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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/zrhm21

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To cite this article: Shrinivas Darak, Ritu Parchure, Trupti Darak & Vinay Kulkarni (2022) Love, sex, and commitment: relationship choices and trajectories among unmarried youth in India, Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters, 29:2, 2031833, DOI: 10.1080/26410397.2022.2031833

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2022.2031833

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Published online: 22 Feb 2022.

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Love, sex, and commitment: relationship choices and trajectories among unmarried youth in India

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Abstract: *There is limited research in India to understand young people's decision-making processes about intimate relationships before marriage. This paper, adopting a life course perspective, explains relationship choices and diachronic trajectories of relationships from adolescence to young adulthood. Retrospective data were collected from 1240 never married 20–29-year-old men and women living in Pune using a relationships history calendar. All the relationships from 10 years of age onwards were plotted on the calendar, and information on predictor variables was collected through structured questionnaires. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Sequence analysis approach was used to identify different typologies. Overall, 76% of the participants reported having at least one relationship. More women compared to men (84% vs 70%) ever had a relationship. The median age of starting the first relationship was 17 years for women and 18 for men. Different relationship types were reported, such as "serious", casual, "friends with benefit", and "exploring". The level of emotional involvement, commitment, and physical intimacy significantly differed in different relationship types with significant gender differences. Four typologies of relationships were observed, labelled as (1) Commitment–No sex (*N = 187*); (2) Commitment–Sex-Some exploration (*N = 189*); (3) No commitment–Exploration (*N = 281*), and (4) No relationship (*N = 583*). Compared to men, women were more likely to follow the trajectory of "Commitment-No sex" (RR 2.13, CI 1.5–3.03). Family environment was significantly related to young people's relationship choices. The findings strongly suggest the need to adopt a developmental perspective towards intimate relationships to understand and address the vulnerabilities of young people across the life course.* DOI: 10.1080/26410397.2022.2031833

Keywords: non-martial relationships, choice, sequence analysis, India, youth, life course

Introduction

Modernity, globalisation, and urbanisation are bringing about a significant transformation of intimacy[1,2] through a larger narrative of individual choice, freedom, pleasure, and delinking of sexual expression with reproduction. In India, neoliberal economic policies are leading to an aspirational change in the population.[3,4] With the changing landscape of opportunities, many young people are moving to cities in pursuit of higher education and jobs and leading a relatively independent life. Increasing age at marriage,[5] especially in urban areas, and improved access to mobile phones and internet are significantly contributing to the way young people are exploring their sexuality.

Despite India being one of the youngest countries in the world, with currently 27.5% of the country's population in the 15–29 years age group,[6] the sexual health needs of young people are poorly understood. Historically, relationships before marriage are not socially sanctioned. Policies, programmes, and research on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are primarily focused on addressing issues related to reproductive health.[7] Most of the available literature on the sexual behaviour of youth is designed from a biomedical perspective and focuses

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primarily on understanding the risk of transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. The literature is mainly cross-sectional and aimed at understanding the proportion of boys and girls who are sexually active (mostly defined as experiencing penetrative sex) to explain the epidemiology and prevalence of premarital sex[8–12] and to understand sexual debut.[13] There is limited research to understand the context in which these relationships occur and the decision-making process of young people.[14,15]

Emerging global literature is highlighting the need to look at adolescent romantic relationships from a developmental perspective. Evidence suggests that forming intimate and romantic relationships while transitioning from adolescence to young adulthood is crucial for individual growth and development.[16] The experiences in these relationships contribute to positive self-concept and social integration,[17] personal happiness,[18] and overall wellbeing.[19] It is, therefore, argued that relationships in adolescence and young adulthood should be looked at in their own right and not just as a precursor to marriage or as "premarital".

The developmental perspective towards relationships in adolescence and emerging adulthood is even more critical in the rapidly changing context of the lives of young people in India. Whether to be in a relationship? When? With whom? For how long? Be sexually intimate? All are important decisions that young people are required to make. While making these decisions, personal aspirations to lead an independent life with freedom can be contested by a conservative family and social context that disapproves of intimate relationships before marriage. How young people then navigate through their decision on intimate relationships in the context of often contradictory narratives of tradition and modernity is an important question to ask for understanding their vulnerabilities.

With this view, the current study aims to understand the dynamic process of decision-making of young people by adopting a life course perspective.[20] A life course is defined as "a sequence of socially defined events (completing education, migrating to another place, starting a relationship, break-up, etc.) and roles that the individual enacts over time".[20] The life course approach views developmental processes as a trajectory, which is shaped by multiple interacting factors, the interrelation of which is likely to change based on timing and sequences of life experiences and transitions. This approach enables understanding of the continuity of life pathways by analysing how behaviour and experiences encountered during childhood and adolescence may affect adult behaviour and experiences. Such a diachronic understanding is essential to identify behaviour patterns and to plan age and context-appropriate interventions for improving the sexual health of youth.

