

INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN DIFFERENT SOCIAL GROUPS IN NORTHERN THAILAND

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Abstract. With the influence of modernization, there is evidence of increasing Thai adolescent sexual activity. The purpose of this study was to describe and compare the intimate relationships of adolescents in different social groups in northern Thailand, and to note the health implications of their behavior. Quantitative and qualitative data from more than 1,750 unmarried young people aged 17-20 years revealed that adolescents from different social and educational backgrounds had significantly different types of intimate relationships. In the Thai context, social class differences are mostly based on young people's educational backgrounds and their families' financial power. Perceptions of love and relationships were interpreted according to social strata and sex. Notably, less well-off young people were likely to engage in much riskier sexual relationships. The present study provides detailed and constructive information to help plan and improve sexual and reproductive health counselling, programs and services for young people in northern Thailand.

Key words: intimate relationships, dating, adolescents, socio-economic status, Thailand

INTRODUCTION

Sexual norms among young Thai people are shifting rapidly (Jenkins and Kim 2004; Liu *et al*, 2006). Young Thais now enjoy frequent social interaction between the sexes (Soonthorndhada, 2002;

Vuttanont *et al*, 2006) and many young men and a growing percentage of young women report premarital sexual experience (Podhisita and Pattaravanich, 1995; Baker, 2000; van Griensven *et al*, 2001; Srisuriyawet, 2006). Some urban Thai men no longer discriminate against women who have had premarital sexual relations with other men, although others still prefer to marry a virgin (Gray, 1999; Knodel *et al*, 1999).

Modernization in Thailand is occurring within the bounds of a longstanding traditional system. This makes it difficult

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for young people to embrace these changes while older generations have attitudes rooted in the past. Consequently, young people face new and unfamiliar risks related to sexual and reproductive health. Many are ill-equipped to make sexual and reproductive choices (Allen *et al*, 2003; Tangmunkongvorakul *et al*, 2005).

As most acts of premarital sexual intercourse in Thailand are unprotected (Jenkins *et al*, 2002; Srisuriyawet, 2006), sexually active adolescents are increasingly at risk of contracting STIs, including HIV/AIDS. Young women are particularly vulnerable to coerced sexual intercourse as a result of gender-based power imbalances and the sharp move away from commercial sex workers as debut and subsequent sexual partners for adolescent Thai males as a result of the AIDS epidemic (Manopaiboon *et al*, 2003; Im-em *et al*, 2005; Rasamimari *et al*, 2008). Sexually experienced female adolescents are relatively powerless to avoid the potential consequences of unprotected sexual intercourse, and are poorly informed about their sexuality and means of protecting themselves, often leading to unwanted pregnancies and abortions (Allen *et al*, 2003). However, the actual vulnerabilities stemming from adolescent lifestyles and relationships remain poorly understood; it is only over the last decade that policymakers have begun to shed their traditional reticence to discuss these issues and have started searching for information to develop appropriate services.

Over the last 15 years, well-founded fears about the risk of contracting HIV infection from commercial sex workers have influenced young men in Thailand to find other ways of satisfying their sexual needs. Increasingly, they are having sex with girlfriends in committed romantic relationships (Kilmarx *et al*, 2000; Taywaditep

et al, 2004).

Little research in Thailand has explored the sexuality of adolescents in different social groups. Studies of this nature in this heavily socially stratified population are needed, especially in northern Thailand, a region deeply affected by epidemic AIDS and linguistically distinct from the rest of the country. To enhance understanding of intimate relationships among young northern Thais we conducted a multi-method study of sexual behavior, relationships and lifestyles among adolescents in Chiang Mai City, the cultural, economic, communication and tourism center of northern Thailand. This city has become a major destination for migration of rural residents, to which young people from country areas and surrounding provinces move for education and work (Vaddhanaphuti, 1999; Vuttanont *et al*, 2006). Our results yield important information that can inform the planning and implementation of health policy, and help improve sexual and reproductive health counselling, programs and services for young people in northern Thailand.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study population

We studied young people aged 17-20 years. The subjects were literate males and females who were not yet married, who were either in or out of school or university, and if out of school, were either employed or unemployed, reflecting the full range of adolescent social groupings within the population.

The sampling frame incorporated accessible sites in urban Chiang Mai where 17-20 year-old youths congregate. Three educationally defined samples were selected: 1) an out-of-school urban adolescent sample, 2) a vocational school student

sample, and 3) a general school and university student sample. For each educational group subsamples of males and females were obtained as follows.

The out-of-school sample was recruited from two broad sources – the six largest of 22 non-formal education centers and four youth-focused NGOs in Chiang Mai City. Non-formal education centers provide tutorial classes for young people outside the formal education system, which they generally attend for three hours on weekends. Selected centers were approached on teaching days and all age-eligible youth invited to participate. The NGOs through which the respondents were recruited were the Harm Reduction Youth Program, the Street Youth Outreach Team, the Adolescent Sex Education Outreach Team, and the MSM (men who have sex with men) Sexual Health Outreach Team. Field staff worked with these NGOs at various times of the day and night, recruiting as many age-eligible respondents as possible from an array of public gathering places, including playing fields, shopping malls and public gardens.

