

**Asia Research Institute  
Working Paper Series No. 119**

**Public Opinion in Vietnam about Adolescent Sexuality,  
Sex Education and Abortion**

**Nguyen Anh Chi**

Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

chianhnguyen@gmail.com

**August 2009**



This article is a part of my thesis for M.A Degree in Southeast Asia Studies in Chulalongkorn University.

The **ARI Working Paper Series** is published electronically by the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore.

© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each Working Paper.

ARI Working Papers cannot be republished, reprinted, or reproduced in any format without the permission of the paper's author or authors.

**Note:** The views expressed in each paper are those of the author or authors of the paper. They do not necessarily represent or reflect the views of the Asia Research Institute, its Editorial Committee or of the National University of Singapore.

Citations of this electronic publication should be made in the following manner: Author, "Title," ARI Working Paper, No. #, Date, [www.nus.ari.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm](http://www.nus.ari.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm). For instance, Smith, John, "Ethnic Relations in Singapore," ARI Working Paper, No. 1, June 2003, [www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm](http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm).

#### **Asia Research Institute Editorial Committee**

Maznah Binti Mohamad - Editor

Anjali Gera Roy

Gregory K. Clancey

Peter Wolfgang Marolt

Tim Bunnell

Venni Venkata Krishna

Zaide Joyce

Valerie Yeo

#### **Asia Research Institute**

National University of Singapore

469A Tower Block #10-01,

Bukit Timah Road,

Singapore 259770

Tel: (65) 6516 3810

Fax: (65) 6779 1428

Website: [www.ari.nus.edu.sg](http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg)

Email: [arisec@nus.edu.sg](mailto:arisec@nus.edu.sg)

**The Asia Research Institute (ARI)** was established as a university-level institute in July 2001 as one of the strategic initiatives of the National University of Singapore (NUS). The mission of the Institute is to provide a world-class focus and resource for research on the Asian region, located at one of its communications hubs. ARI engages the social sciences broadly defined, and especially interdisciplinary frontiers between and beyond disciplines. Through frequent provision of short-term research appointments it seeks to be a place of encounters between the region and the world. Within NUS it works particularly with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Business, Law and Design, to support conferences, lectures, and graduate study at the highest level.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the period of Doi Moi in 1986, especially restructuring of a large-scale economy, there have been many social changes in Vietnam. (Nguyen & Liamputtong, 2007). People, especially Vietnamese women have more freedom to make their own choice in general and have more rights and opportunities to be responsible for their own fertility issue and abortion problem in particular.

Since the government has made abortion legal in Vietnam and regarded it as a method of population control, religion seems to have little influence nationwide in terms of abortion decisions. As said by Ms Nguyen Thi Ngoc Lan, an officer of Head Office of Population and Family Planning Section, the punitive measures of one-or-two-child policy have affected Vietnamese couples most when deciding to give birth, for fear of severe punishment and breaking the law. In addition, the legality of abortion in Vietnam resulted from the government's attention to women's health in an effort to enhance the quality of family planning service, especially in rural and remote areas:

*“This policy [one-or-two-child policy] is an important strategy in the process of effectively controlling the galloping population in Vietnam. Together with making abortion legal, the Vietnamese government has so far reinforced the family planning service to make it available and more effective in order to improve women's health.”*

(Interview Ms Nguyen Thi Ngoc Lan,  
an officer of Head Office of Population and Family Planning Section  
in December, 2008 in Hanoi)

In terms of the increase of abortion cases, especially among the youths, Mr Nguyen Xuan Son, an officer from Ministry of Health said: *“Most aborted women in Vietnam are from remote areas with little knowledge relevant to reproductive health. That is why we are still trying to let doctors come and show them how to avoid unplanned pregnancy. It is obvious that Vietnamese youth are currently active in premarital sex. Yet, what we should do is teach them how to have safe sex and avoid unwanted pregnancy as well as complications from unsafe abortion”*. It can be partly inferred from this that the concept of premarital sex is no longer as strict as it used to be in the past, and the focus seems to lie more on women's health.

## HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL ECONOMIC REASONS

It is undeniable that since the triumph of the August Revolution in 1945, to the unification of Northern and Southern part of Vietnam in 1975, up to the Doi Moi period in 1986, there have been dramatic changes in the position, rights, and interest of Vietnamese women. Professor Hoang Ngoc Trang, who devoted her life to research in Gender Studies in Vietnam, said:

*“Women have taken a very important role from the revolutionary war to politically active role in Governmental Organization as the leaders, and policy makers (e.g. former vice presidents of Vietnam: Ms Nguyen Thi Binh and Ms Truong Thi My Hoa). Vietnamese women, thus, have no longer been limited to out-dated traditions and habits”*.