Methods

Study setting and population

The study was conducted among never married, educated (at least 12 years of education) youth who were living in Pune for at least six months prior to an interview and were between 20 and 29 years of age. This was a retrospective descriptive study, which applied a non-probability sampling method. Given the sensitive nature of exploring relationship histories and sexual behaviour, recruiting a probability sample to represent urban unmarried young adults aged 20–29 was not feasible. Recruiting the sample in this age group would require cooperation from diverse educational institutions and workplaces, which are not open to the issue of sexuality, given the widespread social taboo on the topic. Further, the research aimed to explore patterns of relationships rather than understanding the proportion of people engaging in sexual activity. There have been studies on non-probability samples to understand the trajectories and predictors of these trajectories.[21,22]

The overall recruitment approach was to appeal to young people to participate in the study and provide them with opportunities to self-nominate for participation. Efforts were made to get adequate numbers in different age categories (20–25 and more than 25 years), and educational and occupational status (currently working/not-working, currently studying/not-studying). Young people were approached using different platforms such as educational spaces (colleges, coaching classes), workplaces, public spaces (parks, cafes), and social media appeals. Of the total 1240 participants recruited in the study, 595 (48%) participants had received the study information through in-person contact (in-person introduction about the study in educational institutes, workplaces, etc. by the study team), 331 (27%) had received the information

through social media, 281 (23%) participants had received it from someone who had participated in the study, and 33 (3%) reported other sources of getting the information.

Data collection

The data on the timing and sequencing of different events in a participant's life were collected in the Relationship History Calendar (RHC). The RHC gathered quantitative information on monthly changes in status concerning various life events, such as education, work experience, history of migration, living arrangement (with family or independently), relationships, sexual behaviour, substance use, and mental health status. Data were retrospectively collected from age 10 until the current age. The narrative interview technique, which encourages participants to share their stories, was used to collect information on different events. The RHC with narrative interview technique has been shown to follow the process of memory recall and reduce recall bias.[23,24]

Data on relationships were collected in two steps in the interview. First, the participants were asked to recollect their relationships sequentially, starting from age 10 onwards until the current age or the other way round, based on the participant's preference. A relationship was considered only when the participant reported that there was an explicit communication with the partner that they were "in a relationship" and the partner agreed to that (to exclude one-sided love/infatuation, etc.). These relationships' start and end dates were plotted on the calendar while corroborating these dates with other life domains such as education, work status, place of residence, that were marked on the calendar before asking about relationships. The smallest unit on the calendar was a month. Relationships that lasted for more than one month were plotted on a calendar, whereas information on relationships that were shorter than one month (short relationships) was collected in a separate form. The second step collected detailed information about each relationship that lasted for more than a month on a structured questionnaire. Information about the gender of the partner, the name assigned by the participant to that relationship (serious, casual, etc.), nature of involvement with that partner (emotional involvement, physical intimacy, commitment), and sexual behaviour with that partner (penetrative, non-penetrative, etc.) was collected in the questionnaire. To determine the name assigned to the relationship, participants were asked what they would call this relationship and were provided with options, such as serious, casual, friends with benefit, open, exploring, and others. Participants who chose "other" mostly mentioned that they would not like to name this relationship yet. This category was clubbed with the label "exploring" for the analysis.

In order to aid the recall process and encourage participants to narrate their stories, the participant and the interviewer had a side-by-side seating arrangement so that the participant could see the calendar and participate in filling it. Male and female interviewers collected data from male and female participants, respectively. The study tools were prepared in Marathi and English language. Data were collected between July 2017 and January 2019.

Data preparation

The data collected on the RHC comparing dates of different events were arranged on a timescale corresponding to the participant's age, starting from 10 years until 29 years. In cases where the participant's age was less than 29 years, the observation was censored by the interview date. Each column corresponded to a specific time unit (months) and included data on a mutually exclusive state. To understand the pattern of relationships and their evolution over time, two aspects of relationships, irrespective of the relationship labels, were combined: a commitment in the relationship and penetrative sex. This gave four mutually exclusive states (1) No commitment–No sex; (2) No commitment–Sex; (3) Commitment–No sex; (4) Commitment–Sex. Additionally, when there were two or more relationships of any type (irrespective of commitment and penetrative sex) in a month, a code of "Parallel multiple" was assigned for that month. When people did not have any relationships in that month, then a code of "No relationship" was assigned.

Data analysis

Data analysis included (1) description of different relationship choices made by young people and gendered differences in the nature of these relationships with respect to emotional involvement, physical intimacy, and commitment, (2) understanding typologies of relationships trajectories, and (3) analysing the association of socio-

demographic variables with the derived typologies in the given sample.

