

RESEARCH BRIEF

# YOUTH IN TRANSITION

## RELATIONSHIP PATTERNS AND DYNAMICS AMONG UNMARRIED YOUTH



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# Youth in Transition

Relationship patterns and dynamics among unmarried youth

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## Citation

Prayas Health Group (2020), Relationship Patterns and Dynamics among Unmarried Youth- Findings from the Youth in Transition Study



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Prayas (Initiatives in Health, Energy, Learning and Parenthood) is a non-governmental, non-profit organization based in Pune, India. Prayas Health Group (PHG) is committed to generate evidence-based discourse on emerging issues on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). PHG is actively involved in socio-behavioral and epidemiological research, awareness building, programmatic interventions and provision of clinical and counseling services especially to persons living with HIV and youth.

## About Youth in Transition Study

India is one of the youngest countries in the world with around 28% of its population in the age group of 15-29. In recent years, the context of life of many young people especially in urban India is changing very rapidly. Urbanization, globalization and technological revolutions are leading to diverse impacts on people. Many young people are moving to cities in the pursuit of higher education and jobs and leading a relatively independent life. The age at marriage is increasing, especially in urban areas providing the youth more time and freedom to explore their sexuality. Increasing age at marriage, widespread availability of internet and social media, availability of spaces that are not under family surveillance and the desire to lead independent life are important aspects of social context of youth in neo-liberal urban India. In this changing context, it is essential to examine the choices young people make about their relationships and sexual intimacy, how these choices evolve over a period and how these choices are interdependent with other life domains. In order to address these issues, the Youth in Transition study was conducted, adopting a life course perspective.

The primary focus of the study was to understand the sexual health needs of never married youth.

The study focused on never married youth because, in Indian context, sex is often linked with marriage. The sexual health needs of unmarried youth remain unaddressed. We have taken a broader perspective of sexual health, beyond mere absence of diseases. We refer to sexual health as a state of physical, emotional, mental and social wellbeing in relationship to sexuality. Improvement in sexual health would require developing a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships as well as possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences free of coercion, discrimination and violence.

While premarital relationship is the commonly used term in the literature to indicate relationships before marriage, the term 'non-marital relationship' is preferred in this report because the participants do not consider many of these relationships as precursor to marriage. Non-marital relationships in the context of the study refers to relationships among never married youth.

### Why life course perspective?

The current research literature on sexual intimacy before marriage in India is limited. The available literature mainly focuses on understanding 'proportion' of men and women who are sexually active (mostly defined as experiencing penetrative sex) and does not explain the context in which young people make their decisions and how these decisions evolve over a period of time. The Youth in Transition study adopted the life course approach to understand the dynamic process of decision-making of young people. 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". 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 the continuity of life pathways by analyzing how behavior and experiences encountered during childhood and adolescence period may affect adult behavior and experiences. Such a diachronic understanding is essential to identify the patterns of behavior and for planning age and context appropriate interventions for improving sexual health of youth.

### How was the study conducted?

The study was conducted among never married, educated youth living in Pune for at least 6 months prior to interview, and were between 20-29 years of age. Being in a relationship or being sexually active was not a criterion for participating in the study. Given the focus on understanding the trajectories and the difficulties of recruiting a random sample, a non-probability sample of participants who self-nominated themselves for the study and were fulfilling the eligibility criteria was included in the study. An appeal was made to young people living in diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds to participate in the study. [please see [this link](#) for details of the study methodology].

The data on timing and sequencing of different events in the life of a participant was collected in the Relationship History Calendar (RHC). The RHC gathered quantitative information on monthly changes in the status with respect to various life events such as education, work experience, history of migration, staying arrangement, relationships, sexual behavior, substance use, mental health, etc. A separate form was prepared to collect data of each relationship to understand details of sexual behavior, contraception use and abusive experiences in that relationship. Data were retrospectively collected from age 10 until current age. Narrative interview technique, which encourages participants to share their story, was used to collect information on different events. The RCH with narrative interview technique has been shown to follow the process of memory recall and reduce recall bias. The participant and the interviewer had a side-by-side sitting arrangement so that the participant was able to see the calendar and could participate in filling it and ensure the correctness of the information collected. The study tools were prepared in Marathi and English language. Data were collected between July 2017 and Jan 2019. Data were analyzed using the principles of event history analysis, sequence analysis and group based trajectory modelling in SAS and R statistical software. After each interview, the interviewer noted down important details of the participant's story including some quotes that were felt essential to provide the context. The quotes used in the briefs are based on these notes.

The findings of Youth in Transition study are shared through research briefs focusing on specific thematic issues.



# Relationship patterns and dynamics among unmarried youth

*“He was very good looking. We both knew that we have the emotional connect. What we felt was beyond friendship. Therefore, we decided to call it a relationship. A few months later, I came to know that he is seeing some other girl. We had a big fight... after a lot of discussion; we both felt that the whole issue is because of the expectation that we should be committed to each other. We both had physical needs and we were comfortable with each other so we decided to continue the relationship and do away with commitment. It became an open relationship.” (23-year-old woman)*

## Background

Intimate relationships are one of the important aspects of the lives of young people. Whether to be in a relationship? When? With whom? 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 and liberty can be contested with conservative family and social context that disapproves intimate relationships before marriage. This research brief describes the patterns and dynamics of relationships among never married youth enrolled in youth in transition study.

There is limited research literature on relationships among never married youth in India that goes beyond medicalized understanding of sexual health risk. A few scholars have studied how modernity, gender, patriarchy and family relationships affect young people’s agency in decisions regarding relationships before marriage[1–3] but there is a need for empirical data on how young people navigate through their decision on intimate relationships. Such an understanding is essential for assessing the sexual health needs of the young people, which goes beyond prevention of sexually transmitted diseases.

## Methodology

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 current age or other way round based on the participant’s preference. The start and end dates of these relationships were plotted on the calendar while

corroborating these dates with other life domains such as education, work status, place of residence etc. that were marked on the calendar before asking about relationships. Relationships that lasted for more than one month were plotted separately from relationships that were shorter than one month (short relationships). In the second step, detailed information about each relationship that lasted for more than a month was collected on a separate form. This included information about the gender of the partner, what the participant would like to call this relationship ('serious', 'casual' etc.), what was the nature of sexual intimacy in this relationship and information about use of contraception whenever applicable. These details for each relationship were not collected for short relationships. Data were analyzed using the statistical package R [4]. Further details about study recruitment, data collection and overall profile of the participants are provided in a separate document and can be accessed through [this link](#).