(Interview Ms Hoang Ngoc Trang at her office in December, 2008 in Hanoi)

She continued,

*“The family law in Vietnam which emphasizes the equality between wife and husband is of great importance in confirming the right and position of women in society and in the family. In my opinion, this does affect the abortion policies in Vietnam with reference to their right and health.”*

Ms Dang Minh Nhung, an officer from Vietnam Women’s Union added that in the current context, women are not only in charge of domestic duties but work in the wider community and contribute a worthy part to the development of society. In relation to the abortion issue,

*“I totally agree that they have the right to their body and they are mature and responsible enough to decide their own fertility issues. In addition, the government and organizations like ours should provide them with good assistance in case of need (e.g. providing accurate information and knowledge of reproductive health as well as safe abortion service)”.*

In terms of social economic transformation and its influence on Vietnamese, especially on the youth, there are more and more foci and studies on adolescent reproductive behavior nationwide. The major theme that arose throughout the research was that social and economic transformations in recent years changed people, especially the youth’s opinions, experiences and behavior thoroughly. Especially, the beginning of Doi Moi (renovation) period from 1986 paved the way for a more open economy, rising privatization and improving mass communication which is partly an explanation for the increasing cases of premarital sex and unplanned pregnancies. Regarding the issue of rising sexual contacts, contraceptive behavior and abortion, Goodkind (1994: 348-350) suggested that this social tendency is the result of the changing social and economic climate. He added and emphasized the possibility that the government’s unwillingness to provide information related to reproductive health, especially to the youths may lead to the rise in premarital pregnancy. Mentioning about the same issue, Ms Nguyen Thi Ngoc Lan, an officer of Head Office of Population and Family Planning Section said:

*“The society is changing dramatically and Vietnamese youth are strongly influenced by Western culture. They are more open-minded when talking and engaging themselves in sex before marriage. In addition, they have more chance to learn from sexuality through the media, especially the internet which is available everywhere. We can do nothing to stop this trend. We had better equip them with better knowledge related to reproductive health to prevent increasing premarital pregnancy.”*

## CONCEPT OF PREMARITAL SEX AND VIRGINITY

### Confucian Thought

Those who think that premarital sex – the so-called “eating rice before the bell” is wrong behavior and virginity is important for girls, are chiefly basing their thinking on traditional double standards in gender norms that exist in Confucianism.

*“I really do not know how to evaluate premarital sex exactly nowadays. I guess there are many different ideas between the older generation and younger ones. I do not think premarital sex is a very serious problem, but I disapprove of it. Importantly, my parents teach me to preserve my virginity as a sign of my good conduct. I had premarital sex unintentionally once and I felt really guilty. I am afraid that my husband-to-be will blame me badly for not keeping my chastity.”*

(Interview a 20-year-old female student in Ha Noi in January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009)

Another girl shares the same perception:

*“I support the traditional view on premarital sex. I think a girl should keep the chastity till the day she gets married. That means she respects her husband and proves that she is a good and well-educated girl as well. Well, premarital sex may happen sometimes among lovers who fell in love for a long time and they have been preparing for marriage in the near future. In this case, I think it is acceptable. However, no one can tell you exactly what will happen afterwards.. Anyway, I still strongly recommend that girls should say NO to premarital sex. That is the safest way.”*

(Interview a 23-year-old girl in Ha Noi in January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009)

There is a group of male students emphasizing different effects of premarital sex on men and women:

*“Men can have premarital sex because they lose nothing from that. No one knows whether or not they have sex. However, if a girl has sex before marriage, she will be doubted and even condemned later if people know she is a bad girl by having sex before marriage. You know, she loses her value in people’s eyes immediately.”*

(Interview a group of five male students in Ha Noi in December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008)

Parents seem to not accept the concept of premarital sex. Ms Hai Yen, a mother of two high school students says:

*“I always teach my daughter to keep her virginity because that is not only the way to keep her value in her husband-to-be’ eyes but also the way to keep our good family reputation. I can not bear being blamed for not educating my daughter well.”*

(Interview Ms Hai Yen in Ha Noi in December, 2008)

There are two surveys of youths' attitude towards premarital sex in Vietnam. In the year 2000, one was carried out in the two biggest cities Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh city (1,600 university students aged 17-24) and another in Hai Phong city (1,100 young people aged 15-24) (Mensch, Clark & Dang, 2002:7). The results showed that in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh cities, 98 percent of young women and 74 percent of young men disapproved of sexual intercourse before marriage, meanwhile the percentage in Hai Phong city were 93 and 70, respectively. Yet, these researchers are well aware of the possibility of unreliable information given during interviews, due to the fact that Vietnamese might be unwilling to respond accurately about their own sexual behavior, especially to foreigners.

