

# Sex, Marriage, and Children in Adolescence: A Case Study of Two Cohorts in Belo Horizonte, Brazil<sup>1</sup>

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Several studies of Latin American and Caribbean populations over the past decades have established that women's early transitions to adulthood bring about a series of concerns. The likelihood of having unprotected sex, of acquiring sexually transmitted diseases and of having an unintended pregnancy, for example, is higher among young women who experience sexual initiation earlier (GUPTA, 2000). Moreover, the timing of the first marriage or union is pointed out as an important dimension of women's reproductive behavior with far-reaching consequences. For instance, women's early age at marriage may cause them to terminate their schooling earlier and, as a result, to attain a lower level of education (SINGH and SAMARA, 1996). Usually, early marriage matches with early childbearing. Motherhood at young age may have adverse consequences for the individual woman, as well for her family and community. These can range from school drop out, lack of social support from family and partners to difficulty in entering in the formal labor market (GRAS, 2001; BEMFAM, 1992).

The objective of this paper is to examine the relationship between first intercourse, first marriage, and first birth, comparing two cohorts – females 20 to 29 and 50 to 59 years old in 2002 – with respect to their behavior in adolescence. Have the norms that govern sex, marriage, and children in adolescence changed over time?

This study takes place in Belo Horizonte, the capital of the state of Minas Gerais (MG). Located in the Southeast region, the richest in Brazil, Belo Horizonte is the fourth largest city of the country, with its 2,238,526 inhabitants, according to the 2000 Census (IBGE, 2004).

The paper combines quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data come from SRSR – *Saúde Reprodutiva, Sexualidade e Raça/Cor* (Reproductive Health, Sexuality, and Race/Skin Color), a survey representative at the *município* (city) level, which interviewed 1,302 females 15-59 years old in Belo Horizonte and 1,106 in Recife, between April and September, 2002. Qualitative data come from 17 focus group meetings, conducted with females 20 to 24 and 50 to 59 years old between February, 2003 and May, 2004.

Descriptive statistics techniques are used to establish the background for qualitative analysis. Social, demographic and cultural characteristics, such as respondents' skin color, marital status, educational attainment, and ages at sexual debut, first marriage and first birth are investigated. Time until events of interest are described using the Kaplan-Meier estimates of the survivor function and the median lifetime. The log-rank test is used to compare the survivor functions of different cohorts and different demographic groups. The focus groups meetings were designed to uncover chances, and differentials in the perceptions of ideas, attitudes and behaviors regarding first intercourse, marriage and motherhood.

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Preliminary descriptive results show that among the 20-29 year-old, white women, who accounted for 27,1% of the sample, 32,8% were married, 55,4% had their first sex before age 20 and 19,1% got married in their teens. Furthermore, 18,3% had a first birth before age 20. “Negra” (black + brown) women 20-29 made up 30,4% of the sample. Among them, 32,9% were married, 62,0% had their sexual debut while a teenager, 17,0% married for the first time before age 20 and 19,0% gave birth to their first child before their twentieth birthday.

Among the oldest cohort, white women, who made up 14,9% of the sample, 64,1% were married, 45,9% had their first sexual relation before age 20, 32,4% were married by age 20 and 15,3% had had their first child by that age. “Negra” women, 50-59 made up 12,5% of the sample. Of these women, 23,6% had its first sexual intercourse before they turned 20, 15,5% married and 8,9% had a child before that age.

A sample<sup>6</sup> of qualitative analyses indicates that although many young focus groups’ participants agree that the best thing for women is to wait until they reach the age of 18 for having their first sexual relation, most of them believe that maturity is what must be considered before starting a sexual life. Many of them claim that young women are not mature enough to engage in sexual relations. So, being mature is a matter of age. Furthermore, for these women, a sexual relation would happen only if the women were able to avoid an unintended pregnancy, since it would become a problem in their lives, as some young women explain.

Moderator: Is there an adequate age to starting having sex?

P3<sup>7</sup>: I there is...yes, there is...the best thing is to wait until you are, at least, 18 years old ”

P4: I think 18 still a young age...it is not good to have sex so young...you are not mature...women don’t know how to say “no”...and if she gets pregnant...oh, that it is a problem, for sure...