The vocational school sample was drawn from the two public and 10 private vocational schools in Chiang Mai City. One public technical, one private technical and one private commercial school were chosen at random. At each of these schools age-eligible students from three departments were invited to participate until the target sample size (about 70 per school - see below) was exceeded. Selected departments were electronics, mechanics and computer technologies at the two technical schools, and marketing, hotel management and finance, at the commercial school.

The general school/university sample was drawn from the nine public and 11

private high-schools and the two public and two private universities in Chiang Mai City. One public and one private high-school were chosen, along with Chiang Mai University, representing all components of this educational group. At the general schools samples of respondents were drawn from the pure and applied science and language study groups. At the university the sample was drawn from the health sciences, science and technology, and humanities and social sciences groups. All respondents volunteered after being issued an invitation.

The sample size estimate was calculated with an error of $\pm 7\%$ at the $p < 0.05$ significance level when measuring key indicators (eg, percent with experience of sexual intercourse). These were applied separately in males and females in each educational group (ie, six samples). If the expected prevalence was 50% (the proportion requiring the largest sample for estimation with a given level of precision), the required sample size was 192, and the total sample size was 1,152 (ie, 6×192). We therefore aimed to sample about 200 young people in each sex/education group, for a total of around 1,200. In five groups this sample size was exceeded; for out-of-school females the sample reached only 169 because relatively few females were encountered at the facilities and locations visited. Overall, the final total sample was 1,749: 909 males and 840 females, comprised of 262 male and 459 female general school and university students, 409 and 212 vocational school students, and 238 and 169 out-of-school adolescents, respectively.

Data sources and collection methods

The field research team was comprised of the first author and five research assistants (two males and three females),

aged 20-23 years, trained in quantitative and qualitative research methods. A questionnaire was administered as a computer-assisted self-interview (CASI) via the internet, or as a self-administered questionnaire (SAQ) with paper and pen. The CASI approach was used where computers and the internet were readily accessible (*ie*, at large schools and Chiang Mai University). Elsewhere (smaller schools and in open or public places) the SAQ method was used. The questionnaire covered socio-economic background, recreational activities, alcohol, tobacco and drug use, relationships, sexual identity and experience, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, abortion and birth control, mental health, and need for sexual health services. Most questions were close-ended and the questionnaire was pre-tested in both SAQ and CASI formats. To test whether the two formats produced similar results, ten selected items from 218 heterosexual male vocational school students who used CASI and 140 students who used the SAQ were compared. On only one item ("Ever smoked cigarettes during the past year") was a statistically significant difference in affirmative response obtained (39.4% with CASI; 53.1% with SAQ). On the key attribute of whether they ever had sexual intercourse, the difference was minimal (68.8% compared to 69.2%). Differences were also small on such other items as whether they ever had oral sex with a date (40.5% and 43.6%), vaginal sex with a date (79.2% and 74.4%), casual sex (39.0% and 39.6%) and drunk alcohol during the past year (87.6% and 87.2%). It was concluded the method of interview was not a major influence on results obtained.

In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used to encourage study informants to explain and elaborate upon their questionnaire answers. Interviews

lasted for 60-90 minutes. Interviewees were recruited from survey participants once enough rapport had been established to be able to discuss their sexual activities. Along with ensuring that they were drawn from the three educational groups they were purposively selected to represent the range of gender diversity. Sixteen males and 14 females were interviewed, of whom 21 (11 males and 10 females) were students who ranged from grade 12 at general or vocational schools to second year university, and nine (five males and four females) were employed, waiting for jobs or unemployed.

The focus groups were comprised of 8 male and 8 female groups, each of which had 4 to 8 participants. Four groups were recruited from the out-of school sample, six from the vocational school sample, and six from the general school/university sample. Group discussions lasted 60-90 minutes. The groups were purposively sampled to represent the diverse gender identity of participants who were invited to join after they had completed the survey by the research team. Some survey respondents also brought their friends to the group but more than three-quarters of the people who participated in the focus group discussions were questionnaire survey respondents. Both the individual and group interviews were used to probe the normative aspects of young people's daily lives and intimate relationships.

This research received ethical approval from Chiang Mai University and the Australian National University. Efforts were made to protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality. Survey data collection and interview recordings did not begin until after the participants had read information sheets and had been fully informed about the procedures of data collection/interviews. Participants' identi-

ties were protected by having them provide the research team only verbal informed consent. To facilitate their comfort and security, participants chose the place and time for interviews and group discussions. After interviews they were provided with information, advice and brochures regarding the matters under discussion and available services.

Data analysis

Data were collected during 2006 and analyzed during 2007-2008. Those from SAQs were double-entered using Microsoft Access 2003. CASI data were digitized as they were collected and merged with the SAQ data before analysis.