### **The Transitional Period**

In fact, although premarital sex used to be strongly condemned in the past, especially by older generations, there are a number of studies (Khuat, 1998, Tran & Khuat, 1998, Nguyen et al., 1999) which show that the attitude of Vietnamese youths toward sexual activities and premarital sex has changed in recent years. More and more young people no longer disapprove of sex before marriage and have a more open-minded view when discussing sexual issues with their peers. Yet, this does not mean that premarital sex is extremely popular among Vietnamese youth as is sometimes thought. The survey of "Adolescents and Social Change in Vietnam" (VASC) asked 1,497 youths aged 15-22 whether or not they had ever had sexual relations and, if so, at what age they first did. The findings showed that among 764 males aged 15-22, only 10 percent reported having had premarital sex, while 5 percent of the 733 females in the same age category reported having had premarital sex. Especially, it should be noted that little premarital sex occurs before the age of 18 (only over 6 percent of male respondents and 4 percent of female respondents are predicted to have sex by their eighteen birthdays) (Mensch, Clark & Dang, 2002:10-17).

The point is that when deciding to marry, women feel comfortable about having sex with their fiancés. Usually, when sexual activity occurs between the future spouses, social judgments towards such premarital sex are loosening. They merely perceive it as a sign of love and trust.

*"I think if couples really love each other, they easily have premarital sex. I support it because it means that you trust your lover. No one loses anything from this. Sex is equal between men and women. "*

(Interview a 26 years old officer in Ha Noi in January, 2009)

*"The conservative view about virginity and premarital sex is outdated, isn't it? What makes you think it [premarital sex] is a sin since people love each other and would like to belong to each other? If they are kids below 16, I may reconsider. Yet, almost all people who have sex are adults. They have their own rights and they are mature enough to be responsible for their bodies and behavior. You can not prevent them from having sex, but you'd better teach them how to do it properly without any bad consequences."*

(Interview a 21-year-old student in Ha Noi in January, 2009)

In this context, the reasons that lead to changes in young people's concept of sexuality and in their sexual behaviour should be well understood. It is necessary to shed light on the issue: What are the changes? How do Vietnamese people respond to these changes? By understanding clearly the meanings young people give to their sexual behavior and their needs, people can avoid unnecessary exacerbating the confusion and difficulties in the present transition into modern life influenced by Western cultures.

*“In our opinion, traditional view of premarital sex and virginity was right in the past. However, the society is changing so fast currently and Vietnamese people, especially the youths are strongly affected by other countries' culture, especially Western culture. That does not mean we are influenced negatively. We can not deny this trend but accept it positively. We are not worse by learning new things. It is merely a new approach to some issue.”*

(Interview a group of four university students in Ha Noi in January, 2009)

In addition, men share the ideas that women's virginity does not strongly affect their decision for marriage

*“It is undeniable that I will feel a little sad if my wife-to-be is no longer a virgin. Yet, this by no means affects our married life. I think the most important thing between spouses is love and trust. I still respect and love her – the one I have chosen.”*

(Interview a 25-year-old officer of Vietcombank in Ha Noi in January, 2009)

*“To be honest, when getting married, I seriously consider our love for each other. Virginity is fine and I am happy to be the first man in her life. However, if she loses it, it means nothing to me either. I just care about her love and her respect for me in the reality and in the future. I do not care what belongs to the past.”*

(Interview a 26-year-old director of Art Company in Ha Noi in January, 2009)

Thus, it is essential to discuss about the changing nature of sexual behavior and relevant attitude about this issue in Vietnam, especially among adolescents. It can be concluded that the traditional view of premarital sex still affects Vietnamese thought, yet simply for historical reasons, related to the traditional viewpoint on Confucianism. In fact, the youths nowadays are mature enough to be responsible for their sexual behavior generally. More importantly, adolescent reproductive behavior does not seem to be particularly and extremely problematic in Vietnam as it has been thought. The vast majority of adolescents indicate that they are not engaging in premarital sex unless they know exactly about the decision afterward. In addition, most young women who are having sex before marriage report doing so with their future spouse. Furthermore, Vietnamese people have more sympathetic eyes on this issue. As said by Mr Tran Huu Thai, corresponding member of Youth's Union:

