

GENDER IDENTITY, RISKY SEXUAL BEHAVIOR, AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN:

EXPLORING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG INDIAN YOUTH

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BACKGROUND

Gender plays a significant role in the sexual risk behavior and vulnerability of adolescents. Sociocultural norms about masculinity, femininity, and sexuality are often embedded during the adolescent years. Thus it is critical that young people not only get accurate information and skills to protect themselves from HIV/STIs, but that interventions encourage the development of gender-equitable and respectful norms

STUDY GOALS

Formative research was conducted to inform a behavior change intervention to develop gender-equitable norms. One goal was to understand the social construction of gender identity, particularly masculinity, and its relationship with risky behavior, among young men 16 to 24 years old.

METHODS

Data were collected through key informant interviews with 45 young men living in three slums in Mumbai, India, on their attitudes and behaviors related to gender roles, HIV/STI risk, and violence. 26 of these young men also participated in in-depth interviews about their lifestyles and beliefs.

RESULTS

Construction of Gender Identity: "Real"

Gender is constructed from a variety of sources, and older peers play a particularly important role in sustaining these beliefs and behaviors.

"Real Man" or Asli Mard:

- Character traits: daring, courageous, smart, authoritative, influential, honest, responsible to family, helping.

"A Real Man is one who looks well after his family, takes care of his wife and kids, and pays proper attention to his parents."

[A Real Man] is a person who takes on any calamity, is not afraid of anybody.... The man who can face any situation with guts. And who is a darer."

- Physical attributes: good looks, muscular body, and a large penis emerged as crucial physical attributes. These attributes were seen as attracting women and enhancing male sexual prowess.

"He must have a good physique to satisfy his wife.... He should be healthy and handsome."

"He must have an eight-inch penis."

"Ideal Woman" or Asli Aurat:

- She is shy, doesn't respond to men's sexual advances, and is therefore marriageable. In contrast, according to the young men, those girls who didn't match these ideals by smiling or speaking with young men when they were approached are "chalu girls" (loose character) and deserve to be teased and sexually harassed.

"I only tease those girls who are extra smart and to such girls I tease even in front of their parents."

Risk Behaviors

Multiple partner sex: with females, males, and hijras (eunuchs)

- Sexual risk perception and use of condoms is selective: sex with sex workers was perceived as high risk and most of the respondents reported using condoms, at times double condoms.

"Of course. I always keep condom in pocket. Whenever I do it (have sex with sex workers) I put on two condoms you know. That too those dotted condoms."

However, with their girlfriends or wife or male and hijra partners, condoms were rarely used. Moreover, respondents didn't perceive engagement in non-commercial multi-partner sex as a risk to them or their partners, and thus condoms were reported to be rarely or never used.

- Drugs/alcohol: Most sex with sex workers is preceded by consumption of alcohol or drugs in order to enhance sexual pleasure. This in turn creates greater risk because under the influence of alcohol or drugs young men are less likely to use condoms.

Violence Against Women

Establishing superiority and masculinity through sex and violence:

- Teasing: activities that demonstrate sexual power usually with no intention of engaging in a love affair/relationship, including verbal comments, whistling, jostling, touching, pulling clothing.

"Some of these youths even go in the crowded area and do fingering with the girls. Touch any part of their body. The women don't object. What can they say? Can they say that this man has touched me here? If they say so, then these boys make fun of them."

- Coercion/sexual dominance/aggression:

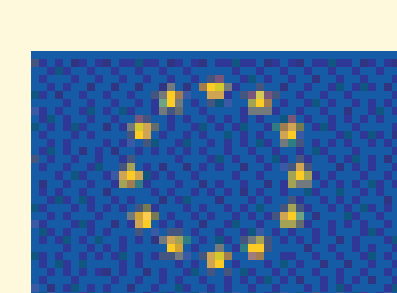
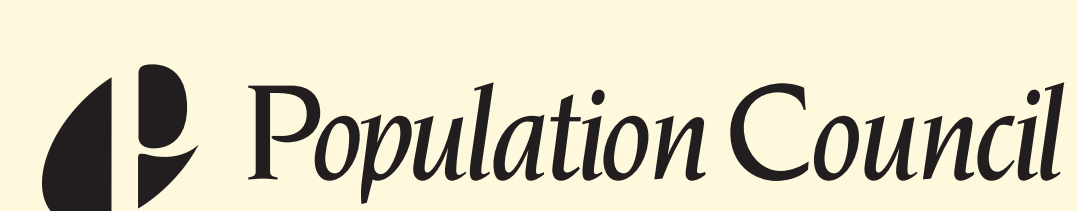
"If a boy takes a girl for f** (having sex) and other boy gets a tip; then he immediately reaches there. After that boy finishes f** (having sex), other boy threatens the girl to disclose this matter to her family and compels her to give him a chance as well."

"If I get to know any girls, I tell her straight away: I want sex. They have to agree otherwise I say this is the end of friendship...these girls first act coy but later agree."

Young men often sought justifications from their peers for their risky and violent behavior. Sexual coercion was often followed by intense discussions with their own peers and sharing of information, and peers reinforced the coercive and risky behaviors.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of this study, Committee for Resource Organization (CORO), the research partner and a community-based organization is currently piloting a series of group activities with young men that aim to bring about equitable gender attitudes and reduce HIV risk behavior through an intensive participatory process led by peer leaders.



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