Information from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions was collected on digital recorders and in field notes. Digital recordings were fully transcribed in Thai into Microsoft Word documents. Thai texts were analysed thematically using the qualitative software package "Atlas Ti" (version 5.2). This process involves looking for repeated themes and directed statements about the significance of a value, belief or action. Passages relevant to the study were then translated into English.

RESULTS

Socio-demographic characteristics

For all socio-demographic attributes measured and for both males and females, when the three educational groups were compared, at least one group was significantly different from the others (Table 1). Most young people were Buddhist, although a sizeable minority of females in the out-of-school group were Christian and lived with a Christian support group. Males in the out-of-school group tended

to have spent their early lives in Chiang Mai City, and more often had been brought up by relatives. Together with their female counterparts they tended to work for income, usually in full-time jobs. The vocational school male and female respondents had the highest mean ages, few were aged 17, in the case of males more were aged 20. They came overwhelmingly from northern Thai families and had most commonly grown up away from the city in Chiang Mai Province. General school/university students usually had been cared for by their parents when they were young and more often than the other two groups were from Chinese or mixed race family backgrounds.

Socio-economic status of family

For all socio-economic status indicators and for both males and females, when the three groups were compared at least one group was significantly different from the others (Table 2). Out-of-school adolescents came from the lowest socio-economic family backgrounds; more of their fathers never went to school, but had unskilled occupations, the parents earned relatively low incomes. Out-of-school males were more likely to come from homes broken by separation/divorce or death, and their female counterparts were also less likely than those engaged in formal education to have parents with intact marriages. Vocational school students came from slightly higher socio-economic status families than the out-of-school group, in that more of their fathers had primary education and semi-skilled occupations, but their parents still earned relatively low incomes and indebtedness was widespread. The general school and university students came from the highest socio-economic status families. High proportions of their fathers had been educated

Table 1
Socio-demographic status of respondents by sex and educational background.

Sample size (n)	All			Males			Females			
	Group O ^a	Group V	Group G	Group O	Group V	Group G	Group O	Group V	Group G	
	238 %	409 %	262 %	169 %	212 %	459 %	169 %	212 %	459 %	
	1,749 %			909 %			840 %			Total (standardized) ^b %
Age last birthday										
17	12.6	1.0	24.8	9.4	2.4	25.5	8.3	2.4	16.2	10.6
18	34.6	25.4	35.9	33.1	50.9	26.4	44.4	50.9	36.2	42.1
19	38.2	43.8	33.6	40.4	35.8	36.4	34.3	35.8	35.8	35.6
20	14.6	29.8	5.7	17.2	10.8	11.8	13.0	10.8	11.8	11.7
Religion										
Buddhism	91.3	93.9	94.3	92.5	95.3	93.2	74.0	95.3	89.9	89.1
Christianity	7.3	5.1	5.7	5.8	2.8	6.1	23.7	2.8	8.8	9.2
Islam	1.0	0.5	0	1.3	0.9	0.4	1.2	0.9	0.7	0.8
No religion	0.4	0.5	0	0.3	0.6	0.2	0.6	0.9	0.5	0.6
Other	0.1	0	0	0	0	0	0.6	0	0.1	0.2
Living place when young										
Chiang Mai City	37.8	25.8	44.7	40.5	25.9	34.6	46.7	25.9	34.9	33.9
Out of city, Chiang Mai Province	34.3	54.3	26.0	36.9	45.3	29.0	20.7	45.3	31.4	34.2
City of other province	12.7	7.6	13.0	9.2	9.4	20.5	14.8	9.4	16.5	14.0
Out of city in other province	15.2	12.3	16.4	13.5	19.3	15.9	17.8	19.3	17.1	17.9
Main carers when young										
Parents	88.6	91.0	93.5	89.9	89.2	90.4	76.3	89.2	87.3	86.2
Relatives	9.7	7.1	5.7	8.4	10.4	8.3	20.1	10.4	11.2	12.3
Other family, not relatives	1.7	2.0	0.8	1.8	0.5	1.3	3.6	0.5	1.5	1.5
Race/ethnicity of family										
Chinese	11.9	4.4	23.7	11.1	3.8	18.3	8.9	3.8	12.7	9.3
Northern Thai	59.3	75.2	46.6	62.8	83.0	50.3	35.5	83.0	55.6	61.1
Hill tribes	5.4	3.4	1.1	4.0	0	2.8	26.6	0	6.9	7.8
Thai, another region	12.2	9.1	17.2	12.9	7.5	13.3	11.8	7.5	11.5	10.3
Other race	2.6	1.5	0.4	1.8	2.4	2.2	8.9	2.4	3.6	4.0
Mixed race	8.5	6.4	11.1	7.5	3.3	13.1	8.3	3.3	9.6	7.4