## Participant profile

Total 1240 participants were enrolled in the study out of which 653 were men, 584 were women, and 3 participants marked their gender as 'other'. One of them mentioned that she (her preferred pronoun) is still questioning her gender identity and for the purpose of the research, her identity can be marked as woman. While we completely understand and support collection and analysis of gender identity data to reflect the diversity, because of the very small number of participants with other gender identity in the research, it was not possible to include a separate gender category in analysis. There was no apparent difference in the trajectories of participants with other gender identities compared to men and women. Therefore, an analytical category of gender with 655 men and 585 women was created.

The median age of the participants was 23 years. Majority of the participants reported to belong to the middle/upper middle class (81% men, 91% women). Average monthly family income between 21000-75000 was reported by 46% men and 41% women whereas above 75000 was reported by 28% men and 43% women. Majority of the participants had completed or were studying for graduation (55% men, 47% women) or post-graduation (21% men, 23% women) degree. Almost half of the participants (57% men, 50% women) were involved in remunerative work at the time of interview. 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 10<sup>th</sup>) in village or town and later migrated to the city for higher education or work.

## Findings

### Being in a relationship was a norm

The finding that almost 80% of the participants had a relationship some time or other over the specific period in their lives suggests that being in a relationship was normative for the young people. The peer norm to be in a relationship is aptly

described by a 23-year-old woman who participated in the study. *“Are you still single? ... this question comes as if it is a crime if you are not in a relationship. It is like you are a faulty piece”.*

Majority of the participants felt that it is common to have a relationship or rather one is expected to be in a relationship.

**Table 1: Relationships among participants**

	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Total</b>
Enrolled in the study	655	585	1240
Ever had a relationship	487 (74.4%)	497 (85%)	984 (79.4%)
Ever had a relationship (> 1 month)	455 (69.5%)	491 (84%)	946 (76.3%)
Total number of partners (>1 month)	1021	1195	2216
Ever had a short relationship	192 (29.3%)	156 (26.6%)	348 (28.1%)
Total number of partners in short relationship	1313	917	2230

The analysis of relationships that lasted for more than one month is summarized below. The analysis of short relationships is provided later in the document.

- Overall, 76% [84% women and 70% men] of the participants reported having at least one relationship.
- Almost 10% of the participants [10.2% women and 8.6% men] reported to have 5 or more relationships that lasted for at least a month.
- The median duration of relationships was 14 months with no significant gender difference [15 months in women and 13 months in men]
- The duration of relationship significantly differed as per the type of relationship. For example, the median duration of a serious relationship was 21 months whereas that of a non-serious relationship was 8 months.
- As people moved on to new relationships, the duration of the relationship decreased, especially from the 4<sup>th</sup> relationship onwards. For example, the median duration of 1<sup>st</sup> relationship was 16 months; 2<sup>nd</sup> was 14 months; 3<sup>rd</sup> was 17 months; 4 was 12 months and 5<sup>th</sup> onwards was 9 months each. Similar trend was observed among men and women and for serious and non-serious relationships.
- After a relationship ends, almost 75-80% of people entered into a new relationship.
- Of the total participants, 167 (26%) men and 88 (15%) women reported that they never had a relationship.

- There appears to be a gender difference in the reasons for not being in a relationship. More men reported that they did not find 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. There were 16% of the men and 19% of the women who said that they did not want to be in a relationship.

### Relationships were more 'flexible' but not necessarily egalitarian

For each of the relationships that lasted for more than a month, participants were asked what they would call this relationship and were provided the options -1) Serious 2) Casual 3) Friends with benefit 4) Open 5) Fiancée 6) For benefit 7) Can't/don't want to give any name and 8) any other. Relationships that were marked as other typically included responses such as 'lets give it a try', 'neither serious not casual', 'only physical', 'rebound' etc. These were self-defined categories and could mean different things to different people. However, it is important to note that the names that people attach to their relationships can define and sometimes dictate the behavior of partners in those relationships. Hence, to understand participants' categorization becomes important.

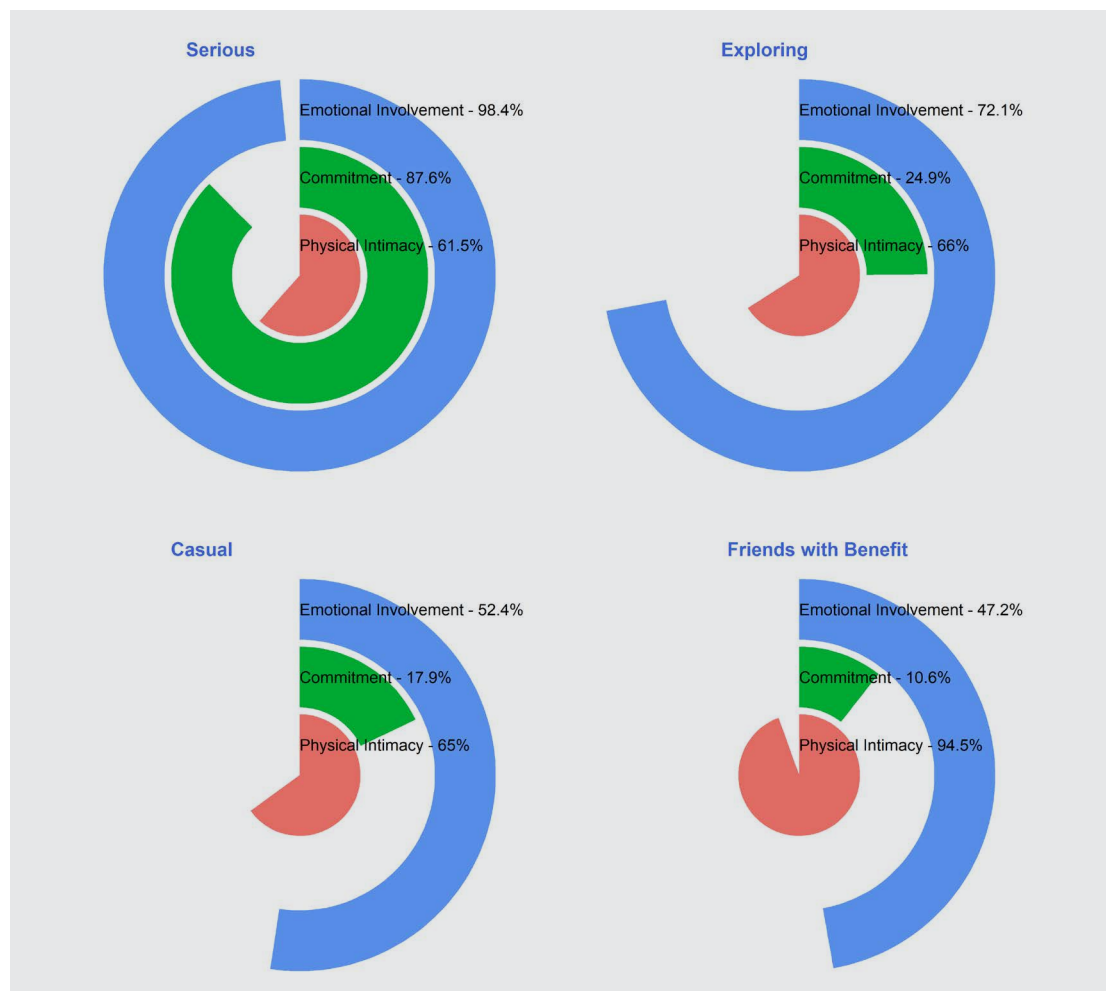
**Table 2: Different types of relationships reported by participants**

