

**SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR AMONG UNMARRIED ADOLESCENTS IN DELHI, INDIA:
OPPORTUNITIES DESPITE PARENTAL CONTROLS**

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from an in-depth qualitative investigation of adolescent females and males residing in two low income urban settings in India – a slum and a resettlement colony in Delhi. This paper sheds light on the widening rift in the perceptions of parents and experiences of adolescents in the area of sexual behaviour. Results suggest that gender double standards and power imbalance powerfully influence socialisation patterns, expectations and behaviours of young females and males. Despite stringent controls on the mobility and activity of unmarried youth and particularly females, opportunities do exist for sexual relationships, sometimes with adverse consequences for young people's health and lives. Liaisons tend to be secretive and awareness of safe sex and the protective nature of condoms are limited. Parental perceptions of and confidence in their ability to control and protect their adolescent daughters from dangerous relationships are clearly unfounded as opportunities unfold for increasing interaction among young people. Indeed, interaction and intimacies between boys and girls occur quite frequently and adolescents report a host of opportunities available to them to build friendships and sexual relationships. Findings argue for programmes that apprise parents and other adult gate-keepers of adolescent behaviours and sexual health needs while at the same time equipping adolescents to make informed, safe and wanted choices in their sexual lives.

I. Introduction

While pre-marital sexual behaviour among adolescents and youth remain poorly explored topics in India, the available evidence suggests that between 20 and 30 percent of all males and up to 10 percent of all females are sexually active during adolescence before marriage (see, for example, Pelto, 1999; Jejeebhoy, 2000). Sexual awareness seems to be largely superficial. Social attitudes clearly favour cultural norms of premarital chastity particularly for females. Double standards exist whereby unmarried adolescent boys are far more likely than adolescent girls to be sexually active; they are also more likely to approve of premarital sexual relations for themselves; their movements are less likely to be supervised; and they have more opportunities to engage in sexual relations. Sexual activity is frequently risky – casual sex and relations with sex workers are often reported by young males (see for example, NACO, 2001). Moreover, condom use is erratic, and sexually active young people are increasingly confronted with unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infection and unwanted sex. Typically, young females have limited decision-making power in their sexual relationships (see, for example, Jejeebhoy 2000).

Given this picture, there is a need to identify factors that may be said to protect adolescents from risky sexual behaviour and design programmes that foster protective behaviours. The literature would suggest that three sets of underlying factors protecting young people from engaging in unsafe or unwanted sex. The first is the adolescent's own self-efficacy, including awareness, the extent to which gender double standards are held, and the ability to communicate and negotiate. The second is the nature of the service environment and the extent to which services are accessible, acceptable and affordable in meeting youth needs, with providers who are not judgmental, and provide confidentiality and privacy. The third is the supportiveness of the environment – here a growing body of literature would suggest that “connections with parents” or interaction with and supervision by parents and communication with parents about sexual matters

are leading protective factors (see, for example, Senderowitz, 2000). Many in India would argue that strong parental controls on adolescents' behaviours and activities have limited opportunities for sexual activity particularly among adolescent females but also among young males (see for example, Bhende, 1994).

The objective of this paper is to shed light on adolescent sexual behaviours in a context of strict parental controls and supervision. Findings question the extent to which, in an urban slum setting in India, such controls do indeed inhibit sexual activity, and suggest, on the contrary, that notwithstanding parental supervision and controls, opportunities do exist for the formation of sexual partnerships among young males and even young females.

II. Background and setting

For the most part, available evidence from both quantitative and qualitative studies suggests that premarital sexual activity among female adolescents is limited. Qualitative data from mothers of adolescent girls in an urban slum in Bombay suggest that girls are so closely watched that sexual activity is virtually impossible (Bhende, 1994). And qualitative data from married women suggests complete ignorance of sexual activity at the time of marriage. Nevertheless, Pelto (1999) points out that in-depth qualitative studies in other regions have led to at least a doubling of the frequencies reported in surveys, and cautions that actual rates of non-marital sexual activity may be similarly twice that reported in surveys by Indian females.

