Pag-ibig (Love), Pagnanasa (Desire): Filipino adolescents and sexual risks

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Introduction

The total Philippine population is pegged at 84.2 million (ISSA 2005). Based on the 2000 statistics, there are 101 males to 100 females. According to the Young Adult Fertility Survey (2002), there are 15.0 million young individuals in the 15-24 age group; of this figure, 7.9 million are within the 15-19 age range, and 7.1 million are between the ages 20 to 24 years old. The Philippine Statistical Yearbook (PSY) 2004 report further noted the following distribution among the youth: 8.9 million are within the age range of 10-14; 8 million are within the 15-19 age group; and 7 million are within the 20-24 age group. Using the WHO definition of adolescence, adolescents aged 10-20 years old comprise a significant portion of the Philippine population.

The period of adolescence among Filipinos is best defined by the local terms, pagbibinata and pagdadalaga. These words reflect the process of becoming and a stage of blossoming, from childhood to adulthood, a process that is believed to be replete with challenges centred not only around the definition of one’s self, but also on establishing

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one's perspectives and values regarding the different domains of one's sexuality. In conceptualizing the characteristics of the period of adolescence, various themes have emerged from research done in this area (Sobrititchea and Ujano-Batangan 2003), including:

- **Adolescence as a period covering different age ranges.** Some respondents defined this to be the period of 10-19 years of age, while others pegged this at 13 to 24 years. Others differentiated between 13-19 years as the teenage years, while 15-30 years were described as the age of youth. Based on this, there seemed to be an ambiguity in defining which ages in particular are included in adolescence.

- **Adolescence as a developmental stage characterized by particular, typical and shared developmental tasks and characteristics; variations of which are related to individual and contextual factors.** These developmental changes are further categorized into: physical/biological changes, cognitive changes, and socio-emotional changes.

- **Adolescence as a point of transition from childhood to adulthood.** Most respondents believe that adolescence is a point whereby the individual learns the necessary skills that are needed for dealing with adult concerns and challenges.

Adolescence is known as a time of extensive changes occurring in the various facets of human development. It is at the period of adolescence when Filipino males and females explore intimate and sexual relationships. Adolescence is a critical time for experimentation and risk taking.

The results of the Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFS) (Natividad and Marques, 2004) show that 31.3% of male respondents and 15.7% of female participants reported that they have had sex. Among the 15 to 19 age group, 17.8% of males and 6.0% of females answered in the affirmative when asked if they had had sex. Of those who had sex from the said age group, 43.8% of males and 28.1% of females stated that they had wanted it to take place the first time. These results show that for a majority of these adolescents, their first sexual intercourse was either unplanned or against their will. Very few of the respondents used some form of contraception during their first sexual coitus (males: 32.5%; females: 12.3%) and during their last
intercourse (males: 27.3%; females: 17.1%). Furthermore, 44.8% of male adolescents in the 15 to 19 age group stated that they have more than one sex partner; while 10.5% of the females reported the same.

The YAFS study also reported that 11% of the Filipino males and females sample aged 15-24 have experienced sex partners of the same gender (Crisostomo 2003). Males account for 52.6% of the responses, while females account for 47.2%. Most of the participants reported that they have engaged in such behaviours while still in school. Only 46.4% of same sex partnerships are “paid”, the rest “happened because they are in a relationship”.

Gleaning from the aforementioned findings, it is important to understand the adolescents’ contexts and constructions of these sexual relationships and their attendant risks. This is a necessary step to ensure that services provided to them are appropriate and relevant, as the period of adolescence is also an opportune period for interventions which would allow young individuals to acquire the necessary cognitive, emotional and social skills necessary for addressing the demands of intimate and sexual relationships.

**Objective and scope**

This presentation will summarize findings from research and workshops we have conducted with different sub-populations and subcultures of young individuals (i.e. in-school and out-of-school; rural and urban; abused and prostituted adolescents; across socio-economic status) in the area of adolescent sexuality and sexual health, focusing on the contexts and constructs of young Filipinos engaged in sexual partnerships, and the implications of these contexts and constructs in terms of the sexual risks they face in this phase of their development. This is by no means an exhaustive discussion on the said topic.

**Findings**

**Contexts and constructs of sexual partnerships**

* Barkada (Peer Group)
While it is clear that friendships are vital throughout life, there seems to be something special about the role of the peer group or *barkada,*
during adolescence. Peer groups provide adolescents with a source of social activities and support. It is in this context that they are able to explore and experiment, given the relatively egalitarian atmosphere pervading among peer relationships. The *barkada* also facilitates friendships with the opposite sex, with friendships identified by most of the young respondents as the context of romantic relationships. It is in or through their peer group or *barkada* that adolescents usually meet their future partner/s. If romantic relationships are established outside the group, the boy/girl friends are integrated into the young individuals’ peer group. The peer group allows, pushes and mediates the development of the relationship. They also help in the reconciliation and termination of relationships.