A sequence analysis approach was used to derive the typologies of relationship trajectories. Sequence analysis is the analysis of categorical sequences of events to model entire event history career trajectories taking into account the order in which events occur and the transition mechanism between different states.[25] The typologies were derived by clustering the common sequences from the data by using the optimal matching (OM) technique,[26] where the distance between sequences is quantified as the minimum number of edits required to generate identical sequences.[27] Two sequences are considered similar based on the number of features they share in common. To get the distinct number of typologies, all the sequences were plotted in a dendrogram to examine the clustering of the sequences.[28] Based on this analysis, four distinct clusters were obtained.

The association of socio-demographic factors with these derived typologies was estimated in a multinomial logistic regression model. Variables were tested using the main effects model. Statistical significance was determined by examining the confidence intervals of the relative risk ratios and the corresponding *p*-values of the coefficients. A *p*-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant. The multinomial regression analysis was conducted only to assess the factors that determined the membership to a particular typology in the given sample.

Sequence analysis and multinomial regression were performed in the statistical software R using the TraMineR library for conducting sequence analysis.[29]

Ethical consideration

The study protocol, consent forms, and data collection tools were reviewed and approved by the Prayas Institutional Ethics Committee for Research (IECR) on 28/07/2017, (IECR registration number – ECR/146/Indt/MH/2014/RR-20) before starting the recruitment of the participants. Written informed consent was taken from all the participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. None of the data forms had identifying information. After the interview was over, all participants were provided with a printed list with contact details/websites of different service providers, including Prayas clinic, offering free/subsidised HIV/STI testing and counselling, contraceptive counselling and care, psychological counselling and care, abortion care, legal counselling, etc. The participants were given a fixed amount approved by the ethics committee to compensate for their time and travel. No other monetary incentive was provided.

Results

Participant profile

A total of 1240 participants were enrolled in the study, of whom 655 were men and 585 were women. The socio-demographic profile of the participants is provided in Table 1. The median age of participants was 23 years. The majority of the participants reported belonging to the middle/upper-middle class (81% men, 91% women). Average monthly family income between 21,000 and 75,000 INR (65 INR = 1 $US) was reported by 46% men and 41% women, whereas above 75,000 INR was reported by 28% men and 43% women. The majority of the participants had completed or were studying for graduate (55% men, 47% women) or postgraduate (21% men, 23% women) degrees. Almost half of the participants (57% men, 50% women) were involved in remunerative work at the time of the interview. The majority of the participants were born and lived in the city during their childhood, whereas 38% of the men and 23% of women were born and at least had schooling (up to 10th) in a village or town and later migrated to the city for higher education or work. Overall, 44% of the participants (36% men, 53% women) had been living in Pune since their childhood, 47% (56% men, 36% women) were from other districts in Maharashtra, and 9% (8% men and 10% women) were from other states in India and had been living in Pune for the past six months.

Relationship choices

Of the 655 men, 455 (69.5%) ever had a relationship that lasted for more than a month, and 192 (29.3%) ever had a short relationship. Among men, 1021 relationships for more than a month (on average two partners per participant) and 1313 short relationships (on average seven partners per participant) were reported. Of the 585 women, 491 (83.9%) ever had a relationship that lasted for a month, and 156 (26.6%) ever had a short relationship. Among women, 1195 relationships for more than a month (on average two partners per participant) and 917 short relationships

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of the participants

Variable	Categories	Men (*N* = 655)		Women (*N* = 585)	
		N	%	*N*	%
Age (years)	20–22	206	31.4	280	47.8
	23–25	253	38.6	207	35.3
	> 25	196	29.9	98	16.7
Religion	Hindu	564	86.1	485	82.9
	Muslim	8	1.2	14	2.3
	Christian	4	0.6	11	1.8
	Baudh	28	4.2	20	3.4
	Jain	14	2.1	21	3.5
	Other	15	2.2	19	3.4
	Don't want to tell	22	3.3	14	2.3
Caste	General	418	63.8	409	69.9
	Other Backward Caste	116	17.7	83	14.1
	SC/ST/VJNT	121	18.4	93	15.8
Socio-economic status	Lower middle class	124	18.9	55	9.4
	Middle class	423	64.5	342	58.4
	Upper middle class	108	16.4	188	32.1
Family income (INR)	0–21,000	170	25.9	90	15.3
	21,000–75,000	300	45.8	239	40.8
	> 75,000	181	27.6	251	42.9
Education	12th/Diploma	158	24.1	174	29.7
	Graduate	362	55.2	274	46.8
	Postgraduate	135	20.6	137	23.4
Currently working	Yes	376	57.4	292	49.9
	No	279	42.6	293	50.1
Residence type	City	408	62.2	452	77.2
	Town	102	15.5	79	13.5
	Village	145	22.1	54	9.2
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	603	92	526	89.9
	Homosexual	21	3.2	9	1.5
	Bisexual	26	3.9	44	7.5
	Asexual	1	0.1	1	0.1
	Exploring/ questioning	4	0.6	5	0.8