Findings reported in this paper come from a study conducted in two urban settings in Delhi, inhabited largely by poor and migrant populations. Sites include a slum and a resettlementⁱ locality in the southern part of the city, and each contains a population of about 40000. Each site is surrounded by relatively prosperous neighbourhoods, starkly contrasting with the conditions of

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poverty reflected in the slum communities under study. Both sites are densely populated and have been in existence for about 20 years; the slum site has been in existence somewhat longer and is perhaps more densely populated than the resettlement locality. Residents of both sites are largely migrants from Delhi and other northern states such as Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and even from the eastern state of West Bengal. They have typically been drawn to Delhi for employment opportunities and are mostly engaged in wage labour or petty trading. Large proportions of women residing in the slum setting are also engaged in economic activity, and hence slum residents are more likely than resettlement colony residents to include multiple income families, with both men and women working. While homes in the slum are typically shanties built on encroached land, those in the resettlement colony are larger and more likely to be *pucca*ⁱⁱ houses with a few small rooms spread in one or two floors. Correspondingly, economic status, as visible from the possession of consumer durables, is considerably higher among residents of the resettlement colony than of the slum.

Yet, such development indicators as health and educational status remain similar in both settings. The male literacy rate in both sites was about 40% in 1991; female literacy rates were somewhat higher, interestingly, in the slum (33%) than in the resettlement site (25%). The sex ratio of the district in which these sites are located was 807 females per 1000 males in 1991, and 797 by 2001 (Registrar General, 1991; Registrar General, 2001). Access to such civic amenities as water and sanitation is limited in both sites. Public health facilities are also limited and the closest primary health centre is about ten kilometres away from the sites; however, each site is served by a proliferation of unqualified medical practitioners. Similarly, access to public educational facilities is limited in both areas; and the nearest secondary school is located at some distance, inhibiting attendance, especially of girls. As a result of restrictions on their mobility, large proportions of adolescent females drop out after middle school.

III. Data and methods

Data for this paper are drawn from a study intended to explore sexual risk behaviours among unmarried adolescent females and males aged 15-19 in low-income sites in Delhi. The study includes several phases of investigation, including focus group discussions and in-depth interviews as well as a survey. Focus group discussions with adolescents explored such issues as the meaning of adolescence at community level, perceptions of their own bodies, norms related to sexuality and sources of information about sex, including the role of the family, peer groups, schools, workplaces, media and health services. Insights relating to young people's lives, family interactions, extent of supervision and opportunities for the development of partnerships were obtained from this series of focus group discussions, and hence findings presented here come from the qualitative phase of this study.

Focus group discussions were held with adolescents themselves as well as parents and other gatekeepers. A total of 12 focus group discussions were held with adolescents, distinguished by sex (6 each for females and males) and age (6 each for adolescents aged 15-17 and 18-19). In addition, five focus group discussions were held with parents of adolescents, and two with other adults familiar with adolescents, including community workers and medical practitioners. Key informant interviews were also conducted with such community gatekeepers as registered medical practitioners (RMPs), NGO representatives, teachers, community leaders (social and political), youth club members, and elder siblings of adolescents. One male and one female in each category were interviewed from each locality.

Participants of focus group discussions – both adolescents and parents -- were selected on the basis of an initial mapping or house listing exercise of both communities, and attempts were made to capture among participants the socio-cultural diversity prevailing in the two sites. Efforts were

also made to exclude those who were recent migrants to the study communities by restricting participation to those who had resided in the communities for at least five years. The overwhelming majority of adolescents and parents thus selected agreed to participate in discussions. Special attention was paid to maintaining privacy and confidentiality during the discussions – confidentiality is particularly difficult to achieve in communities that live in cramped quarters and in settings in which parents perceive little need for researcher to hold private discussions with adolescents. Efforts were made to ensure quality and confidentiality of data obtained. Of course, despite these efforts, limitations to this approach must be acknowledged. Notably, the sensitive nature of the topic did indeed inhibit free and frank discussion of intimate sexual matters and the insights that emerged are likely to reveal broad trends (see Joshi et al, 2001).