Proximity plays a very crucial role in allowing individuals to get to know each other and for attraction to ensue. Friends are chosen (at least initially) from a pool of peers who share the same social environment. In adolescence, friends go to the same school, belong to the same organisation, same community, same territory/gangs (for young people living in the streets) and are similar in ethnic and socio-economic status. Similarity of demographic characteristics, personal attributes, activities, and social behaviour, are observed among friends, and facilitate the “liking” process. Generally, adolescent friends tend to be similar in academic attitudes, achievement and aspirations and enjoy the same leisure activities. Similarity between friends makes it easier to achieve an intimate relationship.

Young females rationalise their decision to have sex based on what they perceived to be the *norms* in their peer group. Susceptibility to conformity with peer group standards is typical among adolescents who are still in the process of negotiating their own values amidst the differing influences of various individuals and groups in their lives (e.g. friends, parents, teachers, etc.). Conformity to peer group norms is a consequence of the adolescents’ tendency to be more sensitive to the needs and standards of others, placing them ahead of their own. Investigations into adolescent peer groups revealed that peers might be one of the primary reasons for adolescents’ initiation to sex; however, more females than males are pressured into premarital sex by peers. Sexual behaviours among girls are greatly influenced by the behaviour of their same sex friends. Males, on the other hand, appear to pick their friends based on similarity in sexual activity.
While intimate relationships first arise in early adolescence, it is not a unique feature of this stage. Adolescents also value forms of intimate self-disclosure or sharing of intimate information among their own friends. These intimate conversations contribute to the adolescent’s sense of self-worth, as well as to the development of social skills and the sense of security necessary for close relationships later in life. Being able to talk and disclose information yields positive feelings of self-affirmation, which can be the context for romantic relationships.

**Paglabas (Dating)**
Because of the term’s romantic and sexual connotations, dating is not seen as a salient stage in the process of building a romantic relationship among Filipino adolescents, especially in rural areas. Although those in the urban centres and upper income groups may use the term, most adolescents prefer to use the term *lumalabas* which roughly translates to “going out together”. Research shows that the purposes of *paglabas* among young individuals are:

- Recreation
- Companionship
- Status grading
- Socialisation for personal and social growth
- Sexual experimentation and satisfaction
- Partner selection
- Intimacy

Oftentimes, the process of *paglabas* is initiated within the peer group. Adolescents seldom go out with individuals they are not familiar with, except when members of their *barkada* are present. Places where adolescents frequent at this stage are malls, food establishments, movie houses, cafés, plazas, churches, etc. It is only after attaining a greater level of comfort and intimacy that potential partners go out on their own, which is when negotiations on physical boundaries and sexual intimacy commence. Though sexual intercourse is not considered to be “socially acceptable” at this point, adolescents may chose to explore various sexual behaviours.

Research on dating among adolescents in the Philippines identified gender differences in the values males and females place on the prac-
tice of dating. Males perceive dating as a means to “satisfy sexual desires”; on the other hand, females see it as a way to “get to know the person better”. This is also related to variations on how they perceive romantic relationships. Most males consider having relationships as sources of “experience”, “fun” and “pleasure”. Females on the other hand, consider “going steady” to assess their future partners in marriage. It is interesting to note that when males were asked as to what particular traits they would want their partner to possess, almost all the respondents, regardless of economic status, considered physical attractiveness, being demure, being sweet and being educated as essential. The female respondents, on the other hand, prefer their boyfriends to be responsible, loving, sincere and honest. Those in the lower income group expressed the importance of having a partner who is financially stable. While Filipino adolescent males initially focus on the external attributes of their partners, females tend to look for indicators of emotional maturity from their partners.

Kami Na

Young adolescents are engaged in various types of sexual relationships: they use the terms “committed” to signal a steady relationships and “casual” for sexual partnerships that are considered to be “fleeting” and “temporary”. Beyond these two lay transactional sexual relationships.

