

## India Factsheet: A Health Profile of Adolescents and Young Adults

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### Overview of Morbidity and Mortality

With a population of 1.14 billion people, the more than 200 million youth aged 15-24 years represent 21% of India's total population (1). Adolescence typically marks a healthy stage in a person's life, as evidenced by mortality rates. In India, adolescent mortality rates remain low: for those aged 15-19 years old, the mortality rate is 2.1 and 1.7 among females and males, respectively; and among 20-24 year olds, the mortality rate is 2.8 and 2.3 among females and males, respectively. However, despite females being biologically healthier at birth, males demonstrate lower mortality rates compared to females (2). An issue that is of particular concern when examining gender disparities in mortality rates is the high maternal mortality among young women. Research suggests that high maternal mortality among 15-24 years old are primarily due to unplanned pregnancies and clandestine abortions (2). Moreover, one out of five maternal deaths occur because of anemia during pregnancy due to poor maternal nutrition (2).

While mortality among adolescents and young adults remains relatively low in India, there is a wide range of health issues specific to this age group that requires targeted prevention efforts. Sexual health, knowledge, and behaviors, sexually transmitted infections and HIV, substance use, psychosocial factors, physical violence and sexual violence, and the consequences of early marriage and pregnancies are issues that warrant further examination and are highlighted in the following brief.

### Data Sources

In recent years, international organizations and government agencies have given more attention and focus to youth in India. The following brief uses data from a wide range of sources including data from the World Health Organization, peer-reviewed journal articles, and the Population Council and International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS). In particular, between 2006 and 2008, the Population Council and IIPS conducted the "Youth in India: Situation and Needs" study, one of the most comprehensive studies of young people in India to date. The study captures 50,848 rural and urban youth in a sub-nationally representative sample conducted in six states. The study included 50,848 unmarried women and men aged 15-24 years, as well as married women aged 15-24 years and married men aged 15-29 years (3).

### Education: Drop-out Rates among Youth Remain High

Between 1991-2001, literacy rates increased in India, from 52.20 to 65.38 (4). However, gender and geographic disparities remain. One in ten young men and one

in four young women aged 15-24 years old reported that they never attended school (3). In particular, young women in rural areas and unmarried women were particularly disadvantaged as 33% of rural young women and 40% of married young women never attended school. Moreover, southern states were more likely to attend school compared to northern states: 10-16% of young men and 38-51% young women of those in northern states never went to school compared to 2-8% and 5-21% of young women (3).

The primary reason for not attending school included economic reasons such as requirements of working for the family, needing to earn a wage, and family could not afford to send their children to school. Women, in particular, indicated not attending school in order to perform household duties such as having to take care of a younger sibling. Young people also cited long distances to attend school as a barrier in educational attainment, as well as poor school quality (3).

### **Mental Health Concerns**

Mental health problems were also an issue among youth in India. One out of seven youth indicated they had mental health issues, with considerable differences between states. For example, men in Bihar and Jharkhand were more likely to report mental health problems compared to other states (16-28% compared to 11-13%); moreover, women in Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Maharashtra more likely to report than other states (17%-21% compared to 9-10%)(3).

### **Early Marriage is Common**

Early marriage is a universal experience for almost anyone over the age of 25 years in India. As reported in 2005 and 2006 by 25-29 year olds, only 6% of people in India had not entered in to marriage by the age of 25 years old. Early marriages have consequences, particularly for young women, in educational attainment and limited spousal communication both before and during the marriage. Most marriages are arranged by parents, with little input from young people. 84% of young men and 70% of young women reported that parents had arranged their marriage, and also asked their opinion on the final decision. However, young women were more than twice as likely as men to say that parents had arranged their marriage without asking their permission (11% of young men and 25% of young women) (3). In addition to gender differences, there were also state-wide differences as northern states were more likely to report arranged marriages without their approval (3).

### **Partner Violence: Physical and Sexual Violence Common among Partners**

Youth commonly reported physical and sexual violence, particularly by their partners. Among married youth, 1 in 4 young women report ever experiencing physical violence perpetrated by their husband. Similarly, 24% of young men ever report perpetration on their partner. 18% of young men and 21% reported recent physical violence with their partners.

Sexual violence is also of concern in India among youth. 1 in 4 women report that their first sexual experience within marriage was forced, and 1 in 3 young women report ever being forced to engage in sex by their husbands. Among males, 1 in 6 report forcing their wives to engage in sex. 16% of young women and 6% of young men report recent sex violence (3).

