trends, family planning, and development.

Support for this publication is provided by the Office of Population, U.S. Agency for International Development, under a cooperative agreement with the East-West Population Institute, East-West Center.

Editor: Bryant Robey
Correspondence Address: Population Institute East-West Center 1777 East-West Road Honolulu, Hawaii 96848 USA

ISSN 0891–6683

This bulletin is based on the following study:


The Xenos study draws in particular on work by the following individuals and organizations:

Ping-Kaeng Lui, Hong Kong Family Planning Association
Korea Institute for Population and Health
Wah-Yun Low, Dept. of OBGYN, Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya
Corazon Raymundo, Population Institute, University of the Philippines
Hui-Sheng Liu, Taiwan Provincial Institute of Family Planning
Yaurawat Porapakkham, School of Public Health, Mahidol University, Thailand

Previous issues of Asia-Pacific Population & Policy are available upon request:

- No. 1, January 1987 “Curbing Population Growth: Lessons from India”
- No. 2, April 1987 “Sex Preference and Fertility: What is the Link?”
- No. 4, December 1987 “Community-based Contraceptive Distribution: A Korean Success Story”
- No. 5, April 1988 “Choosing a Contraceptive Method: Why Does It Matter?”
- No. 6, September 1988 “How Development Programs Can Affect Fertility: The Case of Bangladesh”
- No. 7, December 1988 “Why Thai Fertility Has Fallen: Are There Lessons for Other Countries?”
- No. 8, March 1989 “Costs and Benefits of Children: Implications for Population Policy”
- No. 9, June 1989 “Policies for Fertility Reduction: Focus on Asia”