Committed relationships are believed to be characterized by pag-ibig (love). They usually use the phrase kami na (a rough and crude translation of this phrase is “it’s us”) to verbalise the existence of a committed relationship. The word kami connotes “being one with the other” and denotes the merging of individualities and identities. Committed relationships therefore include the expectation of blurring physical and psychological boundaries among partners. In some cases, this is coupled with the female’s identity being subsumed under the male’s identity. Terms used to denote the partner are syota, girlfriend/boyfriend, bu, steady, hubby, mama/papa, mahal, babes, etc. Love for young individuals is associated with being together, which allows each person “to get to know the other and deepen the relationship”. This need to be together necessitates spending more time together alone, which allows the partners to explore each other’s sexuality.
Adolescents believe that it is in the context of committed relationships that sexual activities are justifiable. Almost all of the female respondents and some of the male respondents in the research noted that they had sex with their partners as an expression of their love for the latter. Young individuals seldom use or verbalize lust as the basis for physical intimacy in committed relationships, which would be simply considered as bastos or profane. Invocations of love (“love conquers all”) are very important, cutting across gender, socio-economic status, and variability of adolescent experiences. While love justifies sexual exploration, the search for one’s “true love” delays sexual debut among adolescents. This need to find the one that is “meant to be” one’s partner leads some individuals to abstain from sex or even from any committed and casual sexual partnerships.

Young individuals view romantic relationships as being extremely important for emotional support, providing them with constant companionship in their daily activities and concerns. Relationships are believed to evolve over time, though the notion of time is not measured solely in terms of days or months. Adolescents talk about tamang panahon (right time) for sexual intimacy to ensue. This notion of “right time” is negotiated in the relationship. Some adolescents go through the phase of M.U. or mutual understanding, where there is no commitment but there is recognition of the attraction and affection for each other. This may serve as a transition point to the emergence of a committed relationship. Adolescents believe that one should only engage in a romantic relationship when one is prepared; preparedness for them entails “maturity” – which they defined as the ability to handle the demands of the relationship. Sexual activities like necking, petting, and penetrative sex are closely tied with the level of intimacy achieved in the relationship. The value given to pananagutan (responsibility) and pagtitiwala (trust) are factored in significantly when defining a committed relationship.

The intense feelings of love and desire (pagnana sa) are considered to be intertwined and essential in a committed relationship; as such, the presence of the former legitimises sexual intimacy. The participants assume that when they are in love, sex will spontaneously happen.

Adolescent females also report that they had sex with their boyfriends to be able to keep them in their relationship. Holding on to their partners through sex assures them that they are still in love.
Some male participants would also consciously plan on getting their girlfriends pregnant to permanently tie them into the relationship.

Some of the females expressed fear in the possible consequences of their refusal to respond to their partners’ sexual demands. Their apprehension stems from various, expected consequences if they decline, such as: their partners “will get mad” at them, “will look for someone who is sexually available”, “will leave” them, or “will get emotionally hurt”. Males play on these fears in the process of initiating sex.

There are instances when notions and meanings associated with love – such as trust, responsibility, and desire to have children – are capitalised upon by males to force their partners into sexual submission, even if this is against the latter’s will. Love may then be used as a justification in controlling one’s partner, without due recognition of the latter’s rights. Unfortunately, even the female participants do not recognise their claim to sexual rights in the context of a romantic relationship.

Some of the female adolescents also stated “impending marriage”, which is an indication of the “seriousness” of the partner’s commitment to the relationship, as reason for having sex. Tan et al. (2001) purported that “love and procreation sacralises sex and makes it acceptable even before marriage in certain circumstances... if love is present and if marriage is impending, then premarital sex may be allowed.”

The practice of using condoms in committed relationships is oftentimes considered as generally unacceptable. For one, the readiness/availability of condoms demonstrates that the partner (especially the male) has been thinking and planning on having sex, which is contrary to the perspective that sex should be spontaneous. This is also not in consonance with the belief that sex in the context of a committed relationship is sacred. This issue is further complicated with the notions of trust and responsibility that govern adolescent relationships: when you trust someone, you should not feel the need to protect yourself and when you are a responsible partner, you need to be accountable for the consequences.

*Libog*

“Casual” sexual partnerships come with different labels/phrases, such as “one night stand”, “flirtation”, “Fubu (fuck buddies, friends with benefits)”, “SEB (sex eyeball)” “seks lang”, etc. More adolescent males admit to having these types of sexual partnerships than females. These
terms denote that such partnerships are only “for releasing sexual energies” or “sexual urges”, which adolescents locally call libog (lust). Lust is conceptualized by adolescents as something biological, characterised by bodily sensations that trigger arousal and create tension, which needs to be released/addressed. Some adolescents, most of whom are males, would tend to compartmentalise the concepts of lust and love, reporting that they love their partners in committed relationships but lust after another individual. This compartmentalisation allows individuals to explore sexual partnerships outside of committed relationships, which can lead to a condition of heightened risk.