*Group 1, negra women, 20-24 years old, less educated.*

In contrast with less educated women, young and well educated women believe that there is not a better age to have the first sex. It depends on being able to protect yourself from a sexually transmitted disease (std), including HIV. Although they show some concern with std and HIV, they are mainly worried with the likelihood of getting pregnant and their dialog shows a misunderstanding about the contraceptive methods function.

P19: I don’t believe that there is an adequate age for starting having sex. What I think is that a woman must be able to protect herself from a sexually transmitted disease because, even with all methods available, there is a chance to get an std, a HIV or even to get pregnant...

P22: There is not a right age for this things to happen, but if you don’t have the responsibility to assume a pregnancy, if it happens, so you are not suppose to start having sex.

<sup>6</sup> Sample prepared to fit the four-page extended abstract rule.

<sup>7</sup> P3 means participant 3. The same rule applies to all other “P” in this text.

P23: Yah, sure, I agree with you.

*Group 4, negra women, 20 -24 years old, highly educated.*

To another group of young females, if you don't wait for having sex, everything in life will start earlier than it should. In their view, earlier a woman has sex, earlier she will get pregnant. For these females, *there is no need to be in a rush.*

P93: "You have to date and to have sex in the right time. If you start early, you will be like myself: I start dating to early and had a baby very young. So, everything I would be doing now, I did many years ago. I started [having sex] when I was 16. There is no need to rush!

P96: That is true. Why you need to rush? I didn't hear my mom, so...look at the outcome [moving her hands to indicate a pregnant woman]

*Group 15, white women, 20 - 24 years old, less educated*

Like some young females, 50-59 years old focus groups participants also believe that it is better to have the first sexual intercourse after the age 18. For them, starting the sexual life later is linked to greater chances to finish school and have a successful future.

P16: Ah! I think the girl must be at least in her eighteens.

M: Why not before that?

P16: Because by this age, girls are attending school, preparing herself to the future, do you know what I mean? Until this age they must be in school. They don't need to worry with these things [to have sex]. Also, because after they have their first sexual relation, they will want to have more, for sure... They will have the first, the second and so on...

P18: That is true, so, it is better to wait until later...

P15: I think they have to begin when they are older, for sure, because nowadays, the first thing they do in the first date is to say: lets go to bed...

*Group 3, negra women, 50 59 years old, less educated*

Some old females have a firm conviction that the first sexual intercourse must be linked to right choices, since it will never be forget by women.

P78: "I never told my daughter: don't have sex. On the contrary, I always said to her: wait until the right time, the right man and the right age. I know that when she had sex, she was already in the college she was dating and she was almost 19 years old. So, I think that was her time.... But I never told that sex was forbidden. I always told her to look for the right person, one who loved her and who were careful...

P78: Yes, that is it...The girl has to think that it will be her first time, and she will never forget it. She will remember that for the rest of her life...

*Group 12, White women, 50 a 59 years old, less educated*

Focus groups participants also believe that marriage should take place latter in life, particularly because when it happens, the major changes are to be faced by women. Usually, after the wedding, they assert, females assume to many chores. As for men, life stills the same. They also defend that for old cohorts, marriage was almost a mandatory event and was supposed to be earlier than it is today.

P50: Before our time, marriage was supposed to be earlier in life...women were pretty young in their weddings...so, they could not go to school as long as we go and they could not go to the labor market...

P53: And to get married was a mandatory thing, and it was considered something natural in the girl's life...

*Group 9, white women 20 to 24 years old, highly educated*

Furthermore, they are also convinced that nowadays females are more independent than they were some years ago and it makes possible to them to stay single for as long as they please. They also point the differences between today and yesterday marriages.

P52:... years ago, many women didn't get divorced because they could not afford to do so...they could not go back to their parent's house and they could not support their children...so, they would stay married. Today is different. Women is in the labor market and she can support herself...if she doesn't want to be married no more...

*Group 9, white women, 20-24 years old, highly educated*

Motherhood is also expected to happen latter in life. Most participants defend that when it happens earlier, female's projects change or must be postponed. Moreover, motherhood is closely linked to financial situation. Most participants agree that being capable of supporting her child, both, emotionally and financially, is a sine qua non requirement to be a mother.

P12: ...I think girls should wait to be a mom...it is not a matter of age..... actually, it depends if she has a good economic situation...

*Group 2, negra women, 20- 24 years old, less educated*

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