(on average six partners per participant) were reported. In men and women, short relationships were mostly in the form of unexpected encounters with friends/colleagues, meeting ex-partners for a short time, casual flings, and meeting someone through dating apps. Thirty men reported short encounters with sex workers. There was some level of physical intimacy (not necessarily penetrative sex) between the partners in all short encounters. Findings on sexual risk trajectories among men and women are published elsewhere.[30]

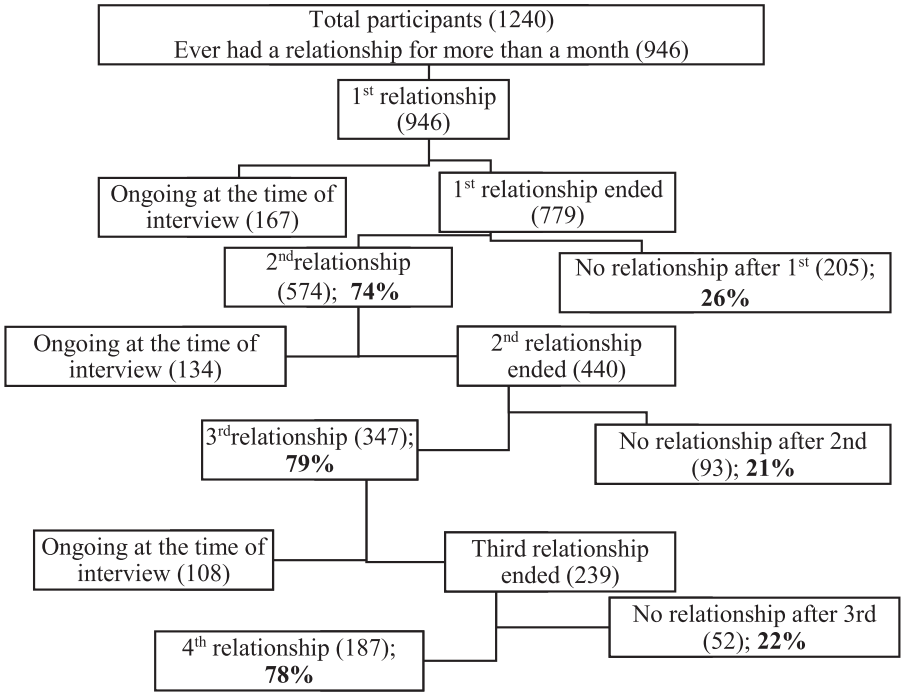
Relationships that lasted for more than a month were analysed to understand relationship choices and trajectories.

"Choosing" to be in relationships

Of the total enrolled participants, 167 (26%) men and 88 (15%) women reported that they never had a relationship. The reasons for women and men for not being in relationships are somewhat different. More men reported not finding a partner compared to women (30% vs 17%). For women, the most common reason was conservative family background (41%), where they knew that their family members would not tolerate it if they found out about it. Sixteen percent of the men and 19% of the women said that they did not want to be in a relationship.

The progression of relationships is shown in Figure 1. Out of the total enrolled participants, 946 (76.3%) ever had a relationship (455 men and 491 women). Almost a quarter of participants (23% men and 22% women) reported having five or more relationships. The median age of starting the first relationship was 18 years (Inter quartile range [IQR 16–21] for men and 17 years [IQR 16–20] for women). Almost 30% of the men and 40% of the women reported having had their first relationship before the age of 16 years. The average duration of the first relationship was 16 months (median duration 12 months). This duration was similar for women and men. However, it was observed that the duration of the first relationship was significantly shorter in the postmillennial generation (median 12 months) than those who are relatively older (median 18 months). In the given sample, the postmillennial generation (born after 1995, also known as Generation Z) was significantly more likely to start their

Figure 1. Progression of relationships



first relationship before the age of 16 compared to those who were born before 1995.

For each relationship that was plotted on a calendar, participants were asked what they would call this relationship. Based on these categories (Table 2), 58% of the total relationships were reported to be serious. The proportions of different relationship types were similar among men and women.

Emotional involvement, physical intimacy, and commitment

For each relationship that was reported, participants were asked to answer whether there was an emotional involvement, physical intimacy (penetrative and non-penetrative), and commitment in that relationship. Gender-wise analysis of the three factors for different types of relationships is given in Figure 2. The analysis showed that there is a high level of emotional involvement, physical intimacy, and commitment in "serious" relationships. The pattern was similar among men and women. Significant gender difference was observed in "friends with benefit" (FWB) relationships where 26% of the men and 66% of the women said they were emotionally involved in that relationship. Similarly, half of the men and women were emotionally involved in their "casual" relationships. A high level of emotional involvement was observed among the relationships defined as "exploring" where people say they did not want to attach any label or relationships where they were "giving it a 'try'" to see how it evolved.

