

RESEARCH BRIEF

YOUTH IN TRANSITION

ABUSE IN NON-MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS



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Youth in Transition

Abuse in Non-Marital Relationships

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Citation

Prayas Health Group (2020), Abuse in Non-Marital Relationships - Findings from the Youth in Transition Study



Prayas (Health Group)

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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.

Abuse in Non-Marital Relationships

“He was thin and I was fat. So, he used to tease me. Every day he used to make me run for 2 hours. He always used to taunt me on my looks. He never told his parents about our relationship. He said, “Tu jad aahes, kali aahes, ghari dakhavanyaachyaa layakichi nahis. Aadhi tu body banav, gori ho mag mi tuzhya baddal ghari sangen. (You are fat and have a dark complexion and you are not worth introducing to my parents. You first build your body and become fair then I will tell my parents about you.) He was flirting with other girls. My friend showed me his messages on her phone. I went to his room and I beat him with a stick and I broke that relationship.” (A 23-year-old woman)

Background

Abuse in relationships is a major social and public health concern. There is conclusive research evidence on its negative consequences not only on mental, physical and sexual health but also on overall development of a person [1–3]. There is emerging research, mainly from developed countries on abuse in non-marital relationships, often referred to as dating violence [4–6]. Gender inequality, patriarchy, and other factors that make people vulnerable such as caste discrimination and poverty have been shown to be risk factors for experiencing abuse [7]. There is also emerging research on the ‘circular’ nature of abuse linking childhood victimization/adverse experiences with intimate partner abuse in adolescence and adulthood [8] highlighting the need for life course understanding of abuse to design interventions for breaking the cycle.

Research on intimate partner abuse in India often exclusively focuses on marital relationships and there is a lack of research-based understanding of abuse in non-marital relationships [9]. This research brief describes the experiences and context of abuse in intimate relationships described by never married participants.

Methodology

In the retrospective data collection, participants were asked to report their experiences with each of their relationships that lasted for more than one month. Abusive experiences were categorized as - emotional, sexual and physical abuse. For each question, it was asked how many times a particular behavior happened. Responses ranged from never, rarely, sometimes to many times. Data were analyzed using R software. 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](#).

To understand the abusive experiences during a relationship, a scale of 12 questions was prepared based on Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse [10] and is described below.

Table 1: Categorization of abusive experiences

Type	Specific	Measuring
Emotional Abuse	Putting restrictions (which clothes to wear, where to go, whom to talk, etc.)	Emotional abuse was considered if any of the acts was reported to have occurred many times during that relationship
	Insulting or talking disrespectfully with the partner	
	Being suspicious (checking mobile/purse/social media accounts etc.)	
	Cheating partner (try to hide things, double dating, etc.)	
	Forcing to marry or continuing a relationship.	
	Aggressive behaviour of the partner / threatening to hit/ using abusive language/ throwing things	
Physical abuse	Physical abuse by a partner in the form of hitting/ slapping / punching/pulling hair, etc.	Abuse is considered even if any of the acts happened rarely
Sexual abuse	Forcing for phone sex/sexting/sharing nude photographs	Abuse is considered even if any of the acts happened rarely
	Showing porn against will	
	Making videos of intimate moments against will	
	Frequently asking for sex	
	Forcing for any type of physical intimacy or particular type of sex against will	

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 10th) in village or town and later migrated to the city for higher education or work.

Out of 1240 participants enrolled in the study, 455 men and 491 women reported having at least one relationship. Nine hundred and forty six (946) participants reported a total 2216 relationships (1021 by men, and 1195 by women).