Now live in Chiang Mai City	76.8	89.1	68.4	79.8	77.1	95.3	67.5	73.6	76.5	76.5
Current living situation										
With parent(s)	47.8	52.9	45.8	53.8	50.0	27.4	45.0	52.3	45.5	42.5
With relative(s)	11.8	16.4	13.2	5.0	11.7	13.7	17.1	8.9	11.9	13.8
With another family	4.0	4.2	2	1.1	2.3	21.4	3.8	0.9	5.7	7.6
Share rented room/house	27.1	19.7	25.7	31.7	25.9	23.8	21.3	33.6	28.5	25.5
Alone in rented room/house	9.3	6.7	13.2	8.4	10.1	13.7	12.8	4.4	8.4	10.6
Regular allowance from parents/ guardian	86.6	60.5	97.3	98.5	88.0	39.6	95.3	97.2	85.1	81.3
Work for income	26.8	58.4	21.7	11.5	28.4	74.0	16.4	11.1	25.1	30.0
If yes, have full-time work	54.3	82.7	23.0	13.3	54.3	83.2	14.7	9.8	54.3	31.2

^a Group O, Out-of-school; Group V, Vocational school; Group G, General school/university

^b The final column for females is standardized to the distribution by educational group for males. Percentages shown represent proportions that would have been observed had females had the same distribution by educational group as males.

Note: for all variables when comparisons are made among educational groups (O, V and G) for males and females separately, $p < 0.05$.

to college or university level and had skilled occupations, and their parents earned relatively high incomes.

Intimate relationships

Opinions about love and intimate relationships. Fifteen statements concerning love and intimate relationships were put to respondents, who were asked if they agreed or disagreed with each (Table 3). Males from the out-of-school and vocational school groups had similar opinions. They tended to believe that it was all right for boys and girls to have affectionate contact (hugging and kissing), sexual contact, and even sexual intercourse before marriage. Higher percentages of these two groups of males and vocational school females also believed that sometimes a boy wants a girl to have sex if he loves her; nowadays grown-ups/adults accept sexual relationships among adolescents; their parents would not blame them if they had sex; most of their friends had already had sexual intercourse; and one-night stands were okay.

Males and females from the general school and university group often (but not always) shared similar, more conservative, attitudes. This group, particularly among males, was more likely than the other two groups to agree that boys and girls should remain virgins until they marry and that most girls who have sex before marriage regret it afterwards, but were less likely to agree that a boy and a girl should have sex before becoming engaged. Both males and females were much less likely than the other 2 groups to consider it the responsibility of the woman to ensure that contraception was used regularly.

Views of boys and girls. As in other cultures, young northern Thai people glorify romance between men and women. Themes of quests for love and the conse-

Table 2
Socio-economic status of family by sex and educational background.

	All respondents		Males				Females				Total (standardized) ^b %	
			Group O ^a %	Group V %	Group G %	Total %	Group O %	Group V %	Group G %	Total %		
	1,749 %	238 %	409 %	262 %	909 %	169 %	212 %	459 %	840 %			
Father's occupation												
Skilled	15.6	5.7	8.7	26.1	13.1	1.3	5.4	29.7	18.4			11.3
Semi-skilled	59.9	45.6	68.5	67.3	62.1	60.5	54.3	57.8	57.5			56.9
Unskilled	24.5	48.7	22.8	6.6	24.8	38.2	40.2	12.6	24.1			31.7
Parents' income/month												
< 10,000 Baht	39.5	51.0	51.9	24.9	43.4	52.8	56.4	22.4	35.3			45.7
10,000-24,999 Baht	30.1	31.8	30.8	28.6	30.4	31.1	25.0	31.3	29.7			28.4
25,000-49,999 Baht	17.7	9.9	13.7	24.9	16.2	9.4	9.9	25.6	19.3			14.3
50,000 Baht or more	12.7	7.3	3.7	21.6	10.1	6.6	8.7	20.7	15.6			11.6
Family financial status												
Sufficient/savings	46.0	45.7	37.3	54.2	44.4	39.0	36.4	55.7	47.7			42.6
Sufficient/no savings	33.4	35.7	35.2	27.7	33.1	37.7	38.4	30.1	33.6			35.8
Insufficient/no debt	6.8	9.0	9.9	6.0	8.6	10.3	5.1	3.2	5.0			5.9
Insufficient/debt	13.8	9.5	17.5	12.0	13.9	13.0	20.2	11.1	13.7			15.7
Father's education												
Never went to school	6.9	12.7	4.8	1.6	5.9	32.3	2.9	1.8	8.0			10.3
Primary school	40.8	48.0	53.9	25.3	44.0	39.2	64.2	24.4	37.3			46.2
Lower secondary	12.8	14.9	15.8	11.3	14.2	8.9	11.8	11.9	11.2			11.1
Upper secondary	13.0	11.8	12.5	14.0	12.7	12.7	8.8	15.4	13.2			11.7
College graduate	8.3	5.4	5.6	9.3	6.7	1.3	4.9	15.4	10.0			7.0
University graduate	18.3	7.2	7.4	38.5	16.5	5.7	7.4	31.1	20.1			13.8
Parents' marital status												
Married	72.6	51.7	74.6	80.2	70.2	64.5	73.6	79.7	75.1			73.0
Divorced/separated	14.2	24.4	14.2	11.5	16.1	16.6	12.7	10.2	12.1			13.0
Father died	9.0	16.4	7.8	7.3	9.9	10.1	9.0	6.8	8.0			8.7
Mother died	2.5	5.0	2.7	1.1	2.9	2.4	3.3	1.3	2.0			2.5
Both died	1.8	2.5	0.7	0	1.0	6.5	1.4	2.0	2.7			2.9