Relationship type	Men		Women		Total	
	N	Number of Relationships	N	Number of Relationships	N	Total Relationships
SERIOUS	375	559 (54.7%)	435	722 (60.4%)	810	1281 (57.8%)
Serious	366	550 (53.9%)	418	705 (58.9%)	784	1248(56.3%)
Fiancée	9	9 (0.9%)	17	17 (1.4%)	26	26 (1.2%)
CASUAL	226	305 (29.9%)	221	290 (24.3%)	447	595 (26.9%)
Casual	150	212 (20.8%)	140	184 (15.4%)	290	396 (17.9%)
Friends with Benefit	54	65 (6.4%)	55	77 (6.4%)	109	142 (6.4%)
Open relationship	17	23 (2.3%)	23	26 (2.2%)	40	49 (2.2%)
For benefit relationship	5	5 (0.5%)	3	3 (0.3%)	8	8 (0.4%)
EXPLORING	118	157 (15.4%)	156	183 (15.3%)	274	340 (15.3%)
Can't/don't want to attach a label	49	54 (5.3%)	107	126 (10.5%)	156	180 (8.1%)
Other	69	103 (10.1%)	49	57 (4.8%)	118	160 (7.2%)
Total	455	1021 (100%)	491	1195(100%)	946	2216 (100%)



Relationships become more flexible when they are more malleable to the individual's choices and expressions. The 'flexibility' of relationships among the youth in this study was seen in terms of the labels they prefer to attach to different relationships and the way these relationships were defined with respect to emotional involvement, commitment and physical intimacy.

Figure 1: Type of relationships and level of involvement



Persons who report **serious relationships** appear to imply that they have emotional involvement with the person and there is an assumption of exclusivity, meaning either of the partner is not expected to be involved with another person while they are in a relationship. On the other hand, when persons label their relationship as **casual**, they generally mean that there is often lack/less of emotional involvement with the partner and little expectation or intention to continue this relationship for a long period. **Friends with benefit**, is a friendship where partners engage in sexual act (not necessarily penetrative sex) but do not consider each other as partners and are not expected to be emotionally involved in each other. Similarly, **Open relationship** is an arrangement where it is explicitly decided by the partners that they can date and be sexually intimate with other persons (non-exclusive relationship).

## Analysis summary on types of relationships

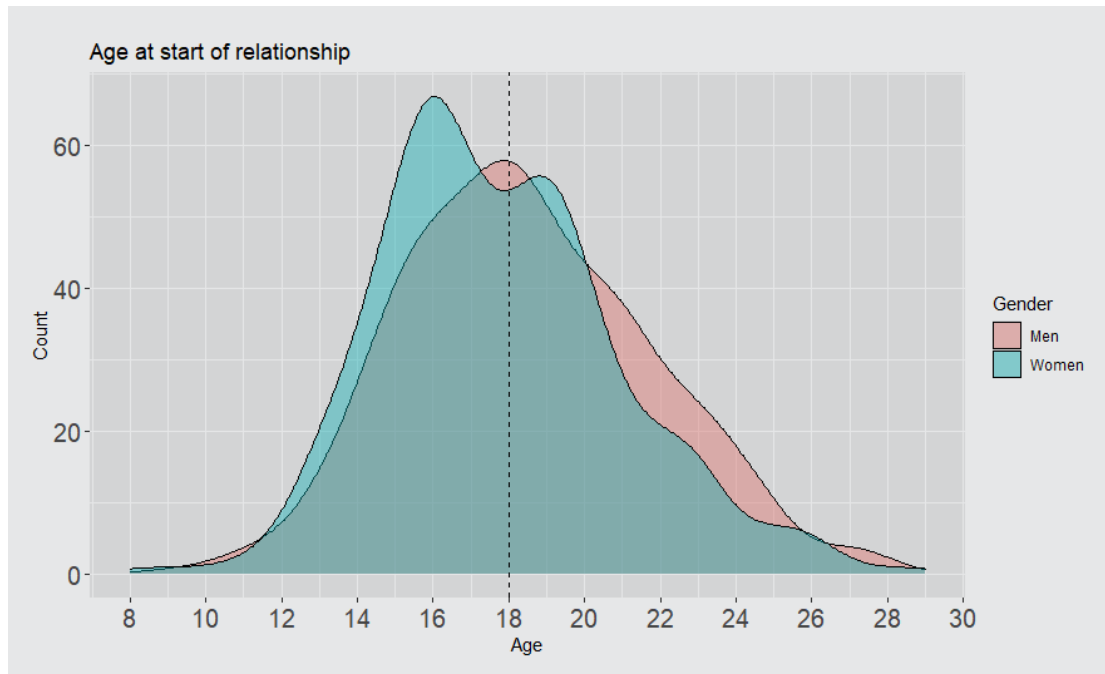
- Non-serious relationships were common, 40% of relationships among women and 45% among men were non-serious
- There was significant diversity among non-serious relationships such as 'casual', 'friends with benefits', 'open' etc.
- Physical intimacy is common irrespective of type of relationship.
- Almost half of the participants reported emotional involvement in relationships that were labeled as 'casual' or 'friends with benefit'. Significantly more women (64%) compared to men (21%) reported that they were emotionally involved with partners in their relationships labeled as 'friends with benefits'. Similar gender differences were observed for 'open relationships' with 73% of the women and 39% men reporting emotional involvement with their partners in 'open relationships'.
- Many participants said that they were still 'exploring' the nature of the relationship, so they could not or did not **want to attach any label to their** relationship. These kinds of relationships may fizzle out or can become serious over a period.
- Young people's decisions about the type of relationships are dynamic and the outcome of previous relationship/s can have a significant role in determining the nature of their next relationship. For example, breaking up a serious relationship with a partner because of partner's cheating led to difficulty in trusting people and hence not engaging in serious relationships after the first experience.
- 'Serious relationships' appear to be defined as having a high level of emotional involvement and high level of commitment.