## **Sexual Health: Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors**

### *Sexual Knowledge*

Less than 10% of young men or young women had learned about sex from adults including teachers, health care professionals, or family members. The most common sources of information for sexual health included peers and the media. While the majority of youth wanted family life or sex education (83% of young men and 78% of young women), only 15% report actually receiving any family life or sex education. Moreover, those who had ever had family life or sex education also had greater knowledge about sexual health issues.

Youth in India lack basic sexual and reproductive health knowledge. Only 37% of young men and 45% of young women believed that one could become pregnant the first time one had sex. While some have heard of contraception, people had limited comprehensive sex knowledge. For example, while 95% have heard of at least one modern method of contraception, few were aware of non-terminal methods such as condom, IUD, oral contraceptives, emergency contraception (3).

### *Sexual Behaviors*

15% and 4% of young men and women, respectively, reported pre-marital sex. Rural populations were more likely to report earlier age of sex compared to their urban counterparts. Men were also more likely to report an earlier age of sex compared to females. While regional differences were not apparent, the proportion of those who reported premarital sex varied from state to state. Young women from Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh were more likely to report premarital sex compared to other states (6-7% compared to 2-3%), even after controlling for marital status and rural-urban residence (3).

More importantly, sexual experiences often occurred in risky contexts. For example, 25% of young men who reported having premarital sex also reported having multiple sex partners, and 21% of women reporting premarital sex also reported having multiple sex partners. Inconsistent condom use was also quite prevalent as only 13% of young men and 3% of young women reported condom use for all premarital sexual encounters. In the context of marriage, communication was low concerning contraceptive use, as 34% for young men and 55% of young women report discussing contraception with their spouse (3).

Non-consensual sex was also prevalent, particularly among young girls. 3% of young men and 18% of young women reported they were forced to have sex in their first

sexual encounter. Disparities between men and women highlight women's disadvantaged status in regards to their sexual behaviors.

#### *Sexually Transmitted Infections and HIV*

Those aged 15-24 years old represent 35% of all newly infected HIV persons in India (2). Youth had many misconceptions regarding sexually transmitted infections, and HIV. Other than HIV, only 19% and 15% of young men and women, respectively, had heard of other STIs (3). Young men were more likely to have heard of HIV (91%) compared to young women (73%) (3), although only 45% of young men and 28% of young women had comprehensive knowledge of HIV (3).

#### *Pregnancy*

First pregnancies in India typically occur in adolescence or young adulthood. The age-specific fertility rate (ASFR) is 52.1 among those aged 15-19 years in 1999 and 213.1 among those aged 20-24 years in 1999 (2). 1/6 19 year olds had birth or become pregnant, and half of India's total fertility rate was among those aged 15-24 year olds (5).

Among married individuals, 2 out of 3 women reported that they had their first pregnancy within the first year of marriage (3). Almost half of young married women aged 18 years and older reported their first pregnancy before age of 18 years. Among men with wives 18 years and older, 35% of men reported their first pregnancy before age 18. In addition, delivery care differed by regions. For example, 72-78% of urban youth reported institutional delivery compared to 40-47% of rural youth (3).

#### *Abortion*

The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971 made abortion in India legal for women under specified conditions. While unmarried women may obtain legal abortion, those younger than 18 years need parental consent (6). The official abortion rate in India is estimated at 0.08, translating to 566,500 abortions between 1995-1996 (7). However, these data reported primarily by physicians performing abortions, are believed to be incomplete, with actual estimations believed to be at least twice the numbers reported (7). Abortions are especially underreported by non-physicians performing abortions. Approximately half of those who sought abortion services were younger than 20 years old, and were also more likely to live in urban area (78% vs. 22%). Young, unmarried girls may be particularly vulnerable, as they are more likely to seek abortion services at later stages of pregnancies, usually in the second trimester of pregnancy (7).

#### **Substance Use**

Tobacco use and alcohol consumption is relatively common among young men in India. There are significant gender disparities in substance use, with men much more likely to report smoking and drinking compared to young women. For example, one out of three young men reported cigarette smoke, and one out of six reported alcohol consumption. The majority of these young people also smoked and

drank within the past month. Few young women had smoked cigarettes or consumed any alcohol. There were also significant statewide differences. For example, young men in Bihar, Jharkhand and Maharashtra were more likely than other states to consume tobacco, and those in southern states were more likely to consume alcohol in the previous month compared to northern states (22% vs. 6-16%). In regards to illicit drug use, few young men or young women reported the behavior(3).

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