The study also includes a quantitative phase of research, consisting of a survey of 823 adolescents aged 15-19, randomly selected from the two settings. While this paper focuses on the findings from the qualitative phase of research, Table 1 presents a socio-demographic profile of adolescents residing in these communities as assessed by the survey.

IV. Findings

The perspectives of adolescents must be viewed in the context of the socio-cultural setting in which they reside. Observation of both settings suggests that the majority of residents continue to perceive themselves as migrants, uprooted from culturally familiar settings and vulnerable to what are perceived as negative social influences associated with urban life. Fears are expressed about the '*kharaab maahaul*' (bad social environment) in their communities and its influence on young people's behaviour. In particular, anxiety is expressed by parents about changing sexual norms among unmarried adolescents and is typically countered by severe controls applied on the

behaviours and movements of adolescents, and especially adolescent girls. A significant influence on the local understanding of adolescent sexuality and sexual behaviourⁱⁱⁱ is the centrality of the institution of marriage in the culture. Although sexual relations outside the context of marriage strongly censured, and adolescents are socialised from an early age to associate reproduction with marriage, parents and other adults do recognise changing sexual norms among the young. Fears of loss of virginity and thereby marriageability and family reputation have reinforced traditional norms among parents' concerning the need to strictly supervise the movement of adolescent daughters and to arrange an early marriage for them.

Table 1 presents a profile of adolescents from the two study sites, as observed in the survey. Several features may be discerned. For one, it is clear that the majority were born in Delhi and are the children of migrants. Second, reflecting the fact that marriage continues to take place in adolescence among large proportions of females in both settings, older adolescent females (aged 17-19) comprise no more than 26%-29% of the sample of females. Indeed, there is evidence that marriage age ranges from 13 to about 19 among girls and 20 and above among boys, and tends to be lower for both female and male migrants from such states as Rajasthan. Third, educational attainment levels suggest that almost all adolescents are literate and have completed high school. Wider gender disparities are apparent in the two communities for secondary school attainment (not shown here): While females generally are withdrawn from school after completing primary school, males tend to continue in school up to secondary or senior secondary school. Gender disparities are also evident in the patterns of vocational training in which adolescents participate (not shown here): while older adolescents are increasingly engaged in vocational training, gender stereotypes prevail. Girls typically pursue such courses as tailoring, embroidery and beauty culture, and boys are more likely to enrol in courses with more lucrative employment opportunities. And finally, economic activity patterns also differ: in Tigri for example, while one in three young males is working, only 7% of girls are. And in Sangam

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Vihar, while a similar proportion of females and males are engaged in economic activity, patterns are quite different. Among working adolescents, girls are typically engaged in home-based occupations, such as, for example, embroidery, for which they are paid by the piece, others may be employed in beauty parlours and other establishments frequented exclusively by women. Indeed, the majority of older adolescent females, irrespective of whether they have received vocational training, are largely confined to their homes. In contrast, young males are employed outside the home and even the community -- in shops and factories, as drivers and so on especially in the slum, Tigri.