It is clear that young people are making diverse choices about their relationships. However, the virtue that it is a 'relationship by choice' does not make it more egalitarian. Existing gender norms, patriarchy, and asymmetry in relationships can lead to adverse outcomes that can further shape their decisions. The asymmetry in relationships with respect to emotional involvement or commitment can reduce relationship satisfaction, lead to power imbalance and make the person with higher involvement more vulnerable. The 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/Open). The existing social norms prevent women from being in 'casual' relationships without any emotional involvement and might increase their vulnerabilities. Over 50% of the participants reported that they experienced emotional abuse from the partner at some time or other and about 35% reported experiences of sexual abuse. These experiences were significantly higher among women compared to men. (For details, see research brief on abuse in non-marital relationships).

## Majority had started their relationship before the age of eighteen

The study data show that many young people started their first relationship when they were in school.

Figure 2: Age at start of relationship



- Overall 54% of the men and 60% of the women reported their first relationship before the age of 18 years.
- Almost 30% of the men and 40% of the women reported to have had their first relationship when they were in school (before 16 years of age).
- The statistical analysis shows that the post millennial generation (born after 1995, also known as Generation Z) is significantly more likely (Odds ratio 2.33, confidence Interval, 1.74-3.14) to start their first relationship before the age of 16 compared to those who were born before 1995. This clearly shows the rapidly changing pattern of relationships in the younger generation.
- Also, compared to people who lived in a village during their childhood (at age 10), those who lived in the city were more likely to start their first relationship early.
- 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 first relationship was significantly shorter in post-millennial generation [median 12 months] than those who are relatively older [Median 18 months]. The median duration of the first relationship, when it is reported as 'serious' is almost 2 years, whereas it is around 8 months when the relationship is reported as 'casual'.

### Short intimate encounters were common

For the purpose of this study, all the relationships that lasted for less than a month were considered as short relationships. These could be unexpected encounters with friends/colleagues, meeting ex-partner for a short time, casual flings, meeting someone through dating apps and visiting sex workers. There is some level of physical intimacy (not necessarily penetrative sex) between the partners in all short encounters.

Table 3: Short encounters (< 1 month)

	Men			Women		
	Participants (N)	Partners (N)	Avg. partners	Participants (N)	Partners (N)	Avg. partners
Short encounters with another gender	162	838	6	132	537	4
Short encounters with own gender	21	407	19	5	177	35
Short encounters with own and other genders	9	68	8	16	203	13

- Twenty-eight percent (348) participants reported they ever have had short relationships.
- There were 192 men (29.3%) and 156 (26.7%) women who reported at least one short-intimate encounter. The median number for both men and women were 2 short relationships. There were 36 men (19%) and 24 (15%) women who had short encounters with more than 10 partners.
- There was no statistically significant difference between the number of short relationships among men and women.
- There is a significant gender difference in reporting penetrative sex in short relationships. 42% of the women reported penetrative sex in short relationships whereas 69% of the men did so.
- Of the 192 men, 30 had encounters exclusively with sex workers and 18 had encounters with sex workers as well as non-sex worker partners.
- The average number of partners for short encounters with same gender were much higher compared to the average number of partners of another gender.

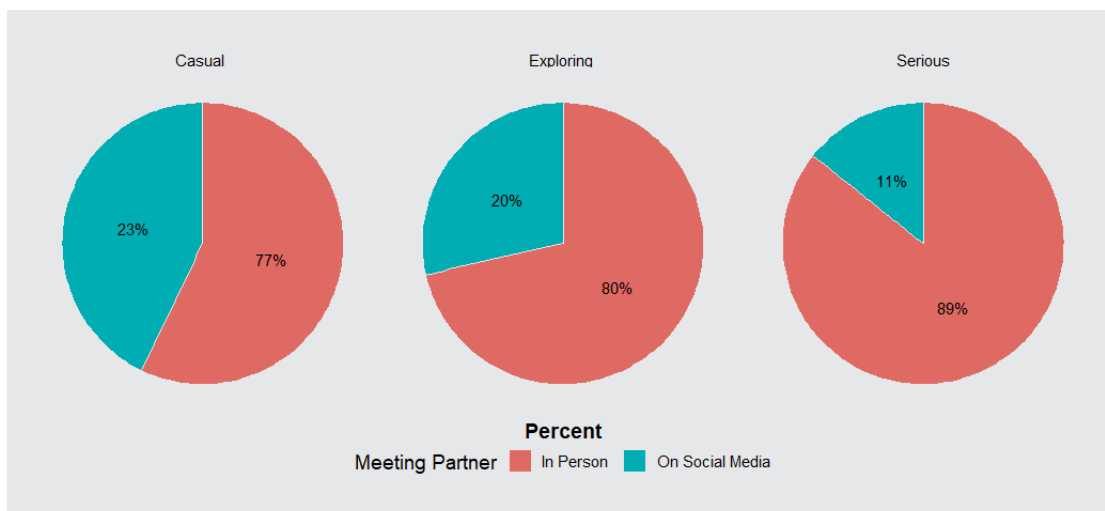
### Social media facilitated meeting partner, mostly for casual relationship

All the participants were asked if they met their partner in person or through social media (Facebook, dating apps). The analysis is presented separately for relationships that lasted for more than 1 month and short relationships.