Findings

Abusive experiences in relationship were common

Table 2: Ever reported abusive experiences in participants

Type of abuse	Men (N = 455)	Women (N = 491)	Total (N = 946)
Emotional	206 (45%)	285 (58%)	491 (52%)
Sexual	110(24%)	222 (45%)	332 (35%)
Physical	13 (3%)	68 (14%)	81 (9%)

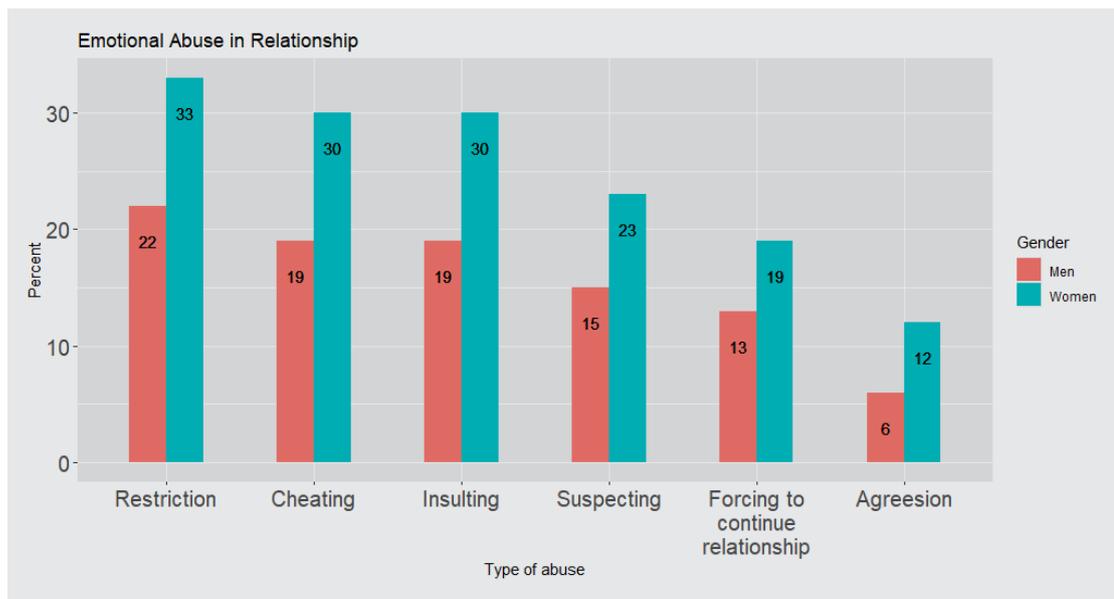
*“She is very demanding, possessive, annoying, and doesn’t understand me. Gets possessive even when I like the posts of my female friends”.
(A 22-year-old man)*

“He used to come to my college every day to keep watch on me. He made me break friendships with all my friends, even friendship with girls as he used to fear that they would tell me bad things about him. He used to check my mobile messages, social media accounts. I used to do a job and pay for his expenses like hotel bills, mobile recharge, petrol bills, etc. Because of experience in first relationship I am afraid to trust my second partner and that is creating problems in our relationship”, (A 21-year-old woman)

Context of Emotional Abuse

Every alternate participant enrolled in the study reported to have ever experienced some form of emotional abuse in the relationship.

Figure 1: Emotional abuse in relationship



- Putting restrictions, insulting and cheating were the most frequently reported emotional abuse by women as well as men. Restriction was mostly in the form of restrictions on talking with someone of another gender or talking with a particular friend, going out with friends, accepting friend's request on social media accounts, wearing particular types of clothing, etc.
- Suspecting the partner, pressurizing to continue the relationship and aggressive behavior were also reported by a significant number of participants as emotional abuse. This suspicion as reported by some women led their partners to follow them to the places they visited, insist on sharing their whereabouts and pressurizing them to share their passwords of social media accounts.
- Women were more likely to experience multiple forms of emotional abuse (such as putting restrictions and being suspicious, insulting and being aggressive etc.) in a relationship as compared to men. Out of six questions that asked for emotional abuse, 25% women reported three or more forms of emotional abuse.