Adolescents believe that the noncommittal nature of “casual” sexual partnerships allow individuals to be more open to explore sexual activities, without the need for committed relationships. The nature of partnerships ranges from “one night stands” to “fuck buddies” (FBs). While the former is characterised by non-permanent partnerships, the latter is characterised by a certain level of regularity, based on mutual need to sexually satisfy one another. It is however a cardinal rule among FBs that none should fall in love with the other in the process. Some adolescents, especially females, find these casual sexual partnerships as more “liberating” because they can negotiate the terms/conditions of engagement. One such condition may be on the form of protection, such as condom use.

Another form of sexual partnership, mainly driven by lust and desire, is the transactional relationship. These types of partnerships also characterised some adolescent relationships. Prostituted adolescents would narrate their experiences, highlighting their recognition that their bodies serve as objects of desire and as commodities in transactions. Though some of them are in committed relationships, they have learned to compartmentalise their lives as partners and as commercial sex workers (CSWs). Some even define boundaries, physical and behavioural, based on this form of compartmentalisation, not allowing their “customers” to kiss them on the lips (for females) for example, or not allowing them to give them oral sex (for males). Some CSWs narrate experiences of dissociating themselves from their bodies in the process of engaging in sex with a “customer”, which allow them to cope with the dissonance that they feel. They may also use drugs to “drown the bodily sensations” they feel or to lessen their inhibition in the sexual act.
The “payment” for sex received by adolescent CSWs includes money, cell phones, cell phone load, tuition fees, clothes, access to particular high-end establishments, etc. Some transactional sexual partnerships may also become regular relationships later on. Variations on condom use are observed in these partnerships. “Customers” may prevent male CSWs from using condoms, and as they are being paid, the men easily oblige. On the other hand, female CSWs oftentimes do not know or assert their rights to be protected. Informed adolescent CSWs may use condoms in their initial encounters with the “customer”, but refrain from doing so when the “customer” becomes a regular partner. More often than not, CSWs do not use condoms in the context of committed relationships.

Cyber space also presents additional contexts for casual and transactional sexual partnerships. Unlike physical, face-to-face sexual encounters, cyber sex presents a “safer” context for exploring one’s sexuality. Some adolescents report that they prefer to engage in casual cyber relationships because they will not get pregnant or contract sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS, and are less vulnerable to sexual abuse. They are also able to explore various persona as they engage with possible partners in cyber space. They recognize, however, the risk of “violations”, when pictures or videos are “leaked” in cyber space, of dealing with “competition”, or gaining a “negative reputation” that would block them from participating in particular chat rooms or groups. Initial sexual encounters in cyber space do not necessarily lead to sex eyeball, but if this should happen, the process of getting to know each other and engaging is thus facilitated. Sexual performance also becomes highly important in such a setting. Depending on what is considered to be desirable, there will be preferences for particular body types, sexual orientation and partnerships.

**Toma, droga**

According to young individuals, one of the salient factors that leads to initiation of sexual intercourse in committed and casual relationships is their participation in gateway behaviours. Gateway behaviours are defined as “mildly or moderately distressing activities, frequently self-destructive”, which often progress to increasingly risky behaviours (Whirtier et al. 2004). There is increasing evidence that these behaviours – e.g. getting intoxicated (toma), doing drugs (droga) – are linked
to more serious activities which place young people at imminent risk. The gateway behaviour prominent among young males and females is getting drunk.

Doing drugs is another gateway behaviour that cannot be conclusively discounted as a risk factor in teenage sexual activities. Research participants have reported using marijuana and shabu (methamphetamine) prior to engaging in sex, especially casual and transactional sex, though they did not attribute their sexual activities as being triggered by said behaviour. These gateway behaviours facilitate the process of engaging in unplanned and unprotected sex.

**Control, curiosity, gratification**
Another theme that emerged in discussions among adolescents is the perception that they do not have control over their feelings, their partner’s feelings and their subsequent behaviours. This response is more frequently attributed/associated with female adolescents. There is an observed outright acceptance of their perceived lack of control over their sexual behaviours and their submission to the sexual demands of their partners. They rationalised this by believing that this is what is expected in an intimate relationship. Unlike females, perceived lack of control reported by males is attributed to the presence of gateway behaviours, such as consuming alcohol or doing drugs. They see alcohol as triggering sexual excitement and inhibiting their ability to think logically. Consequently, they report that their judgment becomes clouded, even when faced with the possible consequences of their action.