### **Relationship lasting for more than a month**

- Around 14% of the relationships among men and women were reported where social media was used to meet the partner.
- Higher use of social media was reported when the relationships are 'non-serious', especially like 'friends with benefit' and 'open'.
- There is a gender difference in this pattern. More women seem to have found their casual partner (as defined by them) through social media. Whereas more men have found 'friends with benefits' and 'open relationships' through social media. This also points out to a different interpretation of 'friends with benefit' concept in the Indian context. The original concept of 'friends with benefit' is a relationship of friendship with (sexual) benefit and involves partners who are also friends. However, in Indian context, sometimes the term is also being used irrespective of the fact that the partners are friends or not and even when the partner is being sought completely for casual sex without any emotional involvement (what otherwise is referred as no strings attached).
- There was no difference in use of social media among people who were younger at the time of interview compared to those who were relatively older

Figure 3: Use of social media in meeting the partner



### **Social media use in short relationships**

Increasing use of social media especially dating apps have been reported among gay population. Our data also suggest that

- More than 80% of the short relationships with same gender were sought through social media.
- More women (33%) than men (10%) reported to have found other gender partners through social media.
- While social media seems to play a role in facilitating finding partners mostly for 'non-serious' relationships, the data shows that the majority of the participants are meeting their partners in person.

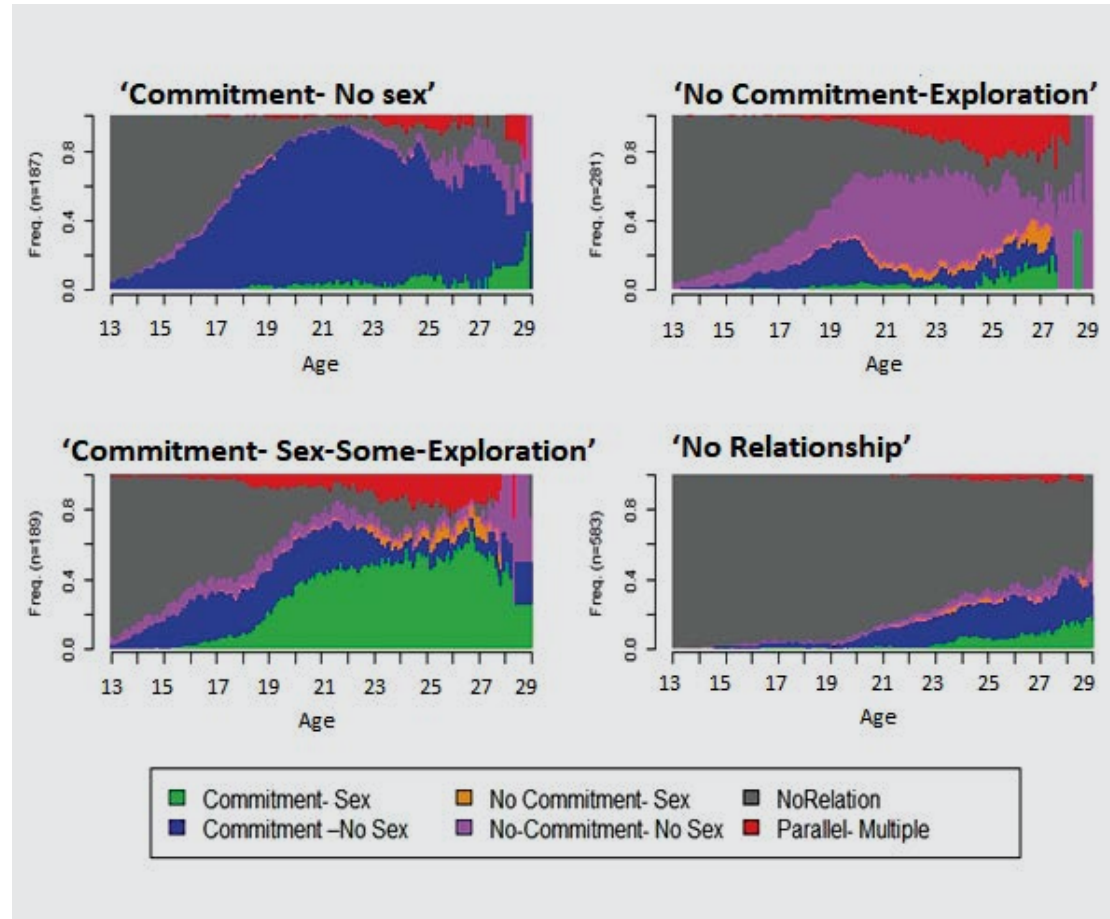
## Four predominant typologies of relationships were observed

The collection of sequential life course data on a calendar makes it possible to statistically group people who follow similar trajectories. To understand the pattern of relationship and its evolution over a period of time- two aspect of relationships were combined; which is commitment in the relationship and penetrative sex. That gave the following possible states for all the relationships plotted on the calendar.

Commitment	Penetrative sex	State
No	No	No commitment- No sex
Yes	No	Commitment-No sex
Yes	Yes	Commitment- Sex
No	Yes	No commitment- Sex

When there were two or more relationships of any type in a month then a code of 'parallel multiple' was assigned for that month. There were also people who were never in a relationship. They were also included in the analysis, as it would have implications for clustering the data. With the help of data analysis software (TraMineR) people who had similar trajectories (timing and nature of relationships) were grouped together. Four such clusters were identified (Figure 4). Each state is color coded and is plotted on an age scale. The groups are given names based on the dominant pattern observed

Figure 4: Patterns of relationships



**Cluster 1: Commitment- No Sex:** As can be seen in the figure (with dominant blue color) that majority of the participants are in committed relationship for most period and do not engage in penetrative sex. This cluster can be considered as of people who typically say that they would have penetrative sex “only after marriage” which largely is the social norm. Fifteen percent of the total participants were grouped in this cluster.

**Cluster 2: Commitment-Sex-Some exploration:** Unlike first cluster, in the second cluster (dominant green color) majority of the participants are in committed relationship for most part of the period and choose to engage in penetrative sex. One can also observe that some people in this cluster also engage in non-committed relationships and also have multiple parallel relationships. However, the duration of the committed relationship dominates the cluster. Fifteen percent of the total participants were grouped in this cluster.