Context of Sexual Abuse

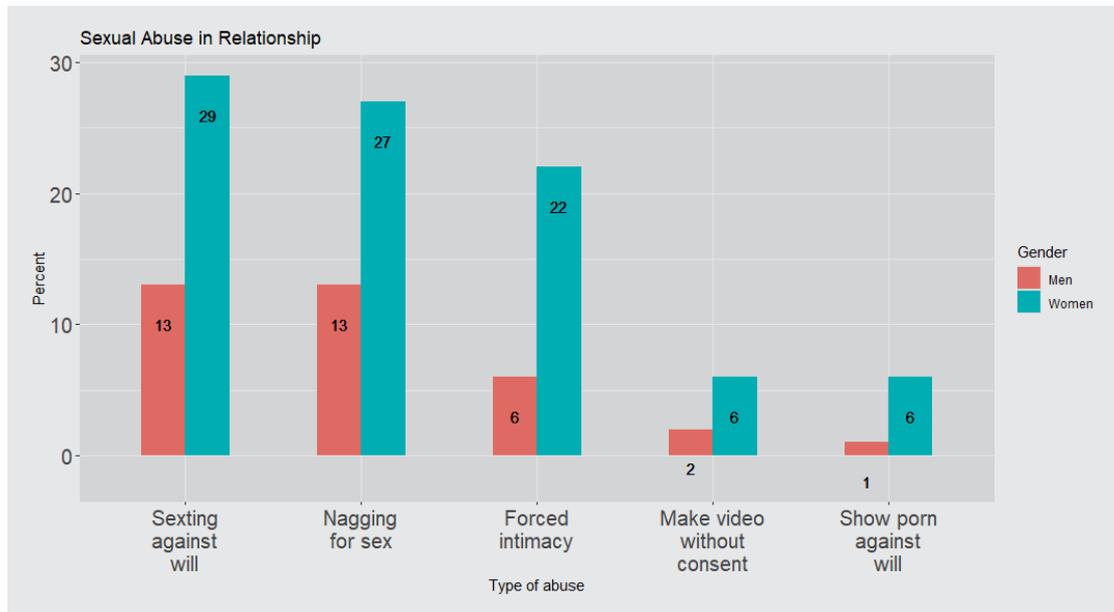
"I used to get irritated and uncomfortable with him as he used to constantly ask for physical intimacy, used to cling in public places, used to talk in a demeaning way. He was very possessive and very much restrictive. He used to get angry if my phone was busy. He was also involved in another girl". (A 22-year-old woman)

- Almost 45% of the women and 24% of the men reported to have ever experienced some form of sexual abuse in relationship.

- Forcing for sexting, for particular type of physical intimacy and nagging for sex were frequently reported abusive acts under sexual abuse.

“She was crazy, verbally abusive, always doubting. We met only twice but insisted on having sex. This was only to engage me.” (A 24-year-old man)

Figure 2: Sexual abuse in relationship



- It was reported that partner forced for sexual acts like kissing, oral/anal/vaginal sex, Bondage Domination Submission and Masochism (BDSM) (sexual preferences and behaviors involving physical restraints, an unequal power relationship, or pain, including the practice of bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadomasochism, etc.) etc. against participant’s will. In a few cases, women also reported blackmailing by partner for sex with the help of videos taken during intimate moments.
- The context and severity of sexual abuse among men and women appears to be different. Among the men reporting sexual abuse, most of them had experienced only one form of sexual abuse (mainly either asking for sex frequently or forcing for sexting when they did not want). However, 25% of the women reported to have experienced multiple forms of sexual abuse in a relationship indicating higher severity of abuse.