Table 1 –Socio-demographic profile

	Tigri		Sangam Vihar	
	Females	Males	Females	Males
NUMBER	188	260	168	207
% born in Delhi	86	65	64	75
Age distribution (%)				
15-17	74	59	71	59
17-19	26	42	29	41
Educational attainment				
% literate	85	90	98	99
% completed primary school	81	87	95	97
% Currently working	7	32	20	17

Source – Survey data

Two themes emerge quite clearly from focus group discussions. One is the extreme control and restrictions placed on the mobility of adolescent females, and on their expressions of sexuality. Young females' connections to their families are, in that sense, close. They live in cramped quarters and close proximity to parents and siblings; their movements are supervised, and

powerful norms govern their behaviour and social interaction. The second is the fact that despite close supervision and expectations of limited social interaction, adolescents do indeed find opportunities for the formation of friendships and partnerships, and, in some cases, a range of sexual behaviours and experiences. Table 1 summarises the main areas of agreement in each set of focus group discussions and key informant interviews with adolescents, parents and various adult gatekeepers. Findings suggest a remarkable consistency with regard both to the kinds of controls placed on adolescent females and males, and on the extent to which sexual partnerships are formed despite these controls.

Societal expectations and controls

As Table 1 suggests, adolescent females and males described very different socialisation experiences, and expressed similar and traditional gender norms. Both adolescents and parents acknowledge vast differences in controls and restrictions placed on adolescent females and males.

Young females in all focus group discussions acknowledged that parental supervision and controls on their movement and behaviour were severe, but accepted these restrictions as necessary protective measures against unwelcome advances of young males. They recognised the restrictions on their behaviours and mobility that became imposed with the advent of puberty:

“The first time we became conscious of having grown up was when our parents begun to have a lot of expectations from us. It was about the clothes we wear, the way we talk and laugh and so on.” (Adolescent girls group, 17-19, resettlement colony)

“They (parents) ask us not to go out alone. The boys in the locality tease girls a lot and also because the family name will fall into disrepute.” (Adolescent girls group, 17-19, urban slum)

“I always go out in the company of someone else, my sister-in-law, my mother or brother. These restrictions are far stronger in my family as we are Muslims.” (Adolescent girls group, 15-17, urban slum).

Behaviour was observed to be restricted in many ways. One was in new restrictions on dress and stress on *modesty*. While pre-adolescent girls tended to wear skirts, the attainment of puberty and especially after about the age of 15, females are expected to dress modestly, in *salwar suits*^{iv}, not revealing their bodies. Even what is perceived as sexually suggestive postures are observed to arouse severe parental and social censure.

“If a girl would move around without a dupatta (the upper cloth worn with the salwar suit) both boys and women in the locality pass comments. They would say ‘She has her breasts on display.’” (NGO worker, resettlement colony)

Young males in contrast reported considerable freedom of movement, implying that restrictions on their mobility were minimal, enabling them to attend school, seek employment and socialise with peers freely. Not only were fewer restrictions placed on adolescent boys, but also adolescent boys, like their parents, assume the role of defending their sisters and exercising control and authority over their behaviour and movement, a role acknowledged by both male and female participants:

“We feel free to move in the locality. In fact we keep a check on our sisters.” (Adolescent boys group, 17-19, urban slum).

“The most irritating is when my brother says you should not wear this dress or go out alone. They place so many restrictions on us, they are worse than our parents.” (Adolescent girls group, 15-17, urban slum)

Evidence from parents reiterates this pattern. There was clear agreement that mothers did and were expected to exert more control over the behaviours and movements of their daughters than of their sons, for fear that “one wrong step” would ruin the family’s “honour”. The group discussions with parents confirm the extent to which they perceive a responsibility to safeguard the social lives of their adolescents and particularly in the sexual sphere. While parents perceive their role as transmitting norms relating to sexuality and the importance of pre-marital abstinence, they are acutely concerned about controlling the development of intimate relationships by their adolescent children, and particularly sexual activities:

“Instilling this moral sense and self-control is our primary duty. We would certainly not be able to do it if we cannot conduct ourselves in a proper manner.” (Mother of adolescent, urban slum)

Parents made frequent reference to the *kharaab maahaul* (bad social environment) and argued that incidents of sexual harassment of adolescent girls by young males further justified the need to protect and control the movement of adolescent daughters.