**Cluster 3 : No Commitment-Exploration:** There is no clear pattern in this cluster except that it is dominated by people who are in non-committal relationships, with and without sexual relationships. The cluster can be considered of those who are exploring different kinds of relationships in their life, which goes beyond committed relationships. Twenty three percent of the total participants were grouped in this cluster.

**Cluster 4: No relationship:** 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 remain 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.

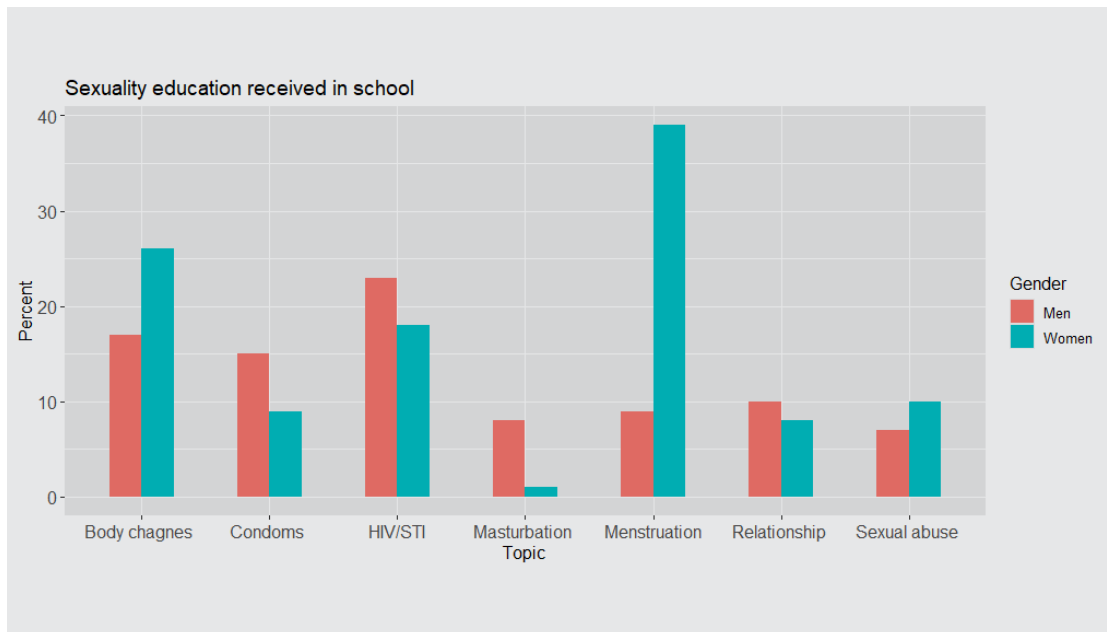
In further statistical analysis of these clusters, it was observed that women in comparison to men were significantly more likely [OR 1.55, CI 1.13 – 2.11] to follow the ‘No Commitment-Exploration’ trajectory. Similarly it was observed that postmillennial generation (Gen Z) were significantly [OR 3.61, CI 2.59 –5.02] more likely to follow the No Commitment-Exploration’ trajectory compared to millennial generation.

### **Only a few had received sexuality education and could talk to their parents about sexuality**

Comprehensive sexuality education is a cornerstone of sexual health. However, in India there are inhibitions from many sections of the society for imparting sexuality education. If at all the topic is discussed in schools, at many places the discussion is restricted to menstruation and HIV/AIDS. Not many parents broach the topic with their children either, resulting in a lot of misconceptions and fears among young people regarding sexuality. The participants in the study were asked if they received any sexuality education in school and if they had any communication with their parents about it.

- Majority of the participants reported that there was some discussion about menstruation (mostly for women), changes that happen in body and HIV/AIDS
- It was discussed because it was part of school curriculum
- Less than 10% of men and women reported to have had any conversation about friendship and relationship, gender, sexual abuse
- There was practically no discussion about masturbation, sexual pleasure, etc.

Figure 5: Sexuality education received in school



These numbers clearly show that there is a complete lack of positive/affirmative approach to sexuality education in schools.

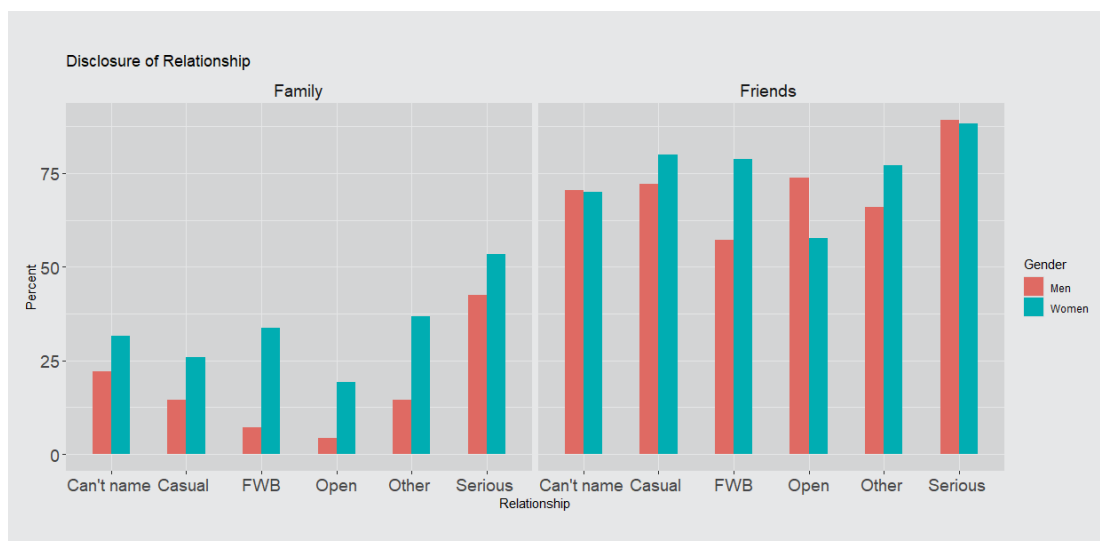
We also asked participants if they had any conversation with their parents about sexuality/growing-up concerns or relationships. Almost 80% of the participants (79% men and 77% women) reported that they never had any conversation with parents on these issues, highlighting the complete lack of discussion in families around sexuality.

Not many people had disclosed their relationship to parents

Disclosure of a relationship to a trusted person could be important for sharing and seeking support when required. Participants in the study were asked if they had disclosed their relationship to family or friends.