Context of Physical Abuse

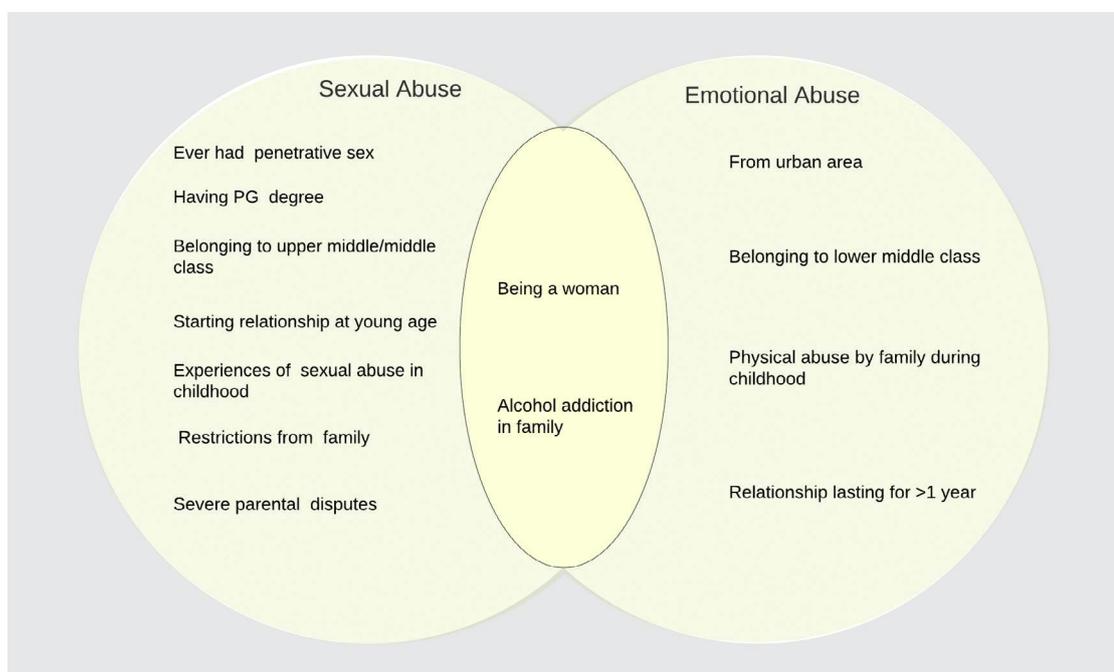
“This relationship was very abusive. He was very aggressive and controlling. He used to always keep watch on me. He made me break friendship with all boys. He slapped me thrice as I was talking with other boys. He used to force me to kiss or for a blow job. What I experienced during this relationship I would never allow this to happen with me again.” (A 21-year-old woman)

- Majority of the time physical abuse co-occurred with other forms of abuse (emotional or sexual); Of those reporting physical abuse, 64% reported emotional abuse and 35% reported sexual abuse. In few cases physical abuse was severe where partner used to drink and beat the participant or in one case, participant was pregnant and partner hit her which resulted in miscarriage. Slapping by a partner was most commonly reported physical abuse by women as well as men.
- Physical abuse in the form of slapping, pushing, pinching, pulling hair, twisting hands, beating, etc. was reported by 13.8% women and 2.9% men.

Multiple factors were associated with increased reporting of emotional and sexual abuse

Sociodemographic factors as well as negative experiences during childhood were tested in a regression model to assess which of these factors are associated with reporting abuse. The analysis was performed only for sexual and emotional abuse, as the number of people who experienced physical abuse was quantitatively not enough for performing meaningful statistical analysis.

Figure 3: Factors related to experiencing sexual and emotional abuse in relationships



- Compared to men, women were significantly more likely to experience sexual [Odds Ratio (OR) 2.53 (1.86,3.44)] and emotional [OR 1.6 (1.18,2.15)] abuse.
- Alcohol addiction in the family (mostly father) was also related to higher reporting of sexual [OR 1.58 (1.12,2.25)] and emotional [OR 1.65 (1.19,2.28)] abuse.