“The times are changing from bad to worse, people have few morals. In this context, it is on us to be responsible and in control” (Mother of adolescent, urban slum)

“Boys are looking for a chance to tease a girl and get pleasure out of it. We cannot change them, it is better to control my daughter.” (Mother of adolescent, resettlement colony)

“One feels very responsible being the parent of a girl, something wrong may happen at the wink of e eye.” (Father of adolescent, urban slum)

Although they closely guard their adolescent daughters, parents are indeed aware that opportunities for developing friendships do exist, and that adolescents are interested in exploring their sexuality:

“When I cross the toilets I find boys and girls looking at each other and gesturing to each other. It is easy to make out that they are attracted, after all I have also gone through that age.” (Mother of adolescent, resettlement colony)

The movement and social interaction of adolescent females was so restricted that few parents permitted their daughters even to socialise with female friends, or go to the movies in a group for fear of negative peer influences. Yet, they were clearly unable to restrict some form of interaction with the outside world and these provide opportunities for the development of friendships. For example, parents acknowledged several situations in which young females would have opportunities to meet males outside of their own families: in relation to work, when making household purchases, and even when walking to common toilets.

By and large, adolescents – both females and males -- justified the ‘*paabandi*’ or controls placed on the behaviour and movement of females and accepted the double standards that permitted young males so much more freedom.

“I cannot even think of being close to a man before marriage. My favourite pastime is to fantasise about the man that I will marry.” (Adolescent girls group, 17-19, resettlement colony)

Examples were described of ‘*bad cases*’ or sexual relationships and elopements that occurred in the communities and their adverse consequences both for the lives of the young people concerned and the reputations of their families. Notably, it was only a minority of young females who argued against such restrictions and suggested that they might oppose parental controls if intolerable.

Opportunities for sexual behaviour

Despite this restrictive environment, adolescent females do indeed have opportunities to share information on sexual matters, develop intimate friendships and, in some cases, sexual relationships – and large proportions of adolescent males are perceived to be sexually experienced. As Table 2 suggests, young females and males, as well as parents and other adult gatekeepers report these conclusions consistently.

While parents may restrict the movement and behaviours of their adolescent daughters, they are unlikely to communicate with or counsel their adolescent children on sexual and reproductive health issues. Rather, communicating about sex and sharing romantic experiences are activities in which adolescents engage with peers – as opposed to family members -- as frequently reported by both young females and males:

“If I buy one of these magazines from the stall on the main road, I read it and then share it with my friends. We always talk about anything new that we learn on these matters”

(Adolescent boys group, 15-17, urban slum)

“We would be too shy to talk about the boy we liked to our mothers. It is so much easier to share this with friends at school.” (Adolescent girls group, 15-17, resettlement colony).

In focus group discussions, adolescent females and males in both communities reiterated that opportunities are indeed available for non-verbal exchanges and friendships and interactions between males and females, despite the prevailing social norms on sexual behaviour. For example, focus group discussions with adolescent females in both communities suggest that it is not unusual for young females to have romantic relationships before marriage – yet they argue that with the exception of a *few bad girls*, these relationships do not involve penetrative sex. The desire for friendships is often expressed in terms of ‘*pyaar*’ (love) by boys to girls, and conforming to gender norms, expressions of *pyaar* were typically initiated by males. While

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adolescents acknowledged the difficulties in practice involved in meeting a partner alone or engaging in sexual relations, they suggested that these were not impossible and cited examples of adolescents involved in intimate or sexual relationships, including intercourse.

Indeed, communication and discussion among adolescent peers often centre on sex. Girls are frequently identified by their physical experience, for example, *patakha* (firecracker) or a source of provocation for men, for example, *chalu* ('easy'). Strong views are expressed on 'good' women and 'bad' women. On the other hand, attitudes towards male sexuality is rarely constructed in terms of 'good' and 'bad' and it is generally acceptable for young men to be sexually interested and even interested in more than one sexual partner.