Figure 6: Disclosure of relationship to family and friends



- Overall, 84% of the relationships among men and 90% of the relationships among women were known to someone, mostly friends.
- Also, there is a significant gender difference in disclosure of relationships especially to family. Men were significantly less likely to disclose their relationship to their parents and family members compared to women. Only 30% of the relationships among men and 44% among women were disclosed to parents or anyone from the family. As against, more than 80% of the relationships were known to friends.
- Overall, 'serious' relationships were more likely to be disclosed to family and friends compared to 'open' and 'friends with benefits' relationships.
- There was almost no disclosure of 'non-casual relationships' by men to their parents or family.
- Almost 70% of the young people feel that if they have any problem in their relationship they will not be able to discuss it with their parents.
- The fact that not many relationships are disclosed to parents and less disclosure of unconventional relationships such as 'friends with benefits' to friends suggests very limited spaces where young people can seek support if there is any issue in such relationships.

### Caste does cast its shadow

Caste is deeply embedded in Indian society. The role of caste in arranged marriages is well known. It appears that caste and family norms continue to drive many choices that young people are making about their relationships. There are diverse ways in which caste operates.

- While the process of urbanization might have reduced overt caste-based discrimination in cities, caste seems to have intertwined with the discourse of 'choice' when it comes to relationships. This is reflected from the narratives of some participants. For example, one participant said,

*"I don't believe in the caste system. But, I think if your partner is from the same background then you can understand each other better. You are more compatible. Therefore, I would prefer a partner with the same caste. That's my personal choice".*

- Parents' disapproval of relationships, either actual or perceived, is also a very significant factor in young people's relationship decisions. This actual or perceived disapproval could restrict young people from not engaging in a relationship (almost 40% women who never had a relationship mentioned family disapproval as a reason for that) or discontinuing/breaking the relationship. Caste and religion appears to be significant reasons for parents' disapproval. While expressing the reasons for break-up many participants expressed this as, "we knew there was no future for our relationship", "parents will not accept our relationship", "partners' marriage was fixed by their parents without their consent" etc.

## Summary

The analysis of relationship patterns and dynamics among unmarried educated youth, majority of them belonging to middle and upper middle class, provided following insights. In this cohort of youth, being in a relationship was a norm. There was significant diversity in defining the meanings and boundaries of relationships based on emotional and physical involvement with the partner and level of commitment. Early initiation and changing pattern of relationship among younger cohort (Gen Z) also indicate that there could be increasing de-standardization of life course (shifting away from traditional trajectory of avoiding relationships before marriage or engaging in serious relationships without penetrative sex). The changes were observed among men as well as women with little gender gap in age at starting the relationships, total number relationships etc. However, these relationships were far from being equal in experiences for men and women. Patriarchal social norms, lack of disclosure to family, lack of family and other informal and formal support mechanisms significantly increases vulnerabilities of youth. While there are limitations to generalizing the findings (mainly the proportions) of this study due to purposive study sample, the findings about the patterns have important implications. What proportion of young people are in a relationship or are sexually active is a moot question. It is important to explore what can be done to reduce their vulnerability and improve their agency to improve their sexual health.

## Implications and way forward

### **Improving capabilities of young people to take informed decisions is of utmost importance**

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. However, the lived realities of young people clearly indicate how they are actively negotiating with their socio-cultural context to create their choices that are constrained by lack of information, lack of support, family norms, religion, caste, stigma, and discrimination. In order to achieve sexual health for this population, interventions should go beyond imparting information and should focus on increasing their ability to make informed decisions. Ability to recognize and regulate one's emotions & behaviors, ability to feel control over one's actions and to deal with the consequences, ability to experience intimacy, ability to seek support when required etc. are all important abilities that young people should have, to experience positive and healthy sexual life[5].

### **There should be spaces for young people to talk about their concerns and seek support**

Rapidly changing external environment and peer norms, asymmetry in relationship expectations, lack of support from family and stigma of premarital relationships can increase the vulnerability of young people to deal with issues related to sexuality. The range of issues that young people can experience may not be restricted to the physical health complaints such as HIV/STI, or unwanted pregnancies but can get intertwined with social and psychological issues such as decision to engage in sex, dealing with abuse, break-up, depression, self-harm etc. Currently, young people, especially unmarried youth do not have spaces where they can talk about these concerns. The Adolescent Friendly Health Clinics (AFHC) that are established as part of the Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK)[6]the Government of India committed to strengthening its programmes and systems for adolescents, initially through the Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health Strategy (ARSH, are restricted for people under the age of 19, are located in the medical facilities and are poorly accessed by young people. There is a need to establish spaces where young people can reflect about their concerns, get help in assessing their own risk & health conditions and get information about available health services which they can access.

### **Comprehensive Sexuality education (CSE) should be universally available and should go beyond information and beyond schools**

Implementation of CSE in India has always faced challenges from different sections of society, from politicians to parents who believe that sexuality education would 'corrupt' the innocent minds of young people. This resistance persists despite the availability of strong evidence beyond doubt that CSE is one of the most important interventions for

achieving sexual health of young people. There is limited information available on the status of sexuality education (also known as adolescent education/life skills education) in India. While there might be individual efforts of the schools and civil society organizations to provide CSE, there is hardly any information about the content, approach and methodology of providing such information. The only known national level program, named as Adolescent Education Program (AEP) is being implemented in the government schools and is still beyond the reach of many young people. Further, the focus mainly remains on providing information about risks & diseases and is far from being 'comprehensive'[7]. Along with making CSE universally available and accessible, there is also need to make the socio-cultural environment more conducive towards positive sexuality that recognizes, respects, and supports sexual rights of young people irrespective of their gender identity, sexual orientation, disability and marital status.

### **Legal age of consent should be re-examined**

Legal age of consent is a contentious issue in India. According to The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, sexual activity before the age of 18, even if it is 'consensual' is considered a crime. This is and can become increasingly problematic as there are more and more young people who are starting their relationship and sexual activity before the age of 18. Though most young people between the age of 16-18 who engage in consensual sexual activity are not currently prosecuted, they are 'criminals' in the eyes of law and find it extremely difficult to access any sexual and reproductive health related services. On the other hand, there is no evidence to support that increasing age of consent has delayed sexual activity or has reduced crimes. Therefore, with the rapidly changing context of initiation of sexual intimacy in India, there is a need to reconsider a lowering age of consent.