- Participants from urban area [OR 1.75 (1.06,2.89)], belonging to Lower Middle Class [OR 1.78 (1.04,3.04)], who experienced physical abuse by family during childhood [OR 1.57 (1.08,2.29)] and whose relationship lasted for more than 1 year [OR 1.49 (1.12,1.99)] were more likely to report emotional abuse.
- Participants having post-graduation [OR 1.8 (1.18, 2.75)], belonging to upper middle class [OR 2.76 (1.5,5.09)], starting their relationship before 18 years [OR 3.21 (1.84,5.59)] and between 18-22 [OR 2.51 (1.46,4.29)] and who ever had penetrative sex [OR 2.07 (1.53,2.81)] were more likely to report experiences of sexual abuse.
- Negative experiences in the childhood such as experiencing sexual abuse during childhood [OR 1.43 (0.99,2.07)], restriction by family [OR 1.51 (0.99,2.31)] and experiencing severe parental disputes [OR 1.45 (1.06,1.99)] in the form of frequent quarrel or fight between parents were also factors related to higher reporting of sexual abuse.
- Emotional and physical abuse was reported more in serious relationships compared to when the relationships were labeled as casual or exploring. However, sexual abuse did not differ according to type of relationships.

Summary

The analysis of abusive experiences in relationships reported by never married educated urban youth reveal that emotional, sexual and physical abuse is common in these relationships. Women are significantly more likely to experience all forms of abuse. This also suggests that even with rapid changes in social and economic context which apparently gives a sense of freedom and empowerment, the issues of abuse in intimate relationships are only changing its context and will not be addressed until the core issues of gender inequality and power are addressed appropriately. In line with emerging literature from developed countries, this life course study also found correlation between experiencing negative events/abuse in childhood and experiences of abuse in intimate relationships in adolescence and early adulthood highlighting the need to have a comprehensive approach to address the issue of abuse. Several implications can be drawn from these findings.

Implications and way forward

Recognition and in-depth understanding of abuse in non-marital relationships is essential

In India, abuse in relationships is synonymous with abuse among married couples, which is generally referred to as intimate partner violence or domestic abuse. The legal protection is provided to only those women who have been living with the partner (including non-marital, live-in relationships) through the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) act. Though the risk factors for experiencing abuse in

a non-marital relationship can be similar as in married couples (such as gender, power, patriarchy etc.) the context of non-marital relationships is significantly different. Non-marital relationships are often by 'choice' where partners generally do not live together and most of the time the families are not involved. In addition, social disapproval of non-marital relationships makes it even more difficult for significant others to recognize abuse in these relationships, report it and seek support. However, with the rapidly changing context of lives of young people with respect to sexuality there is even more urgent need to acknowledge that many young people are engaging in non-marital relationships and abusive experiences in these relationships can have a significant impact on their lives. There are very few research studies from India, which measure prevalence, types and context of abusive experiences in non-marital relationships in different populations. As one of the first steps to address the issue of abuse in non-marital relationships, there is a need for in-depth understanding of these issues.

There is a need for effective interventions for preventing abuse in non-marital relationships

Adolescence and early adulthood are important periods that lay the foundation for future relationships and overall health of the individual. Ensuring that adolescents and young adults experience relationships free from coercion and abuse is essential for their development and overall health. In India, various factors such as the patriarchal social structure, restrictive gender norms, gender inequitable roles significantly contribute to abuse in non-marital relationships. A particular challenge in addressing abuse in non-marital relationships is the stigma of these relationships leading to non-disclosure to family or significant others to seek support. Stigma also leads to fear of exploitation from the network that is otherwise approached for seeking support. This makes it clear that the prevention of abuse in non-marital relationships would require interventions to not only identify and provide support to those affected by it but also make efforts to destigmatize non-marital relationships and address gender inequitable social norms.