Opportunities for social interaction and even the development of sexual relationships is, in a way, made easier by life in this resource poor setting. For one, as acknowledged by parents, slum life makes interaction unavoidable – fetching water, using toilets, purchasing essentials all require movement outside of the home and facilitate interaction. Cramped living quarters make privacy difficult to negotiate. And since many mothers are engaged in economic activities outside of the home, there is considerable opportunity and some privacy for adolescents to develop friendships and even engage in sexual activity. Indeed, adolescents acknowledge that they take advantage of these lapses in supervision to explore their bodies, new friendships and discuss sexual matters. Interaction with partners both in their own homes and outdoors do therefore occur, albeit among a minority. Focus group participants suggested that opportunities for offers of friendship to be extended arise when adolescents meet by chance in a group, in the course of casual verbal exchanges in the street and so on, and are described to develop into meetings in parks and sight seeing spots away from the community, thus creating the space for intimacy:

“There are a lot of constraints on girls’ movements. But they continue to meet their male friends stealthily. When parents learn of these cases they generally forcibly get them

married off elsewhere after an abortion or agree to get them married to the same boy.”

(Adolescent girls, 17-19, urban slum)

“One girl came asking for advice as her boyfriend was wanting to have sex with her. We discouraged her saying that he may not marry her later. She should be sure if she wanted to still do so.” (NGO worker, urban slum)

Adolescent females sometimes perceive attention from community males as harassment. Female FGD participants described how males harass them, even sometimes while they go to the shared public toilets.

“We feel tired and irritated of the comments and whistles we hear soon as we step out of the house. One does not feel like going out just due to this.”(Adolescent girls, 17-19, urban slum)

“None of the boys in the neighbourhood are worth making friends with, they are all rowdies.” (Adolescent girls, 17-19, resettlement colony)

Adverse consequences are also reported, including unwanted pregnancy and resort to abortion:

“There are some cases of pregnancies among unmarried girls, we do have girls of this kind in our area. We do not know them well and do not interact with them”

“There are cases of unmarried girls coming for abortions in the area. Two such girls have come to our clinic. They may seek initial advice and if they feel the word will spread would not return to us“ (NGO worker, resettlement colony)

Among boys, opportunities are, of course, more extensive. As Table 2 suggests, young males perceive that well over half of unmarried adolescent males in their communities are sexually experienced; parents and registered medical practitioners would agree. Young males whether in MAMTA-Health Institute for Mother and Child

school or working spend long hours outside the home, during which they find opportunities to interact with the opposite sex and develop relationships stealthily.

“Many of the boys start masturbating by the age of 12 or so. Then the boys also often experiment having sex with boys. This is done in the jangal (woods) nearby which is deserted.” (Adolescent boys, 17-19, urban slum).

“Boys seek physical intimacy with girls at this age but few actually have intercourse. We try and check them but boys are rebellious at this age and can oppose you very strongly.” (Male teacher, secondary school).

Partners of young males are varied. They include young females from their own and neighbouring communities, as well as sex workers and older women residing in the neighbourhood. They also include other boys:

“The first time we did it was to experiment. We went out as a group of friends to a brothel. I was 17 years then. Since then some of us have had other experiences at the same place or others. For some of my friends, though, it is the only experience of intercourse.” (Adolescent boys, 17-19, urban slum).

“I still recall vividly about when I was around 11 years of age. Older boys would take us out to isolated places and teach us about sexual intercourse, we learnt a number of things through this experience.” (Adolescent boys, 15-17, resettlement colony)

Even so, young males express difficulties in establishing relationships with females in their own communities

“When I was in class 9, I fell in love with a girl in the same community. I tried to approach her several times and in several ways. All my attempts failed. Then the family moved out of the locality. Also, the girl feared her parents’ anger if they learnt about it.

Because of what she had learnt she also believed that such a friendship is galat (bad).