Quality of parents' relationship when respondents young	7.9	12.9	7.4	4.7	7.9	18.4	7.1	4.8	7.8	9.4
Quarrelled often	7.9	12.9	7.4	4.7	7.9	18.4	7.1	4.8	7.8	9.4
Quarrelled sometime	67.5	63.8	68.9	67.5	67.2	61.0	70.6	68.9	67.9	67.6
Never quarrelled	24.6	23.3	23.7	27.8	24.9	20.6	22.3	26.3	24.3	23.0

^a Group O, Out-of-school; Group V, Vocational school; Group G, General school/university

^b The final column for females is standardized to the distribution by educational group for males. Percentages shown represent proportions that would have been observed had females had the same distribution by educational group as males.

Note: for all variables when comparisons are made among educational groups (O, V and G) for males and females separately, the *p*-value is less than 0.05.

quences of passion, pursuing aspirations and heartbreak were evident throughout the interviews and focus group discussions. Gendered perceptions of love and intimate relationships might, however, reflect preferred types of relationships, since male and female adolescents had been socialized differently by their families, schools and communities.

Qualitative information supported the survey findings and provided more depth. General school and university students tended to regard sexual activity among young people as inappropriate and sexual relationships between men and women as things that should take place after marriage, because that was what traditional rules and practice in Thai society dictated. They had been taught by family and school that premarital sex was not acceptable, and the distinction between love and lust had been impressed upon them to discourage them from engaging in premarital sex within romantic relationships. In such teachings, love was usually idealized as pure and dignified, and exemplified by responsibility, maturity and persistence, whereas lust reflected qualities opposite to those virtues.

Love among students in school can happen, but it is unusual for a boyfriend and girlfriend to get involved in sexual relations (female, 17-18 years, general school).

Boys here in school might talk about sex for fun, but very few tell friends they have sex with their girlfriend (male, 17-18 years, general school).

However, even when sexual activity was unlikely, many informants were still very reluctant to reveal to their parents or other adults that they had a boyfriend or girlfriend, for fear of disapproval. Among those with conservative middle-class

I believe that girls should remain virgins until they marry.	81.6	74.1	76.0	83.2	77.6	77.8	84.8	89.5	86.1	84.3
My parents will not blame me if I have sex.	29.3	57.2	50.5	29.0	46.1	16.2	14.3	8.0	11.3	13.0
Most of my friends have had sexual intercourse.	68.5	86.5	91.4	61.4	81.5	60.5	87.7	36.9	54.4	65.9
Nowadays grown-ups/adults accept sexual relationships among adolescents.	43.5	65.6	61.7	33.3	54.6	37.7	46.5	22.5	31.6	37.3

^a Group O, Out-of-school; Group V, Vocational school; Group G, General school/university

^b The final column for females is standardized to the distribution by educational group for males. Percentages shown represent proportions that would have been observed had females had the same distribution by educational group as males.

Note: for all variables when comparisons are made among educational groups (O, V and G) for males and females separately, the *p*-value is less than 0.05.

moral values, romantic interest was inappropriate for young people because they could not support themselves (Taywaditep *et al*, 2004). Males and females in the general school and university group generally thought that although they could express opinions about love and sex, they were expected to avoid sexual activity until they could take full responsibility for their lives by finishing university, obtaining a secure job and income, and getting married. A sexual partnership was thus not a recreational option for well-brought up and respectful unmarried young people.

If a person truly loves someone, he or she will have the courage to wait until the timing is right, and concentrate on first getting themselves financially established and getting married (female, 17-18 years, general school).

These days whether you are a virgin or not may not be a very important issue, but normally those who are well-trained know that sex before marriage creates many problems in life (male, 18-20 years, university).

Many vocational school and out-of-school informants had more liberal views regarding love and relationships. Focus group participants thought that intimate relationships among young people were for making mutual commitments based on love. Sexual relationships could prolong their love lives, and some also believed that they allowed couples to learn about each other. They emphasized that the more intimacy they shared, the more they could learn about each other. Sex did not need to be delayed until marriage, and intimacy came from mutual desire.

For young people, when they are in love and go out together, sex can happen. But surely young people will talk about this only with those who they

Table 4
Dating patterns by sex and educational background.