### **Emphasis on 'sexual health' is required in the sexual and reproductive health programs in India**

The sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) programs in India have been traditionally focusing more on reproductive health and hence are dominated by the discourse on maternal health. This has resulted in formulation of more bio-medical approach to SRHR that largely catered to married heterosexual couples. There is a need that SRHR programs should also focus on sexual health which is considered fundamental to people's health and rights. SRHR programs 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. This focus is essential to ensure that the services reach everyone including the groups such as adolescents and unmarried adults, people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, people with disabilities etc. whose needs have received little priority in the SRHR programs.

## **Taking a life course approach to sexual and reproductive health is essential in addressing complex interlinked issues**

The current research literature on sexual intimacy before marriage is limited. Majority of the research is conducted using survey methods to get a cross sectional understanding of number of men and women engaged in premarital sex and is often medicalized. It is not uncommon in the current literature to come across words such as “prevalence” and “determinants” of premarital sex, which clearly highlights the narrow focus of these studies. Such cross-sectional understanding of sexual behavior only focusing on penetrative sex does not provide enough understanding about sexual health of young people. Sexuality related decision-making is dynamic in nature. Therefore, a dynamic framework, such as a life course approach is more appropriate to understand the complexities and interrelatedness of sexual experiences of youth. Central to the life course perspective is the belief that any point in life should be viewed dynamically as a consequence of past experiences and future expectations as well as the integration of individual motive with external constraints[8]. Such an approach is required not only for future research but also for planning sexual health programs.

### **Acknowledgements**

We gratefully acknowledge the efforts of Population Foundation of India and Prabha Nagaraja of TARSHI (Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues) in reviewing the research briefs and providing their valuable comments. We thank our data collection team – Maitreyee Kulkarni, Archana Kulkarni, Sanjay Chabukswar, Amar Deogaonkar and Anuj Deshpande for their sensitive and sincere efforts of talking to young people and their help in data entry and validation. Many thanks to all the participants who cooperated enthusiastically during long interviews and trusted us to share their personal journeys. We would like to thank Mr Makarand Sathe for language editing, Mr Mitwa AV of Elements of Poetry Studio for design and Mrs Rohinee RC for layout.

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### **List of research briefs from the Youth in Transition Study**

1. Relationship Patterns and Dynamics among Unmarried Youth
2. Sexual Health Risks among Unmarried Youth
3. Contraceptive Use and Unwanted Pregnancies among Unmarried Youth
4. Abuse in Non-Marital Relationships
5. Experiences and Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse among Unmarried Youth
6. Sexuality and Mental Health Issues among Unmarried Youth

All the research briefs and detailed methodology of the Youth in Transition study is compiled in a report, which can be accessed through [this link](#).

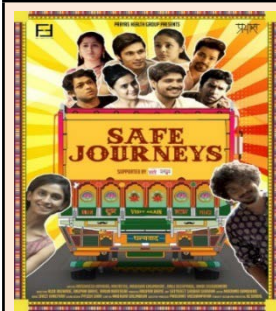
### **Publications and resources based on insights from the Youth in Transition Study**

#### ***The Wire Marathi Article Series***

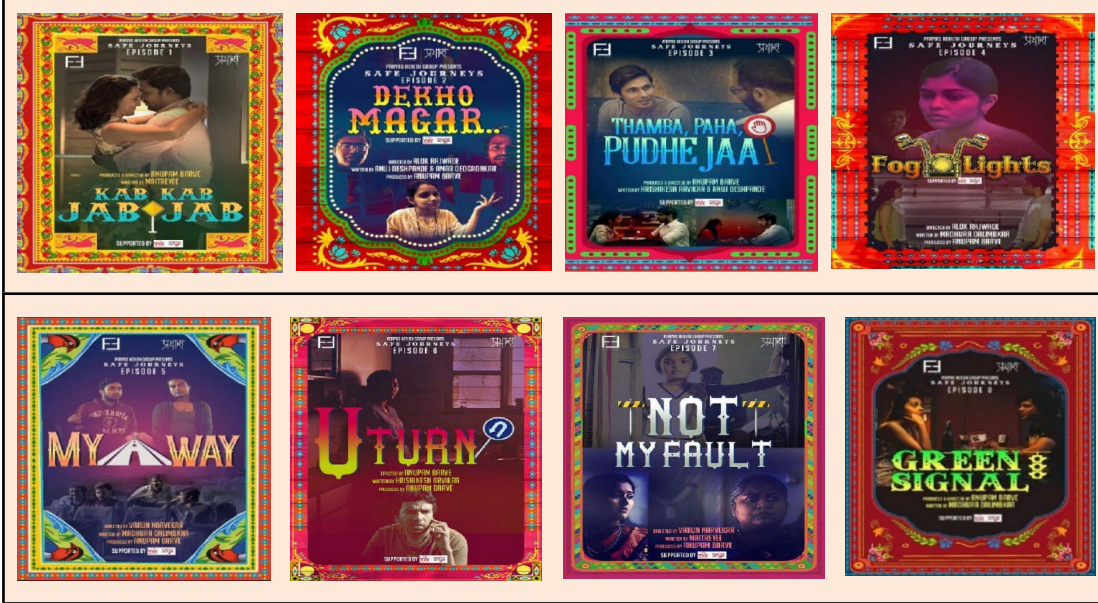
The findings of Youth in Transition Study were shared through a series of articles written in a Marathi news portal, The Wire Marathi. Click the title of the articles to read more.

1. युवकांना स्थित्यंतरात समजून घेण्याचा 'प्रयास'
2. 'सिरीयस', 'कॅज्युअल' आणि जातीची जाणीव
3. नाती, नात्यांच्या कल्पना आणि अदृश्य दबाव
4. लैंगिक अत्याचार आणि आपण सर्व
5. लैंगिक अत्याचाराचा लपलेला चेहरा
6. लैंगिकता आणि नैराश्य
7. संमतीची जाणीव- नेणीव
8. सेक्स आणि इज्जत का सवाल
9. सेक्स आणि जोखमीचे जोखड

Safe Journeys- A Web Series



The web series is based on the insights from the Youth in Transition study and is created with the aim of increasing young people's ability to deal with issues related to sexuality. The series of eight videos can be accessed from [Safe Journeys web page](#) and through [Prayas Health Group's You Tube channel](#)





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