Relationship transitions and typologies

Given the fact that the interpretation of relationship types could be different for men and women with respect to emotional involvement, physical intimacy and commitment (Figure 2), for plotting the relationship transition, a combination of two factors – commitment and penetrative sex – was used instead of using relationship types. In the trajectories, the commitment would generally indicate a serious relationship whereas lack of commitment would indicate casual, friends with benefit, or exploring relationships (Figure 2).

The four typologies identified using the sequential data on mutually exclusive states of

Table 2. Type of relationships and the total number of partners by gender

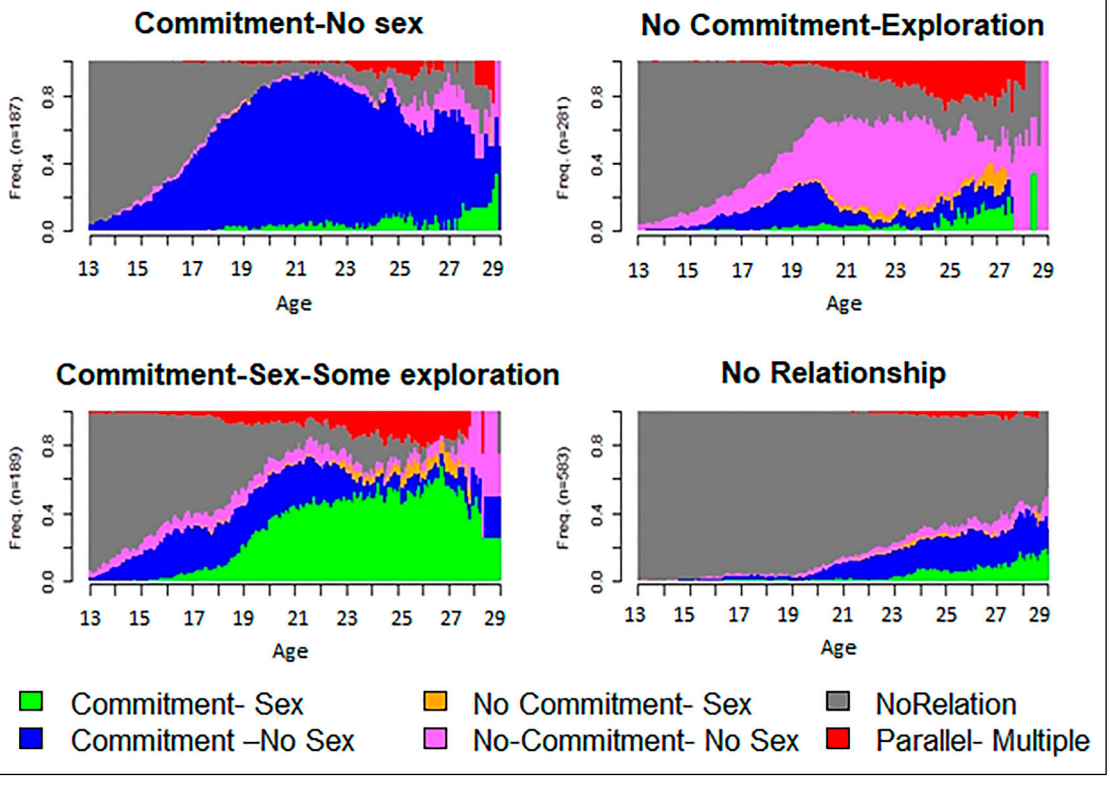
	Men			Women			Total		
	N	Relationships		*N*	Relationships		*N*	Relationships	
Relationship type		*N*	%		*N*	%		*N*	%
Serious	375	559	54.7	435	722	60.4	810	1281	57.8
Casual	150	212	20.8	140	184	15.4	290	396	17.9
Friends with benefit	76	93	9.1	81	106	8.9	157	199	9.0
Exploring	118	157	15.4	156	183	15.3	274	340	15.3
Total	455	1021	100	491	1195	100	946	2216	100

"No commitment-No sex", "Commitment-No sex", "Commitment-Sex", "No commitment-Sex" are illustrated in Figure 3, as well as "parallel multiple", which indicates two or more relationships of any type irrespective of commitment and penetrative sex in that relationship. Each state is represented by a specific colour. Each cluster presents the distribution of these states over the age scale which starts at the age of 13 and ends at 29. The graph is interpreted by looking at the overall distribution of these states across age (proportion of individuals in these states). Based on these distributions, the derived clusters are labelled as (1) Commitment–No sex, (2) Commitment–Sex–Some exploration (3) No commitment–Exploration, and (4) No relationships, and are described below.