	Both sexes		Males				Females			
	Total	Group O ^a	Group V	Group G	Total	Group O	Group V	Group G	Total	
	(n=1,749) %	(n=238) %	(n=409) %	(n=262) %	(n=909) %	(n=169) %	(n=212) %	(n=459) %	(n=840) %	
(All respondents)										
Ever dated someone	67.9	82.4	77.9	55.3	72.5	60.4	83.3	54.2	62.8	68.9
(Respondents dating)	(n=1,188)	(n=196)	(n=319)	(n=145)	(n=660)	(n=102)	(n=177)	(n=249)	(n=528)	
Ever done following things while on a date:										
Gone to a restaurant	90.6	84.2	89.6	93.8	88.9	91.2	90.9	94.8	92.8	92.1
Cinema/shopping center	91.0	92.9	88.4	97.2	91.7	87.3	86.4	94.0	90.1	88.8
Gone to public gardens	70.7	78.6	71.6	68.3	72.9	79.4	71.0	61.0	67.9	70.3
Gone to a pub or discotheque	50.3	72.4	57.2	34.5	56.8	61.8	57.4	23.3	42.1	48.7
Gone to your place	64.2	81.6	82.1	54.5	75.9	53.9	64.2	37.3	49.5	53.7
Gone to your partner's place	60.9	59.2	73.9	54.5	65.3	58.8	68.2	45.0	55.4	59.1
Gone to friends' place	54.9	68.9	62.1	47.6	60.9	57.8	57.4	36.1	47.4	51.4
Gone to a motel	12.5	17.3	11.5	17.2	14.5	18.6	9.1	7.2	10.1	11.0
Held hands	94.0	99.5	97.8	89.0	96.4	93.1	97.2	85.9	91.1	92.9
Hugged	81.9	93.4	93.1	72.4	88.6	81.4	88.1	59.8	73.4	78.2
Kissed on the cheek	79.6	91.8	90.9	67.6	86.0	79.4	85.2	58.6	71.5	76.0
Fondled breasts/genitalia through clothes	59.1	72.4	77.3	55.9	71.1	45.1	61.9	30.9	44.0	48.6
Fondled/oral stimulation of breasts inside clothes	58.6	76.5	77.9	54.5	72.3	46.1	58.5	27.3	41.4	46.3
Fondled/manual stimulation of genitalia inside clothes	52.5	66.3	74.8	49.0	66.6	42.2	48.6	22.5	35.0	39.4
Had oral sex while dating	35.4	36.7	44.8	37.9	40.9	35.3	40.9	16.9	28.5	32.5
Had vaginal sex while dating	52.7	77.0	72.6	37.9	66.3	51.0	48.9	20.5	35.9	41.3
Had anal sex while dating	8.9	10.7	9.5	18.6	11.9	4.9	6.3	4.4	5.1	5.4

^a Group O, Out-of-school; Group V, Vocational school; Group G, General school/university

^b The final column for females is standardized to the distribution by educational group for males. Percentages shown represent proportions that would have been observed had females had the same distribution by educational group as males.

Table 5
Experience of having current boyfriend/girlfriend by sex and educational background.

	Both sexes		Males				Females			
	Total	Group O ^a	Group V	Group G	Total	Group O	Group V	Group G	Total	
	(n=1,749) %	(n=238) %	(n=409) %	(n=262) %	(n=909) %	(n=212) %	(n=169) %	(n=459) %	(n=840) %	
(All respondents)	57.8	67.6	65.9	41.2	59.2	59.2	84.7	42.3	56.3	65.8
Currently have a boyfriend/girlfriend	(n=1,011)	(n=161)	(n=269)	(n=108)	(n=538)	(n=100)	(n=180)	(n=193)	(n=473)	
Sex of friend										
Male	45.8	3.7	6.0	21.1	8.4	91.0	85.3	90.2	88.5	88.2
Female	54.2	96.3	94.0	78.9	91.6	9.0	14.7	9.8	11.5	11.8
Living with current boyfriend/girlfriend	24.9	34.2	18.7	13.8	22.3	57.0	31.5	9.3	27.8	31.8
Introduced a boyfriend/girlfriend to your parents	68.6	66.5	71.7	60.6	67.9	67.0	75.8	64.9	69.5	70.4
Plan permanent/marry him/her?										
Yes	30.7	24.2	33.8	35.8	31.4	37.0	25.4	30.4	29.9	29.9
No	16.5	16.1	14.5	17.4	15.6	11.0	22.6	16.5	17.6	17.8
Not sure	52.8	59.6	51.7	46.8	53.1	52.0	52.0	53.1	52.4	52.3
Had sex with current boyfriend/girlfriend	63.3	80.7	72.0	55.0	71.2	72.0	68.4	32.5	54.4	59.0
(If yes for had sex)	(n=640)	(n=130)	(n=194)	(n=59)	(n=383)	(n=72)	(n=123)	(n=62)	(n=257)	
Condom frequency										
Always	18.8	23.1	14.0	31.1	19.8	13.9	14.0	27.0	17.2	17.7
Often	11.4	8.5	14.0	19.7	13.0	6.9	7.4	14.3	9.0	9.3
Sometimes	43.6	50.0	47.7	29.5	45.6	45.8	43.0	30.2	40.6	40.0
Never	26.3	18.5	24.4	19.7	21.6	33.3	35.5	28.6	33.2	32.9

^a Group O, Out-of-school; Group V, Vocational school; Group G, General school/university

^b The final column for females is standardized to the distribution by educational group for males. Percentages shown represent proportions that would have been observed had females had the same distribution by educational group as males.

can talk to (male, 18-20 years, technical school).