(Adolescent boy, 15-17, urban slum)

Teachers, private unqualified medical practitioners and *dais* (traditional birth attendants) serving these communities all concurred that opportunities did indeed exist in the study sites for sexual relations among adolescents. Although their narratives suggest that these key informants are aware of sexual activity among unmarried adolescents, their attitudes remain conservative. Providers indicated that they refused to provide contraceptive or other services to sexually active unmarried adolescents. Even NGO representatives, as seen in some of the quotations above, are more likely to provide messages of abstinence and other culturally acceptable messages rather than condom and contraceptive information and services. Indeed, while parents – and even adolescent females -- suggested that sexual interaction is limited, perceptions of young males, some females and service providers suggests that despite tight parental controls, intimate and sexual partnerships are not uncommon in the study communities.

V. Discussion

This paper makes several observations. For one, it highlights the many ways in which parents closely supervise the activities of their adolescent daughters, in an attempt to inhibit sexual activity, but condone the sexual activity of their sons. Supervision and control take the form of controlling the clothes and physical appearance of their daughters, controlling their movements even to the point of withdrawing them from school or watching them as they walk to the common toilets serving the communities, and inhibiting social interaction even among same sex peers. Sons, in contrast, are encouraged to attend school, seek employment and socialise with peers outside the home. Second, the study underscores the fact that despite this close supervision and control, intimate non-sexual and even sexual relations do indeed occur. While females may be

reluctant to admit intimacy with boys, in focus group discussions particularly with young males, and in interviews with key informants, it is evident that sexual activity does indeed take place. And third, key informants concur with young people that risky sexual activity does indeed exist in the communities under study, notwithstanding parental perceptions.

Gender disparities are evident. Socialisation patterns are clearly gendered, with parents far more concerned about the behaviours of their daughters than of their sons. Adolescents themselves express gender double standards about the acceptability of pre-marital sexual activity for males and females, the relatively greater price that sexually active females would pay if sexual activity status were disclosed, the appropriateness of parental controls imposed on them but not their brothers, and the need for young males to supervise and protect their sisters, in rather the same way as do their parents on the one hand, and initiate overtures of friendship to females on the other.

More generally, findings suggest that while parental connections and supervision may be an important factor protecting adolescents from unsafe sexual relations, such concepts as “connections” need to be clearly defined. In the case of study participants for example, families spent enormous amounts of time together, the activities and mobility of adolescent females was closely supervised and scrutinised. Yet opportunities were available to and were seized by adolescents in developing sexual relationships, in all likelihood, unsafe.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

Social norms and behaviours are changing in India, including in relatively conservative low-income settings such as those described in this study. Gender double standards and power imbalance powerfully influence socialisation patterns, expectations and behaviours of young

females and males. Despite stringent controls on the mobility and activity of unmarried youth and particularly females, opportunities do exist for sexual relationships, sometimes with adverse consequences for young people's health and lives. Liaisons tend to be secretive and awareness of safe sex and the protective nature of condoms are limited. Parental perceptions of and confidence in their ability to control and protect their adolescent daughters from dangerous relationships are clearly unfounded as opportunities unfold for increasing interaction among young people.

These findings offer several suggestions for action. First, the misperceptions held by parents need to be recognised and addressed. Programmes directed to parents that apprise them of existing conditions and the need to inform and communicate with their adolescent children about sexual and reproductive health issues as a means of protecting them from unsafe and unwanted sex are essential. Programmes are needed also that convince parents of the need to focus on enhancing informed choice among adolescents rather than imposing tight supervision and controls as a more effective strategy of ensuring sexual and reproductive well-being.

More important, findings suggest the need for programmes that provide, for both young females and males, extensive sexuality education, that facilitate communication between adolescent partners as well as between adolescents and their parents on sexual matters, and that seek to redress gender imbalances and double standards influencing their own autonomy and ability to exercise informed choice. Programmes are required that provide life-skills training aimed at both informing young people of safe sex and available facilities, as well as in negotiating safe outcomes within their social relationships. And finally, programmes are needed that reorient adult gate keepers, and particularly providers away from traditional and judgmental attitudes to pre-marital sexual activity and towards the provision of services that enable safe sexual relations among young people.

