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 JOURNAL OF  
 ADOLESCENT  
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Original article

## Gendered Differences in the Predictors of Sexual Initiation Among Young Adults in Cebu, Philippines

 Jessica D. Gipson, M.P.H., Ph.D.<sup>a,\*</sup>, Andrew L. Hicks, M.S.<sup>b</sup>, and Socorro A. Gultiano, Ph.D.<sup>c</sup>
<sup>a</sup> Department of Community Health Sciences, Fielding School of Public Health, University of California, Los Angeles, California<sup>b</sup> CCPR Statistics and Methods Core, California Center for Population Research, University of California, Los Angeles, California<sup>c</sup> Office of Population Studies, University of San Carlos, Cebu, Philippines

Article history: Received May 2, 2013; Accepted October 18, 2013

Keywords: Philippines; Sexual initiation; Young adults; Adolescents; Gender; Intergenerational

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 A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** Social environment and family context exert substantial influence on adolescent sexual behaviors. These influences are especially important to examine in countries undergoing rapid demographic and social change. This study employs unique, intergenerational and longitudinal data (1998–2009) to examine the effects of parental, peer, and household influences on sexual initiation among young adults in Cebu, Philippines.

**Methods:** Intergenerational and longitudinal cohort data from the 1998 Cebu Longitudinal Health and Nutrition Survey (CLHNS) are analyzed to examine the effects of household, peer, family, and young adults' sexual attitudes on age at first sex by 2009 among young men and women. Gender-stratified Cox proportional hazards models and Cox regression models are used to model time to first sex.

**Results:** Household, family, peer, and individual characteristics have disparate influences on sexual initiation among Filipino boys and girls. Boys' sexual initiation was positively associated with urbanicity, household wealth, and the presence of a family member working abroad, whereas for girls, these variables had no significant effects. Unique effects were also found for girls—mother's education was negatively associated, and girls' number of siblings was positively associated, with higher hazards of sex. Additionally, the effects of some variables on the occurrence of first sex differed across time, indicating that boys and girls may be differentially influenced by contextual characteristics across adolescence.

**Conclusions:** Amid substantial sociodemographic changes and persistence of traditional gender norms, this study highlights the importance of examining the unique influences and intersections of gender and context on sexual initiation in the Philippines.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND  
 CONTRIBUTION

Household, family, peer, and individual characteristics have disparate influences on sexual initiation among Filipino boys and girls. Among other factors, presence of household remittances and number of siblings emerged as important predictors for boys' and girls' sexual initiation, respectively, indicating the importance of contextual- and family-level influences on adolescent sexual initiation.

Social environment and family context exert important influences on adolescent sexual behaviors and subsequent adult behaviors. Examination of these contextual influences is especially important in countries undergoing rapid demographic and

social change, where young adults' social environments are much different from those of past generations.

Global trends indicate that age at puberty, and in some settings, age at first sex is decreasing while age at marriage is increasing [1]. These changes have important implications for health and demographic outcomes [2]. Young adults who have sex at an earlier age are more likely to truncate schooling due to pregnancy, not use contraception, acquire HIV or other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and have higher rates of unwanted pregnancies [3–6].

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\* Address correspondence to: Jessica D. Gipson, M.P.H., Ph.D., Department of Community Health Sciences, Fielding School of Public Health, University of California, Los Angeles, 650 Charles E. Young Drive South, CHS 46-071B, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1772.

E-mail address: [jgipson@ucla.edu](mailto:jgipson@ucla.edu) (J.D. Gipson).

Empirical evidence from global settings has indicated the strong influence of gender norms and the importance of socioeconomic inequality in determining the timing and patterns of adolescent sexual behavior, overall, and in explaining the differences between young men's and women's behavior [7,8]. Longitudinal studies in rapidly changing, developing country contexts also indicate the importance of family characteristics in influencing individual sexual and fertility behavior, including mother's and siblings' fertility behavior, family structure, and family religiosity [9–11]. Additionally, as the world becomes more interconnected, it is more likely that adolescents are exposed to alternate ideas and norms regarding sexuality and childbearing [12,13].

Similar to other global settings, the Philippines has witnessed rapid urbanization and industrialization, with concurrent changes in educational and employment opportunities. These broader contextual changes wield important influence on Filipino adolescents as they attempt to reconcile differences in norms and attitudes between older and younger generations [14]. As compared with their parents' generation, young Filipinos are more likely to delay marriage, to choose cohabitation over formal marriage, and to engage in premarital sex. The mean age at marriage has increased for men—from 24.8 in 1980 to 26.5 years in 2007—and for women—from 22.4 in 1980 to 23.8 in 2007 [15]. National survey data from 2002 indicate that 31% of men and 16% of women between the ages of 15 and 24 years reported having premarital sex, an increase from 1994 levels [16].

