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Adolescent Sexuality in Taiwan

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Introduction

In past years, sex talk was a taboo. The importance of female chastity before marriage has long been stressed in Chinese culture. Marriage were arranged by families, and young couples did not expect to see each other until the day of the wedding.

As a result of rapid socio-economic transformation and cultural change in the last four decades, Taiwan has become an urban and industrial society with widespread education and extensive contacts with the outside world. Many non-familial ideas and values have added to the pre-existing Chinese familial ideas. In recent years, pornographic entertainment materials such as risqué videos and magazines have flooded Taiwan. The excessive exposure to pornography of the general public has led to some unhealthy ideas, particularly among the youths. Sexual relationships have been growing more diverse and complicated, and women groups and academics have been calling for sexual liberation.

An island-wide survey on people's knowledge, attitude, and practice toward fertility and family planning in Taiwan was conducted in 1986 (1). A random sample of 5000 ever-married women aged 20 to 49 were interviewed. It was found that the percentage of women who never dated with their husbands before marriage decreases remarkably from 62.6% for the birth cohort of 1936-1940 to 10% for the cohort of 1956-1960. Furthermore, the substantial increase in women who dated their husbands without parental permission from 7.6% for the birth cohort of 1936-1940 to 28.1% for 1956-1960, implies greater personal autonomy in the dating period for the younger cohorts of women.

As for the change in concept of sexual experience in the marital contexts, greater autonomy of mate-selection and dating has been accompanied by the increased premarital sexual intimacy for women in Taiwan. The incidence of premarital sexual intercourse had substantially increased overall from 9.5% for the birth cohort of 1936-1940 to 38% for the birth cohort of 1956-1960. This trend toward increasing premarital sex implies that, for the younger cohorts, the timing of women's first sexual experience tends to be ahead of schedule relative to the wedding day, or sometimes even earlier than the engagement ceremony(1).

Currently, the increasing rates of sex problems such as premarital pregnancy, abortion, sex transmitted disease, prostitution and rape, etc., may cause negative impacts on the growing adolescents. In order to understand the status of adolescents' sexual behaviors in Taiwan, a literature review of selected papers related to sexuality in the last 20 years has been done. Although the sexuality researches in Taiwan are limited, many changes can still be found.

Adolescents' Sexual Behaviors

The rates of masturbation reported by adolescents are shown in various studies (2-6). For the ninth graders, the rates of 1985 are higher than that of 1978 regardless of sex. For the 10th to 12th graders, the rates of masturbation are around 80% for males and 30% for females in 1992 and 1993. However, the rates of masturbation increased with age. Wei's study (6) indicated that there were 45.1% of males and 14.1% of females in 1993 reporting having first masturbation at the age of 13 to 15. Only 5.6% of males and 4.6% of females reported the age early than 10.

Historically, men in Chinese culture have always had more sexual freedom. The number of men who want a virgin bride far exceeds the number of women who desire a virgin groom. Cernade's study (7) indicated that 22.8% of the students agreed unmarried woman having sex with her fiance while 22.9% of the students agreed unmarried man having sex with his fiancée. This data shows that the double-standard no longer exists. However, males reporting higher rates than females indicated that males' attitudes toward premarital sex are more open than females.

An investigation of sex behaviors among the ninth graders in Taipei City was conducted in 1978 (2). The rates of holding hands, shoulder and waist with dates for males and females are 13.9% and 6.5%, respectively. The rates of having kissing, caressing and intercourse are fairly low.

Two studies focusing on same target population by similar sampling procedures (8,9) are available for learning the trend of having sexual behaviors among the graduates of junior colleges in Taipei. For males, the rates of having intercourse with dates were 20.7% in 1979 and 35.2% in 1988; for females, 4.0% in 1979 and 6.9% in 1988 were reported. Both for males and females showed 70% increase within 9 years. The rates of having all sexual behaviors shown for males are higher than that of females. For example, the rates of having intercourse with dates in 1988 for males and females are 35.2% and 6.9%, respectively. Whom did the males have sex with? It was found that 14.6% of males reported for having more than one sex partner.

For vocational high school students who had sexual experiences, 69.6% of them adopted contraception (10). For those who have adopted contraception, 79.6% of them have used condoms, 24.1% of them have taken oral pills. Other contraceptive methods which have been used frequently but less effective are rhythm method (53.3%), coitus interruptus (40.2%), and douching (27.7%). The main sources for obtaining contraceptive devices are drugstores and supermarkets, with 71.5% and 41.6%, respectively. Few students reported getting contraceptive devices from health institutes such as hospital, clinic, family planning station, and health station.

Adolescents' Sexuality Knowledge

One may question that the increasing of sexual behaviors among adolescents was caused by learning more about sex. Actually, many researches reveal that the rates of respondents correctly answering on sexual knowledge tests are quite low. Studies conducted during 1977 and 1992 indicated that respondents averaged to correctly answer 65% or less. Even for teachers and health professionals, the rates are no more

than 80%.

In the school system, curricula related to sexual education provided to students are limited. Only two chapters in the Health Education textbook for the 7th graders detailed reproductive physiology and family planning. Toward these contents, half of the teachers described roughly and evasively while 23% of the teachers described in detail (7).

Concerning family education, the communication between adolescents and their parents is far below satisfaction. Among the 5th to 9th graders, about 14% to 32% of them have ever discussed dating with their parents, and about 14% to 28% of them have ever discussed physical changes in puberty with their parents. The issues related to sexual behaviors, pregnancy, and contraception are less discussed (11). The rates of 12th graders of vocational high schools discussing sexual issues with their parents are unsatisfactory also. Although the rates in 1992 (4) are higher than that in 1987 (10), only 65.8% of them ever discussed the issue of dating, 29.8% of them ever discussed the issue of physical changes in puberty and 12.4% of them ever discussed the issue of sexual behaviors, pregnancy and contraception.

When school and family fail to provide sufficient sex education, adolescents are frequently misinformed by pornographic magazines. A survey conducted in 1978 (2) showed that the percentages of having read pornographic magazines among the 9th graders are 61.1% for males and 29.1% for females. Nowadays, our society is full of risqué videos which become the channel for adolescents to obtain sex information. A study conducted in 1984 (12) revealed that for those students of junior high schools, 18.5% of males and 9.3% of females have watched risqué videos.

Conclusion

It is amazing that the rates of approval of sexuality education are fairly high. About 70% to 96% of the students, parents, teachers, and nurses agreed to conduct sexuality education for adolescents. Researches focusing on evaluation of the effectiveness of sexuality education have been conducted since 1987. It is noted that students' sexuality knowledge increased, attitudes toward sex changed, sexual behavior intention tended to be lower.

While sexuality curricula are being offered to the students and sexuality training programs being implemented for the teachers, sexual liberation movement has been declared by the women societies. It is expected that the rates of premarital sex among adolescents will increase. Under this circumstance, the prevention of premarital pregnancy and AIDS infection becomes an imperative task of sexuality education in Taiwan.

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