Figure 2. Type of involvement in different relationships



Figure 3. Typologies based on relationship trajectories



*Commitment–No sex (*N = *187)*
This typology shows participants who start their relationship early, stay in committed relationships, and choose not to have penetrative sex (as can be seen in the figure, with dominant blue colour). This cluster can be considered as being people who typically say that they would have penetrative sex "only after marriage" which is largely the social norm. Fifteen percent of the total participants were observed to follow this typology (*N* = 187). Of these, 116 (62%) were women, and 71 (38%) were men.

*Commitment–Sex–Some exploration (*N = *189)*
This typology includes a more diverse set of trajectories. Participants start their relationship early either as a committed or non-committed relationship without penetrative sex and from 18 years onwards start to engage in penetrative sex. Though the dominant green (commitment with penetrative sex) appears to be the central aspect of this typology, one can observe that some people also engage in non-committed relationships and have multiple parallel relationships. Fifteen percent of the total participants were observed to follow this typology (*N* = 189). Of these, 93 (49%) were women, and 96 (51%) were men.

*No commitment–Exploration (*N = *281)*
There is no clear pattern in this cluster except that it is dominated by people who are in uncommitted relationships, with and without penetrative sex. The typology can be considered as those who are exploring different kinds of relationships in their life, which go beyond committed relationships. Twenty-three percent of the total participants were observed to follow this typology (*N* = 281). Of these, 149 (53%) were women, and 132 (47%) were men.

*No relationship (*N = *583)*
The majority of the people in this cluster are not in a relationship, some by choice and others because they could not find a partner. It also

includes people who had a relationship for some time, then never went into another relationship, and hence remained uninvolved for most of the period. Those who had a relationship started it relatively late. Forty-seven percent of the total participants were grouped in this cluster (N = 583). Of these, 227 (39%) were women, and 356 (61%) were men.

Overall, these four typologies indicate the pluralisation of relationship trajectories. Some are following a more conservative traditional pattern of either not having a relationship or having a committed relationship without getting involved in penetrative sex, while others are choosing to normalise sexual relationship before marriage and exploring relationships beyond commitment.

Socio-demographic factors associated with different typologies

The socio-demographic factors were analysed in a regression model keeping the trajectory of "No relationship" as a reference. The analysis was undertaken mainly to understand the factors associated with the trajectories in the given sample and showed that in comparison to men, women were more likely to follow the trajectory of "Commitment-No sex" [RR 2.13, CI 1.5–3.03]. The postmillennial generation (born after 1995, also known as Generation Z) compared to the millennial generation is more likely to explore in their relationships and was seen to follow the trajectories of "Commitment-Sex-Some exploration" [RR 2.43, CI 1.67–3.54] and "No commitment-Exploration" [RR 3.11, CI 2.25–4.30]. Compared to people who reported their sexual orientation as heterosexual, those who reported being lesbian, gay, or bisexual were more likely to follow the trajectories with exploration. Contrary to the common belief, those men and women who reported that as teenagers they had experienced significant restrictions from their parents (meeting friends, going out late night, wearing clothes they want, etc.) were more likely to follow the trajectory of "No commitment-Exploration" [RR 1.86, CI 1.18–2.93]. Participants who lived in a city during childhood and migrated from one city to another city (Pune) were more likely to follow the trajectory of "Commitment-Sex-Some exploration".

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study in India that has explored relationship choices and trajectories among unmarried youth, adopting a life course approach. The study showed that relationships in adolescence and emerging adulthood are becoming common with a higher probability among people growing up in cities and higher-income households. There is significant diversity in emotional involvement, physical intimacy, and commitment in different relationships with gender asymmetry, particularly in relationships that are labelled as "friends with benefit" and "exploring". The analysis of typologies showed a mix of groups following a more traditional pattern of either not engaging in a relationship or mainly engaging in serious relationships without penetrative sex, to a more liberal pattern of exploration in relationships with engagement in multiple parallel relationships in the latter group. The postmillennial generation, people growing up in cities and from higher-income households were more likely to follow a more liberal pattern. The relationship choices of young people are also affected by a restrictive family environment.

Transformation of values and attitudes about intimacy is an ongoing process.[31,32] The transformations are more dramatic in India after liberalisation and globalisation.[3,33] While these changes are natural and inevitable, they are often contested within traditional cultural, social, religious, and political contexts. The finding that young people are making diverse choices about their relationships, with some actively engaged in evolving new frameworks to define their relationships, points out the element of asserting choice, which is considered an important aspect of modernity in India.[34] However, there is always a struggle to maintain a fine balance between tradition and modernity,[33,35] which is reflected in people's different relationship choices. The finding that relationships are occurring earlier in younger people and that the pattern is also more diverse points towards rapid change in intimacy. A rapidly changing situation, coupled with a lack of open communication about sexuality in the family[36] and lack of comprehensive sexuality education at schools,[37,38] can significantly increase the vulnerabilities of young people.