Sex which comes from love and mutual commitment is very good. Everyone wants that. However, it may last, or not last very long (female, 18-20 years, neighborhood community).

Virginity might have been less valued among young people in vocational schools and those who were out-of-school partly due to the emerging issue of equal rights and freedom of expression of men and women. During focus group discussions some male adolescents argued that premarital sex was an acceptable practice if it resulted from mutual desire. Some groups of girls also stated that virginity was not the most important issue in their lives. Losing one's virginity was acceptable if a man and woman loved each other. Love came first and sex generally followed. Virginity was not the first factor to be considered, although it was perceived to be very important. Some girls stated that after splitting up with a first sexual partner they had gained the confidence to have the same right of sexual choice as boys did. They had the power to initiate courting of boys, and virginity was no longer a big issue for them.

It's very difficult for girls these days to preserve virginity, I think. Some may think it's important. But, you know, boys don't go to brothels to have sex with sex workers when they need to release sexual desire. They have sex with their girlfriends because of love. It's understandable (female, 17-20 years, technical school).

I think they feel that they have freedom and rights to do that. Once we don't care about virginity, we are able to feel free like boys do (female, 18-20 years, neighborhood community).

Nevertheless, there were some contradictions regarding sexual roles in that some informants stated that while girls had the same opportunities as boys and both sexes had the same freedom in life, good and respectable girls were supposed to be inexperienced and naïve in sexual matters. Some stated that it was all right for men to have premarital sexual experience, but might be more appropriate for women to remain virgins until marriage.

We talk a lot about the freedom of young people's lives. It is acceptable among youths. But when boys and girls engage in sex, those to be blamed are always girls (female, 18-20 years, commercial school).

As for girls in vocational schools, many behave like sluts, going out easily with men. They devalue themselves (male, 18-20 years, technical school).

Dating patterns

Almost three-quarters of male respondents had ever dated someone, with those from the out-of-school group recording a higher percentage than those from vocational schools, and those from general schools and university clearly the lowest figure (Table 4). A higher percentage of females from the vocational school group had dated (83.3%) than females in the other two school groups. Among females who had left school, those who attended non-formal education were less likely to have ever dated someone, with 45.9% reporting having done so compared to 86.7% among those who did not attend any educational institution.

Males and females from the general school and university group usually dated in public places, such as restaurants, cinemas and shopping centers. Those from vocational school and out-of school groups tended in addition to have dated in public

gardens and pubs or discotheques, and in private places, such as their own, partners', or friends' homes. Males and females from the latter two groups had also experienced more affectionate and sexual contact, including intercourse.

Dating experience

Males and females agreed that an ideal dating partner would normally be someone of similar age, educational background and economic status, with compatible interests. He or she would be good looking, or at least look smart, and well mannered. He/she would have an attractive personality, such as being cheerful and having a sense of humor, and be good at music or sports. High socio-economic status in a male dating partner could indicate ability to date at luxurious restaurants or entertainment places, as well as the capacity to provide a car rather than a motorcycle for transport, and this was preferred by most girls.

Informants gave as the main reason for dating a desire to seek experience with establishing intimate relationships. Some had found that dating was one of the major ways to raise their popularity within a group. Boys and girls accepted various degrees of intimacy during dates, ranging from holding hands, hugging and touching to having sex. Many boys, especially those from vocational schools or out-of-school, would seek to increase the degree of intimacy if they were in love with their date.

I met my boyfriend last year when I went with friends to sing at a karaoke booth. After that we went out together. I love him...One day after going to the pub he took me to his apartment and started to touch and fool around. It was so good, I admit that...A few months later we had sex. I really had a feeling

that he also loves me...We are still seeing each other, but I don't live with him. I don't want my parents to know about our relationship (female, 19 years, commercial school student).

Prior to dating there were steps of emotional contact that entailed calling, or sending texts to one another, using a mobile phone and/or chatting via the internet. Once dating commenced, intimacy began with affectionate contact and sometimes later progressed to more intimate acts. Sexual intercourse was the last step for some informants, and could be either planned or unplanned.

When I go out with girls and they allow me to touch (their hands or body), it is a sign that they will let me go further when we are in a private place...I have been on dates with a few girls. I would know from their reactions whether I can touch them or have sex with them (male, 19 years, factory worker).

Having a current boyfriend or girlfriend

A higher percentage of male respondents from the vocational school and out-of-school groups than from the general school and university group had a current girlfriend/boyfriend (Table 5). However, among those in relationships, males from the general school and university group were the most likely to report same-sex relationships. Females from the vocational school group were more likely than the other two groups to currently have a boyfriend/girlfriend. However, among the out-of-school females, those who did not attend non-formal education were most likely to currently have a boyfriend/girlfriend, with 80.0% reporting this, compared to 47.7% among those who attended non-formal education.