*“I am happy if adolescents come to ask for information about reproductive health. It does not mean that they are spoiled. They should be responsible and well aware of their body and its function. Most of youths start with embarrassment when mentioning about sexuality. Yet, we should encourage them to be honest with their curiosity and provide them with necessary knowledge. It will be much more dangerous to blind them on this issue and they may access wrong information. This will be much worse.”*

## The Obstacles to Appropriate Sex Education

Sex education has been regarded as a decisive factor in order to prevent unwanted pregnancy and abortion cases from increasing in Vietnam. Despite the support of a number of doctors, health providers and upgraded people who believe young people need information to be able to protect themselves, there still exists resistance from traditional, older Vietnamese for whom sex is still a sensitive subject and should not be taught at school. This fact led to a delay in introducing sex education officially in secondary schools for adolescents and negative consequences are undeniable.

*“No sex education on the school curriculum together with the reluctance to discuss such intimate issues at home somehow result in increasing unplanned pregnancy among the Vietnamese youths”.*

(Interview Dr Hang from Tu Du Obstetric Hospital in January, 2009)

Health officials and educators insist that more should be done:

*“Our hospital has to deal with nearly 10,000 abortions each year, and it’s painful to know that young patients do not have appropriate knowledge about sexual health. They should learn about this and know how to protect themselves better.”* said gynaecologist Le Thanh Thuy of the National Obstetric Hospital in September, 2008.

*“I support the teaching of sex education in schools. People may argue that teaching sexuality means encouraging the young to be more active in premarital sex. Yet, nobody knows what adolescents do to satisfy their curiosity. The assessment to inappropriate information will lead to more serious consequences.”* (said Ms Ho Nhat Trinh, the cooperate member of Association for Youth & Women’s Development, said in Seminar on Sex Education in High School in July, 2008.)

In addition, when being asked whether or not sex education is provided at home with parents as sex-educators, almost all students answer that their parents never initiated talking about sex with them. Personal interviews with some students aged 17-22 in Ha Noi in January, 2009 also confirm the trend that their parents hardly talk to them openly about sex even when they have related questions to ask:

*“My parents may scold me if I ask for information related to sexual issues. In their opinion, when we try to ask, it means we are going to have sex or we are haunted by this problem”*

(An 18-year-old girl)

*“I have never learned anything from my parents. They have never talked about sex with me. In addition, I do not think that when I get older, they will teach me about sex. They may think that I will learn by myself like I have done in other issues”*

(A 20-year-old boy)



Parents also have their own reasons for not talking about sex or providing sex education for their children. The most common reason mentioned is that their teenage sons or daughters are too young to learn about sex education. Most parents say that their children may learn about sex naturally.

*“My son never asked me about sex, thus I have not mentioned it to him either. I know that he is a teenager but in my eyes, he is still a little boy. Moreover, if I talk about sex with him, I am afraid that he may think it is time for him to engage in sex. I do not want him to know stuff like this”*

(Interview a mother of a male high-school student in December, 2008)

*“I tell my daughter not to be involved in premarital sex because it is not good for her future life. I do not teach her how to prevent pregnancies. I prefer to let her learn about it by herself. In my opinion, if she knows too much and too soon about sex, she may feel eager to have sex with her boyfriend”*

(Interview a mother of a female high school student in December, 2008)

To some extent, the fear of being misunderstood or misled and of being embarrassed is shared by both parents and children. Some parents are afraid that giving lessons or related knowledge about sex will encourage their children to engage in sex actively, not to mention the concern that their children might regard them as people engrossed in sex. Children express their idea in the same way as that of their parents.

*“To be honest, I feel embarrassed and I do not know how and where to start if I have to discuss about sex with my son even when I know it will be helpful for him.”*

(Interview a mother of a 19 years old son in December, 2008)

*“I do believe that almost all parents may think that teaching sex is a double-edged sword. They are afraid that we might interpret their teaching as kind of encouragement of having sex”*

(Interview a female university student in January, 2009)

*“I only teach my son and daughter some basic knowledge about sex suitable to their ages. I am worried that talking too much about that topic might lead them to misunderstand that I am active in sex or I feel fine if they have sex”*

(Interview a mother of a 17- year-old son and 20-year-old daughter in January, 2009)

Some other parents simply think that their teenagers receive enough information thanks to journals or friends or basic knowledge transferred by teachers, thus they do not need to teach them any more lessons. Some even claim that they are not the proper providers for this issue.