The popular narrative of young unmarried urban youth's sexuality seems to be dominated by freedom-anonymity-technology, consumerism, and the "choices" they have in their lives, ignoring the role of parenting and family environment shaping these choices.[39] There is growing global

literature showing the important role of family, environment, and negative childhood experiences in the choices and quality of adult relationships.[40–42] A study conducted in Pune among unmarried youth reported that young women who had been beaten (physically abused, slapped, etc.) by their families were more likely to engage in romantic and sexual relationships.[43] The finding from our study adds to this evidence and supports the adoption of a life course perspective in addressing sexual and reproductive health issues.[44] Vulnerabilities for sexual health should be understood as a dynamic process of stress and resources across various domains of life (i.e. work, family, health, migration, relationships, etc.), levels (i.e. person, group, collective), and time (i.e. long-term processes).

It is evident that young people are making diverse choices about their relationships. Being able to choose one's partner and decide the nature of the relationship is an important sexual right. However, the fact that it is a "relationship by choice" does not make it more egalitarian.[45] Existing gender norms, patriarchy, and asymmetry in relationships can lead to adverse outcomes that further shape decisions. The study findings of unequal emotional involvement and commitment in friends with benefit (where it is not expected)[46] and the gender differences point out the asymmetry in relationships. Such asymmetry can lead to power imbalances and make the person with higher involvement more vulnerable.[47] Cultural norms about sexuality and gender could be an important factor for a significantly higher proportion of women reporting emotional involvement in relationships where it is typically not expected (friends with benefit). The existing social norms prevent women from being in "casual" relationships without any emotional involvement and might increase their vulnerabilities.

Research to understand different aspects of sexual and reproductive health using life course perspective and event history data is emerging only recently.[22,48–51] The analytical approach adopted in the current study to understand typologies of relationships provides a unique perspective. Research studies that applied this framework to understand relationship transitions are mainly from developed countries.[17,52,53] These studies argue that the development of early romantic relationships follows a phase-based approach, whereby adolescents start with short-term connections, which evolve into relationships with more emotional intimacy, culminating into single, committed intimate relationships for an extended duration.[17,54] Our study indicates that there is distinct within-group segregation with two groups reporting committed relationships right from the beginning (with a difference in engaging in penetrative sex). The group following more exploration continues to do so even in early adulthood and lacks commitment. Given the important role of individual, familial, and social factors, such as agency in decision-making, morality about sexual behaviour, level of family pressure, etc., there is a need for studies to understand the contextual factors affecting relationship transitions.

The insights from this study have several policy and programmatic implications. Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) programmes in India have traditionally focused more on reproductive health and hence are dominated by the discourse on maternal health. This has resulted in the formulation of a more biomedical approach to SRHR that largely catered to married heterosexual couples and focused more on contraception and HIV/STI. With changing patterns and diversity of relationship choices, young people can experience a range of issues beyond HIV/STI, or unwanted pregnancies. The psychosocial issues, such as decision to engage in sex, dealing with abuse, break-up, depression, self-harm, etc., can significantly affect the quality of life and require professional support to deal with. Currently, young people, especially unmarried adults, do not have spaces where they can talk about these concerns. There is a need that SRHR programmes should also focus on these sexual health concerns. Rather than a risk-centric approach, SRHR programmes should aim at building a more positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships which gives importance to pleasurable and safer sexual experiences, free of coercion. Creating non-judgmental and non-medicalised spaces where young people can share their concerns and seek timely support is important for ensuring their wellbeing. In addition, the findings of this study, particularly on younger age at beginning the relationship, strongly highlight the need for implementing comprehensive sexuality education in schools.

While the study provides important insights about relationship choices and trajectories, it has certain limitations. The study was conducted among a purposive sample, mainly from an urban middle-class population, which limits the

generalisability of the findings. Participants who chose to participate in the study might be more likely to have relationships and to have engaged in penetrative sex. The trajectories of all individuals included in the study are not complete due to different ages at the time of the interview. While the proportions derived from the study may not be representative, the patterns derived from the observable exposure time of the included participants remain informative and provide significant insights. Being a retrospective study, recall bias is another limitation. However, previous research has demonstrated that the calendar method to ascertain information about sexual behaviour[24] significantly reduces recall bias.

Conclusions

Significant variations in the choices, timing, and trajectories observed among youth are useful to understand their decision-making processes about intimate relationships. The postmillennial generation comparatively start their relationships early. They are more likely to break the traditional norms about penetrative sex before marriage. They are inclined to explore new frameworks about intimate relationships, suggesting a rapidly changing external environment and peer norms about relationships. This, coupled with asymmetry in relationship expectations, lack of support from family, and stigma related to non-marital relationships, can increase the vulnerability of young people to deal with issues related to sexuality. The finding that relationships choices are diachronic and are influenced by family environment strongly suggests the need to adopt a developmental perspective towards intimate relationships in adolescence and young adulthood. Sexual and reproductive health and rights programmes in India should broaden their scope to cater to the changing needs of young adults.