Health care and psychosocial support services are needed for young victims

Abuse in relationships is being recognized as one of the major social and public health concerns due to its negative consequences on mental, sexual, physical health and overall development of a person. With high prevalence of abuse in non-marital relationships, it is essential to provide required health care and psychosocial support services to youth. Because of the secrecy associated with non-marital relationships, access to services is challenging. Currently, there are no sexual health services for young unmarried adults. The only sexual health program, the Rashtriya Kishore Svasthya Karyakram (RKSK) caters to adolescents up to 19 years of age. Therefore, there is a need to establish services which will be non-judgmental, affordable and youth friendly.

There is a need to increase capabilities of young people to recognize and address abuse in relationships

Capabilities of young people or their power/ability to do something is at the core while dealing with the issue of abuse in relationships at an individual level. Specifically, young people need to know different forms of abuse, how to identify when one is a victim of abuse and how to address it. They need to be empowered to address and seek appropriate care, which could include confiding in a trustworthy person to seeking professional support to deal with. Young people's abilities are shaped by their socio-cultural context. As non-marital relationships are self-arranged, and are not socially approved many young people are likely to deal with them on their own and are less likely to believe that having a relationship free of coercion and violence is their right. Therefore, it is also important to make young people aware about their rights and responsibilities with respect to sexuality.

Both men and women need to be involved in the abuse prevention and mitigation efforts

Compared to men, more women experience abuse. However, experiences of abuse by men are not negligible. There is a need to shift the perspective of 'men as perpetrators and women as victims' while dealing with relationship abuse. Therefore, both men and women need to be involved in the abuse prevention and mitigation efforts. The issue of abuse of transgender people in relationships is another serious one; albeit beyond the scope of this study.

A life course approach is needed to understand and address abuse in relationships

There is increasing research to indicate that sustaining and perpetrating abuse have strong linkages with upbringing and experiences during childhood. This research also found that people who had difficult childhood, those who were maltreated or who were sexually abused were more likely to experience abuse in relationships during adulthood. There are attempts to theorize these findings. Some believe that attachment patterns of children with their parents is an important factor that determines the nature of relationships in adulthood. Others believe that neglect from family and abusive experiences during childhood can lower the self-esteem of the person, which can further hamper the ability to respond to abuse in relationships. (Paat Yok-Fong et al. 2016). Irrespective of the theoretical perspective, it is increasingly evident that the issue of abuse in relationships needs to be understood by taking a diachronic approach which focuses on how things evolve rather than only cross-sectional examining.

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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](#).

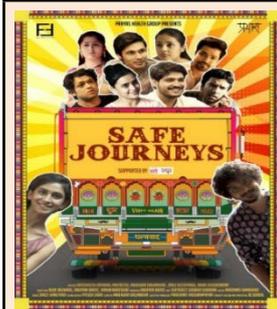
Publications and resources based on insights from the Youth in Transition Study

The Wire Marathi Article Series

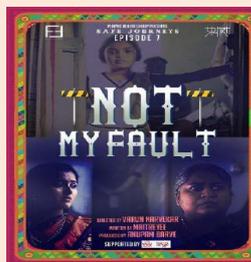
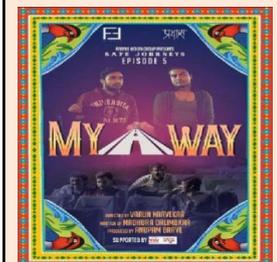
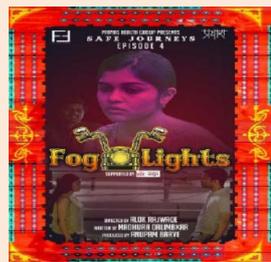
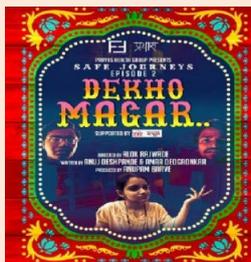
The findings of Youth in Transition Study were shared through a series of articles written in a Marathi news portal, The Wire Marathi. Click the title of the articles to read more.

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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