Currently partnered males and females

from the out-of-school group were the most likely to have had sex with their girlfriend/boyfriend. Sexually active males from the general school and university group, however, reported the highest level of regular condom use with their current partner, with almost one-third reporting regular use, while less than a quarter of males from the out-of-school group and only 14.0% from vocational schools reported this. Almost three-quarters of currently partnered females from the out-of-school group reported having had sex with their girlfriend/boyfriend, compared to around two-thirds from the vocational school group and only one-third from the general school and university group. There was no significant difference in condom use among sexually active females from the three educational groups.

Respondents from the out-of-school group were the most likely to report living with their girlfriend/boyfriend. Around one-third of males reported this, compared to 18.7% and 13.8% for the vocational school and general school/university groups, respectively. More than half of the out-of-school females reported currently living with their loved one, compared to 31.5% and 9.3% in the vocational school and general school/university groups, respectively. Figures for the female out-of-school and vocational school groups were much higher than equivalent male figures.

Intimacy with girlfriends and boyfriends

Informants gave as reasons for engaging in sexual relationships with a boyfriend or girlfriend that it was common among their peers and that it was acceptable to be affectionate. Some young males and females perceived that being in a relationship for a certain period of time, perhaps a couple of months, or maybe a year,

could be deemed to signify a close relationship, from which an intimate relationship could be developed. Sexual activity mainly happened according to the timing of the development of intimate relationships. Feelings of love, curiosity and autonomy, and living remote from social control, could encourage them to initiate sexual activity.

My girlfriend and I met two years ago. She studies at a public general school which is not very far from my school. We had time to see each other a lot, and sometimes I picked her up after school and we went out together. ...She is a nice girl and has never had a boyfriend before. It took me almost a year before she would allow me to touch her (male, 19 years, technical school student).

Informants said they wanted to live with their sexual partner because they were in love and wanted to spend as much of their time together as possible, although some stated that they were living together without truly being committed. Some lived together for practical reasons, such as sharing the rent or to make it easier to manage their lives. Sometimes young people did not tell their parents.

First informant: I live with my boyfriend. We study in the same school but he is in another department. After school we usually have something to eat before going back to our apartment. We don't usually go out at night; just watch TV at home and go to the internet shop sometimes. My parents don't know about this.

Second informant: For me, my parents know about the relationship with my boyfriend. We didn't tell them when we first moved in, but later they found out and had to accept the situation. My dad

was very angry, but my mum helped me to calm him down (female, 18-20 years, commercial school).

DISCUSSION

Intimate relationships among northern Thai young people are changing. Transitions are observable at two levels: for adolescents as they reach adulthood, and for adults experiencing the change from traditional to modern. Both transitions are proceeding across all socio-economic groups, but at different rates. Young people are adapting to a modernized environment in which independence, materialism, technology and media enable new forms of relationships, featuring both committed and non-committed sexual intimacy, including unprepared for and unprotected sexual activity. Young women are particularly vulnerable to rapidly changing social and sexual values. Some are under pressure from potential partners to engage in sexual activity, particularly given the AIDS-inspired male retreat from seeking sexual initiation with commercial sex workers, and they experience more disapproval than males from their parents' generation.

The results of the study suggest that young people have had limited control over the social changes underway in Thai society. While knowledge of HIV transmission is widespread, young people rarely believe they are personally at risk. Like young people from other countries, Thai young people often judge their risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections on the basis of a partner's appearance. And because older generations of Thais generally believe young people do not engage in pre-marital sex, little health policy has been devoted to promoting condom use among them. Young people's

sexual activities remain largely hidden, and the older generations do not have to acknowledge or address the reality that such activities occur. Previous campaigns promoting condom use have focused specifically on risk groups, such as sex workers and their clients, intravenous drug users, and gay men, but have ignored the general population of young people that this study has evaluated.

Consistent with previous research findings (Taywaditep *et al*, 2004), relationships are conducted differently by social class and sex. Young people engage in socially patterned forms of intimacy. Those from under-privileged family backgrounds (*ie*, out-of-school adolescents and vocational school students) compared to those from more advantaged families (*ie*, general school and university students), were more likely to report liberal sexual attitudes and practices. These, in turn, made them more vulnerable to negative health consequences, including contracting sexually transmitted infections and experiencing unwanted pregnancies. Such young people were less likely to practice safe sex as indicated by consistent condom use, and their behaviors were frequently reinforced by peers, who assisted one another and shared common interests.

Our findings highlight the need for health care providers, health service managers and policy makers from various sectors to gain a comprehensive understanding of contemporary young people's lives and sexuality. This study underlines, as others have (River and Aggleton, 2001; Aggleton and Warwick, 2002; Vuttanont *et al*, 2006), the need for adolescent health promotion in the form of health education, life skills programs and counselling. Adolescent-sensitive health care services should also be planned and introduced, and/or existing services should be appro-

privately enhanced. All initiatives require a sound understanding of interactions between gender, socio-economic status, courtship practices, attitudes toward sex, and condom use. Programs need, for example, to empower young males and females from lower socio-economic backgrounds to improve their knowledge and skills, in order to minimize the sexual health risks emerging from the nature of their lives.

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