Studies from the Philippines indicate earlier sexual initiation among boys and disparate determinants of sexual behavior between young men and women [17–20]. A recent analysis found that 67% of men and 47% of women had sex before age 21 years, of whom 98% of men and 91% of women had sex before marriage [20]. Changes in sexual initiation signify broader social changes, as well as potentially increased risk of pregnancy and STIs. In a nationally representative survey of young adults, only 15% of women and 28% of men reported that they used contraception during their first premarital sexual encounter and nearly 40% reported using the withdrawal method, a method that is less efficacious in preventing pregnancy and STIs, as compared with other methods [16]. These gendered patterns are mirrored by persistent norms regarding “appropriate” sexual behavior for young men versus young women in the Philippines. Social norms typically allow more freedom for young men in expressing and experimenting with their sexuality, whereas for young women, these norms are more conservative and discourage young women from expressing interest in or knowledge about sex or contraception, especially before marriage [14,17,21].

This study examines the effects of multiple, contextual influences on young adults' sexual debut in the Philippines. Unique longitudinal and intergenerational data from adolescents and their mothers (1998–2009) are used to assess the independent and synergistic effects of multiple domains on adolescent lives—household characteristics, parental sociodemographic and marital characteristics, family and peer influences, and adolescents' own sexual attitudes and behaviors from 1998—to predict sexual initiation by 2009.

## Methods

### Sample and procedures

Data for this study come from the Cebu Longitudinal Health and Nutrition Survey (CLHNS), a longitudinal study of Filipino

mothers and their children born in 1983–84. The study location, Metro Cebu, is located on the island of Cebu and is the second largest metropolitan area in the Philippines. (Further details of the study are described elsewhere [22,23]).

This analysis focuses on data collected in 1998 from mothers and their children (index children = ICs), when the ICs were approximately 15 years old. ICs were followed as long as they remained in the survey and follow-up data was provided by the ICs in 2002, 2005, and 2009. The analytic sample comprises ICs who had not had sex prior to 1998 (98% of females and 81% of males) and who were living with their mothers at the time of the 1998 survey. An additional 28 females and 1 male (2% of sample) were excluded based on their reports in the 2005 survey of forced first sexual intercourse. (We did not have this measure available to us in other surveys.) The final sample includes 1,584 mother-and-child pairs, including 823 girls and 761 boys.

### Measures

*Age at first sex.* The outcome variable is age at first sex, as reported by the ICs in 2002, 2005, and 2009. Reports of first sex were abstracted for all ICs who participated in the 2009 survey; if absent or lost to follow-up by 2009, previous data points were used. Participants who had not had sex by 2009 were right censored at their age during the 2009 survey. For 5% of boys and 14% of girls, the age at first sex was reported as occurring during the same year as marriage; therefore, their responses were right censored at age of marriage.

*Household characteristics.* The first block of variables includes household characteristics of the ICs in 1998: number of persons in the household, nuclear versus extended family household, household wealth, and an urbanicity score of the household's *barangay* (village or community). The household wealth index was constructed using housing construction indicators and ownership of household assets (e.g., type of toilet, owns refrigerator, etc.) [24,25]. The urbanicity scale was constructed following a modified version by Dahly and Adair of CLHNS data [26]. Principal component analysis was performed on five categories of variables relating to urbanization: population size, population density, communication infrastructure, availability of transportation, and presence of markets. Only the first component was necessary based on results of parallel analysis [27].

*Mother's sociodemographic and marital characteristics.* Mother's age, education, religiosity, number of living children, and presence of the IC's father in the household were included. Religiosity was determined by church attendance, with mothers attending church at least once a week considered to be “religious.” In addition, two measures of women's status found to be predictive of sexual debut among CLHNS adolescents in an earlier study [20] were included: whether the husband turned over all income to the mother and an interviewer-determined measure of whether the woman, her household, and her children were “well-kept,” a locally developed measure of women's status (see [20] for further description).

*Mother-child relationship.* This set of variables included the mother's educational aspirations for the IC and the reported communication and closeness between the mother and IC. Mothers were coded as having high educational aspirations if they wished the IC to graduate from college. High mother-child communication was determined if both mother and child separately reported they

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