Table 2
Sexual behaviour and Parental control:
Key Patterns from FGDs and key informant interviews reported by different groups

Issue	Control and restrictions	Incidence of pre-marital Sexual intercourse	Other sexual behaviours
Respondent			
Adolescent girls – slum	Severe especially because the boys in the locality harass. Girls go out in the company of a family member	It is not uncommon, one keeps hearing about it happening in other families.	Many girls have boyfriends and go out alone with them.
Adolescent girls – resettlement	Severe as there is a lot of sexual harassment and even a small exchange between a boy and a girl leads to gossip. Girls rarely go out.	It is very low, only a few ‘bad’ girls indulge in it.	A few girls do have relationships but this is quite rare.
Adolescent boys - slum	There are no restrictions on mobility. Go out for school and work and often hang around in groups in the streets.	A high percentage of boys indulge in sex.	Friendships between boys and girls are common. Boys go out with girls alone and also seek physical intimacy. Boys also often experiment with sex with others slightly older in age.
Adolescent boys - resettlement	There are hardly any restrictions on mobility. Boys go out for school and work	A very high percentage of boys (more than 50%) indulge in sex.	Many of the boys pursue girls in the locality Boys go out with girls alone and also seek physical intimacy.
Parents- slum	Mothers exercise more control on daughters than fathers. If the daughter takes one ‘wrong’ step then the family honour is believed to be ruined.	There are a few girls in this locality who have had sexual intercourse. Many boys have had sex before they are married.	Girls and boys like to meet alone and are quite aware of each other even when they see each other from a distance.
Parents- resettlement	Mothers exercise more control on daughters. If the daughter takes one ‘wrong’ step then the family honour is believed to be ruined	Sex among unmarried adolescents is not common in our area. Boys are getting into sexual relationships outside the locality.	There are some boys and girls who have close friendships.
RMPs- male	Parents need to control their children but there are so many influences on adolescents, they are bound to feel tempted.	Sexual intercourse is fairly common among boys and there are many who have come with symptoms of STI or for condoms. There are a few girls who have become pregnant before	Girls and boys are meeting often but the partners of boys are also sex workers and other women outside the locality.

		marriage.	
RMPs and <i>dais</i> - female	Parents need to control their children otherwise things go completely out of hand. It is a question of the family honour.	An increasing number of girls are having affairs and getting pregnant. In some cases, it is with a boy/girl in the locality or at school.	Friendships and intimacies of a sexual nature are on the rise.
Teachers- male	We try to check the interaction of boys and girls but grown up boys may rebel against us.	We see a lot of interaction between the boys and girls in the school. There are a few boys and girls having sexual intercourse.	Many of the boys attempt to find girlfriends and are involved with a girl some time or the other.
Teachers- female	We often reprimand them if they spend a lot of time with boys.	A lot of male-female interaction takes place and we feel obliged to check them. Cases of intercourse are quite rare.	Some friendships between boys and girls can be observed but more so are the cases where boys pursue girls insistently.

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ⁱ In the resettlement colony, residents are resettled from smaller shanty clusters. However, it has expanded further with a large number of unauthorised settlements.

ⁱⁱ The term *pucca* refers to houses with walls and roof made of concrete and cemented floors.

ⁱⁱⁱ It may be useful to clarify the use of some terms in the paper at the outset. While sexuality is seen as predominantly the psychological and emotional dimensions, sexual behaviour is seen more as the actual manifestations in behaviour. Further, while sexual desire encompasses a range of aspects, the desire for sex is seen primarily as the desire for varying physical intimacies.

^{iv} A traditional dress in north India consisting of a long shirt, loose trousers and a cloth that covers the upper part of the body