Perceived lack of control is also associated to the notion of the “naturalness” of male sexual libido. Some of the males in the studies and workshops stated that male innately have an “interest in sex” as well as lust. They believe that once they have been excited and stimulated, they cannot do anything about their desire to have intercourse. This is further reinforced with the view that masculinity is tied with sexual experience and sexual prowess. Curiosity on the kind of pleasure that the act of sex can bring, as well as the expectation of gratification are other factors that contribute to the decision to have sexual intercourse, according to male adolescents.
Katawan
Another factor that complicates the adolescent sexual exploration is their ignorance of their own bodies (katawan). Most young people are never encouraged to explore their bodies and the sensations associated with each body part. As they go through the changes brought about by puberty, they become more curious about the changes they are going through and try to secure information on this. They depend most of the time on peers, the Internet and other forms of mass media, for information. Unfortunately, the content of mass media creates unrealistic expectations of the adolescent body, which further on increases the dissatisfaction of adolescents with their own bodies (especially among females) leading to other risks and problems. They gain distorted information particularly about the human body and more generally about human sexuality. Myths regarding fertility, STIs, HIV/AIDS, pregnancy, contraception and protection still haunt young people, disabling them in making sound decisions regarding their sexuality.

Sexual Risks
Filipino adolescent and adult respondents agree that the following are the top five risk conditions confronted by young people (Sobritchea and Ujano-Batangan 2003): domestic violence/violence in intimate relationships; lack of access to adolescent reproductive health services; lack of education on sexuality and reproductive health; adolescent unsafe/risky sexual activities and behaviours; and mental health issues and problems (i.e. depression and suicide ideation).

At risk behaviours that adolescents engage in which increase the likelihood of adverse psychological, social and health consequences can be classified into the following: problem behaviours; health related behaviours; and school behaviours. The concept of risk does not have any direct translation in Filipino. Whenever adolescents and adults are asked to identify a term that best approximates the meaning of risk, they would always respond with the terms panganib, pagsubok and pakikipagsapalaran (Sobritchea and Ujano-Batangan 2004; Tan et al. 2000). The term panganib denotes negative outcomes/consequences of risk-taking, while the terms pagsubok and pakikipagsapalaran mean taking up the challenge with no definitive expectation of the nature of the consequences. Most adolescents use panganib in describing sexual risks, mirroring an inclination to define the consequences of risk taking
as negative. In further pursuing the meaning of risk, adolescents perceive risks as factors that impede an individual’s functioning, positive development, and the exercise and protection of one’s rights. These concepts are related to the issues of perceived control, passivity, and probability.

Based on the statistics on abortion, the estimated number of abortions per year is 400,000, with an abortion rate of 25 women per 1,000, aged 15-44 (ISSA 2005). Abortion rates are at 16 per 100 pregnancies, with approximately 4 out of 10 of abortion complications treated in hospitals occurring among female youth 15-24, according to the YAFS two study sites.

Adolescents also experience violence in intimate partnerships. Several studies have noted that, more often than not, females are the ones coerced and violated by their sexual partners. The different physical forms of violence that females experience in intimate relationships include being slapped, dragged, spat on, drugged, punched, slammed, pushed/shoved, gripped tightly, slashed with a knife, kicked, choked, chained, pinched, threatened, thrown things at, and pulled by the hair. They also go through other forms of physical, psychological and economic abuse: rape, neglect, economic control, and being berated and humiliated. Prostituted young females have also experienced all these types of abuses from their male customers. A handful of males admitted to being physically abused by their partners. Individuals who have experienced abuse in intimate relationships (unless they break free and heal), are further cowed into submission, unable to assert themselves, and have their rights to be respected and protected. Even after the physical wounds have healed, the psychological trauma still persists. Abuse is further related to the lowering of an individual’s sense of self-worth and self-efficacy.

Worth (1996) noted that there is difficulty among females in “distinguishing love and abuse”. She attributed this to the commonly held belief among women that loving their partners entails being sexually available to them. Cultures have always portrayed “women as empty vessels where emotional and sexual fulfilment comes through reflecting their male lover’s passion rather than their own”. This is further reinforced by the process of socialization where young individuals are made to believe that “gender roles are natural which contribute to the beliefs that risky sexual behaviours are unavoidable” (Shears 2002).
All these contexts and constructs associated with adolescent sexual relationships provide conditions of vulnerability to risks, which impedes their development of healthy sexual identity and their claim to sexual rights in sexual relationships. Intervention programs need to consider and further explore these factors in the process of developing relevant and appropriate strategies to reach young individuals in sexual and reproductive health promotion.

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