

Forced Sexual Initiation in Romantic Relationships among Young Women: Findings from Taiwan Youth Project

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Abstract

Unwanted sexual activity impacts both risky sexual behavior and its health outcomes. International studies continue to emphasize the importance of sexual health in adolescence. Only a few researchers have explored how the experience of unwanted sexual activity is associated with specific behavioral and well-being outcomes. This issue is of particular importance for girls in a male-dominant, non-western society such as Taiwan, where unwanted sexual activity remains barely studied. Building upon Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979) and Belsky's evolutionary perspective (1991) we use longitudinal data of Taiwan Youth Project 2000-2011, and compare how the young woman who has had forced first sex in her romantic relationship fare on various behavioral, family, social, and well-being variables from adolescence to young adulthood when compared with two other sexual-experience types. Findings of this debut investigation will provide a profile of how risky behavioral, social, family, and well-being variables are associated with first sexual experience. Our study will also contribute to social and health policies and programs for bettering the developmental health of youth in Taiwan as well as in Asia contexts.

Significance

Despite international support for improving adolescent health over the past few decades, the health consequences associated with unwanted sexual activity remain a concern, particularly for girls in male-dominant, non-western societies such as East Asian [1]. Unwanted sexual activity is often related to an increased likelihood of risky sexual behavior, unplanned pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted infection [2-8].

Research on unwanted sexual activity of adolescents has primarily focused on characteristics of girls such as psychosocial correlates [5, 9], risky behaviors [8, 9], and family context [9]. Some existing studies have also paid attention to characteristics of girls' partners related to unwanted sexual activity [10]. On the other hand, an equally important but much less investigated aspect of unwanted sexual activity is derived from developmental context.

Building upon Belsky's evolutionary perspective (1991) [11] and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979) [12], the present study focuses on first sex and hypothesizes that forced first sex associated with risky sexual behaviors and even beyond sexual health from the developmental perspective. We intend to compare how the young woman who has had forced first sex in her romantic relationship fare on various behavioral, family, social, and well-being variables from adolescence to young adulthood when compared with two other sexual-experience types. And, we seek to delineate the profile of aforementioned variables by three types of first sexual experience among Taiwanese young women.

Methods

Data. We utilized data from the Taiwan Youth Project (TYP) from 2000-2011. This study focused on unwanted first sexual activity in romantic relationships. Yet, TYP did not collect this information until 2011. Our analytical sample was thus based on 2011 data and excluded female participants with missing responses on major variables (n=52) and sexual

activity in non-romantic relationships (n=42); this yielded to 1,358 women. In addition to exploring developmental variables, we also merged these young women with their retrospective information from 2000-2009 TYP datasets.

Measures. Forced first sex in a romantic relationship was derived from a question asking whether a young woman had had first sex in a romantic relationship. This information was obtained directly from a self-administrated questionnaire. Young women responded yes or no to two items, asking whether or not their first sex had “ever been physically or verbally forced against your will” and whether or not their first sex was occurred in a romantic relationship. Three specific types of first sexual experience were investigated, namely forced sex in a romantic relationship (FSR), unforced sex in a romantic relationship (UFSR), no sex. In addition, the present study hypothesized that the developmental context is associated with forced sex initiation in romantic relationships. We thus include sets of variables related to risky behaviors and well-being from adolescence to young adulthood in our preliminary exploration.

Preliminary Findings

Figure 1 presents distributions of the analytic sample by three types of first sex experience according to selected developmental variables. The sexually inactive was about two-fifths of the total sample, with 59% UFSR, and 2% FSR. Half of FSR reported first sex at age 18 or younger compared with 37% UFSR. More than half of young women in FSR had 4 or more lifetime sexual partners compared with 32% of UFSR. Overtime, self-esteem among FSR decreased from early adolescence to late adolescence; whereas for UFSR it did not appear clearly decreased. More than 90% of FSR reported their age at first smoking at 19 or younger compared with 61% of UFSR.

Our preliminary results suggest that FSR seems to be associated with risky sexual and health behaviors over life course. These preliminary findings warrant further investigation and models incorporating other identified covariates to limit sample selection bias. Further investigations will continue estimate and model the long-term effects of FSR in multivariate analyses.

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Figure 1: Distributions in 3 types of first sexual experience by selected variables among young women, TYP 2000-2011