Acknowledgement

We thank our data collection team – Maitreyee Kulkarni, Archana Kulkarni, Sanjay Chabukswar, Amar Deogaonkar, and Anuj Deshpande for their sensitive and sincere efforts in talking to young people and their help in data entry and validation. Many thanks to all the participants who cooperated enthusiastically during extended interviews and trusted us to share their personal journeys.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This paper is based on the study "Youth in Transition" financially supported by Prayas (Health Group).

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Résumé

L'Inde dispose de recherches limitées pour comprendre les processus de décision des jeunes sur les relations intimes avant le mariage. Cet article, qui a adopté une perspective englobant le parcours de vie, explique les choix de relation et les trajectoires diachroniques des relations depuis l'adolescence jusqu'au début de l'âge adulte. Les données rétrospectives ont été recueillies auprès de 1240 femmes et hommes jamais mariés, âgés de 20 à 29 ans et vivant à Pune, à l'aide d'un

Resumen

En India se han realizado pocas investigaciones para entender los procesos de toma de decisiones de las personas jóvenes respecto a las relaciones íntimas antes del matrimonio. Este artículo, adoptando la perspectiva del ciclo de vida, explica las opciones de relaciones y las trayectorias diacrónicas de las relaciones desde la adolescencia hasta la adultez temprana. Se utilizó un calendario de historial de relaciones para recolectar datos retrospectivos de 1240 hombres y mujeres de 20 a 29

calendrier retraçant les relations. Toutes les relations à partir de l'âge de dix ans ont été inscrites sur le calendrier et des informations sur les variables prédictives ont été collectées avec des questionnaires structurés. Les données ont été analysées au moyen de statistiques descriptives. Une approche d'analyse séquentielle a été utilisée pour identifier les différentes typologies. Dans l'ensemble, 76% des participants ont indiqué avoir eu au moins une relation. Les femmes étaient plus nombreuses que les hommes (84% contre 70%) à avoir eu une relation. L'âge médian du début de la première relation était de 17 ans pour les femmes et de 18 ans pour les hommes. Différents types de relations ont été cités, par exemple « sérieuse », « légère », « sexe entre amis » et « exploration ». Le niveau d'implication émotionnelle, d'engagement et d'intimité physique différait sensiblement dans les divers types de relation avec des écarts notables entre hommes et femmes. Quatre typologies de relations ont été observées: (1) engagement-pas de rapports sexuels ($N = 187$); (2) engagement – rapports sexuels-un peu d'exploration ($N = 189$); (3) pas d'engagement-exploration ($N = 281$); et (4), pas de relation ($N = 583$). Par comparaison avec les hommes, les femmes avaient plus de probabilités de suivre la trajectoire « engagement-pas de rapports sexuels » (RR 2.13, IC 1.5–3.03). L'environnement familial était clairement lié aux choix de relation des jeunes. Il ressort nettement des conclusions qu'il convient d'adopter une perspective développementale des relations intimes pour comprendre et aborder les vulnérabilités des jeunes tout au long de leur vie.

años nunca antes casados, que vivían en Pune. En el calendario, se marcaron todas las relaciones a partir de los 10 años, y se utilizaron cuestionarios estructurados para recopilar información sobre variables predictoras. Se analizaron los datos utilizando estadísticas descriptivas. Se utilizó el enfoque de análisis secuencial para identificar diferentes tipologías. En general, el 76% de las personas participantes informaron tener por lo menos una relación. Más mujeres que hombres (84% vs 70%) habían tenido una relación alguna vez en su vida. La edad media al inicio de la primera relación era de 17 años para las mujeres y de 18 años para los hombres. Se informaron diferentes tipos de relaciones, tales como "serias", casuales, "amigos con beneficios" y "en exploración". El nivel de participación emocional, compromiso e intimidad física difirió significativamente en los diferentes tipos de relaciones con significativas diferencias de género. Se observaron cuatro tipologías de relaciones, clasificadas como (1) Compromiso-sin sexo ($N = 187$); (2) Compromiso-sexo-algo de exploración ($N = 189$); (3) Sin compromiso-exploración ($N = 281$) y (4) Ninguna relación ($N = 583$). Comparadas con los hombres, las mujeres eran más propensas a seguir la trayectoria de "compromiso-sin sexo" (RR 2.13, IC 1.5–3.03). El entorno familiar estaba relacionado significativamente con las opciones de relaciones de las personas jóvenes. Los hallazgos indican enfáticamente la necesidad de adoptar una perspectiva de desarrollo hacia relaciones íntimas para entender y abordar las vulnerabilidades de las personas jóvenes a lo largo de la vida.