*“My children learn about sex when reading books or talking with friends. I agree that teens should know about this. Yet, you know, I have no time to explain it to my children. Health providers are more competent in this field.”*

(Interview a father of a high school student in December, 2008)

*“In my opinion, my children get enough lessons about sex, thus I do not need to teach them again. They can take good care of themselves with the knowledge they have got. Journals, friends, and internet are available for them.”*

(Interview a mother of two secondary female students in December, 2008)

On the other hand, a number of students say that most of the lessons they have got from the teachers and their parents are too superficial and they have never got enough information to answer their basic questions.

*“My mother warns me to go out with groups but not alone when I hang out at night and she asks me to avoid going to deserted place. Sometimes she tells me the story of some girls who are raped and talks a little bit about the safe way after such unexpected situation. However, she never teaches me how to have sex without unwanted pregnancies. I do not dare to ask her in detail.”*

(Interview an 18-year-old girl in January, 2009)

*“I am curious about condoms, yet when I try to ask my parents, they only give me the general information that it is a contraceptive and prevent me from going further in this issue.”*

(Interview a 17-year-old boy in January, 2009)

*“I do not dare to talk with my parents about this although I have many questions in my mind. It's so humiliating to ask elders' advice for such kind of things. My parents might think I am a spoiled girl or they just answer in general. I think it is useless to discuss with them”*

– said a female high school student in January, 2009

Parents, one way or another, express their hope for the availability of sex education at school:

*“I am worried about how my children will learn about sex. If I have to teach them by myself, I do not think I am able to do so. Only just thinking about it, I feel embarrassed. Thus, I strongly agree if sex education is provided in school.”*

(Interview with the father of a secondary male student in December, 2008)

*“Perhaps I have rarely talked about sex with my son. He sometimes mentioned to me, yet I think it is his private life. I feel happy to be his good listener without asking him too many questions because I am afraid that he may feel embarrassed. Besides, I do not feel comfortable to discuss about sex issues with him either. I think sex education should be provided at school.”*

(Interview a mother of a high school male student in December, 2008)

As a result, it is undeniable that calls for sex education are true and urgent in current society. As said by Ms Nguyen Van Anh, the President of Research Center of Gender, Family, Women and Adolescents - Ha Noi branch, it is high time that sex education be provided at school:

*“Sex education is being provided more effectively with the availability of mass media, voluntary health providers at schools; unfortunately, it has not yet been systematically built and transferred. It is time for sex education to be introduced officially and practically at school, not only the fundamental knowledge of body, but also methods of preventing unplanned pregnancy, available contraceptive devices and their side-effects in detail. Vietnamese society is stuck between traditional and modern concepts. However, all we have to do is practical viewpoint. Sexuality is not something that can be controlled by avoiding providing information.*”

Thus, it can be concluded that there exists a more open-minded viewpoint toward the abortion issue and sex education in Vietnam. The current government’s focus is on equipping people in the childbearing ages with better knowledge related to reproductive health to prevent increasing premarital pregnancy. Importantly, the Vietnamese government is making an enormous effort to include sex education in high-school curriculum for adolescents step by step because it has come to realize that it will be much worse to censure sexual issues from youths: they may have access to unofficial and false information and the consequences can be damaging. As a result, sex education should be systematically built and transferred. After all, abortion is a reality that cannot be hidden or avoided, given the tendency towards resorting to it when relationships do not work.

**REFERENCES**

- Khuat, T. H. (1998). *Study on Sexuality in Vietnam: The Known and Unknown Issue*. Ha Noi: Population Council.
- Mensch, S.B., Clark, H.W., & Dang, N.A. (2002). *Premarital Sex in Vietnam: Is the Current Concern with Adolescent Reproductive Health Warranted?* Vietnam: Population Council.
- Nguyen, H. N. and Liamputtong, P. (2007). *Sex, love and gender norms: sexual life and experience of a group of young people in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam*. In *Sexual Health*, 2007, 4: 63 – 69
- Nguyen, Q.A. et al. (1999). *Adolescent Reproductive Health: Survey and Assessments of Knowledge, Attitudes and Practice of Adolescents in Hai Phong city about related Reproductive Health*. Vietnam: Ha Noi.
- Tran, T.P.M. & Khuat, T. H. (1998). *Responding to the reproductive health needs of adolescents and youth in Vietnam*. Vietnam: Ha Noi.