



Love Affairs, Dating and Sexual Behaviour among Unmarried Youth: A Qualitative Investigation Carried Out Immediately Prior to The Covid-19 Pandemic in Sri Lanka

Malith Kumarasinghe¹, W. Indralal De Silva² & W. S. M. Goonatilaka³

¹Family Health Bureau, Ministry of Health, Colombo, 00100, Sri Lanka

²Department of Demography, University of Colombo, Colombo 00700, Sri Lanka

³Sri Lanka Social Security Board, Ministry of Finance, Sri Jayawardhanapura Kotte, 011, Sri Lanka

Corresponding Author: Malith Kumarasinghe, **Email:** malith.kumarasinghe@yahoo.com

Received: 5th October 2021

Accepted: 10th November 2021

Published: 4th December

ABSTRACT

Initiation and continuation of healthy relationships among youth critical for the long-term wellbeing of the youth. Present socio-cultural environment presents numerous pitfalls which inhibit such relationships. Aim of this qualitative investigation was to describe the current status, trends and patterns of love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour among unmarried youth in Sri Lanka. Case studies, key informant interviews and focus group discussions were selected as methods of data collection. Thematic analysis was used. Four themes were generated, namely initiation of love affairs; dating and sexual behaviour, preferences, pattern and places; psychological, physical and sexual issues and violence related to love affairs and dating behaviour; assistance and advice on issues, problems in love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour. One of the key issues identified was lack of reliable person to seek advice for issues related to love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour among youth. Unmarried youth should be desensitized of the norms that inhibit the communication of love affairs, dating, sexuality and reproduction. Furthermore, a mechanism to identify high risk youth groups: those who have multiple love affairs, youth with inadequate knowledge of STIs, youth with casual sex, victims of sexual harassment need be designed and implemented

Keywords: unmarried youth, love affairs, dating, sexual behaviour, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Youth are shaping social and economic development, challenging social norms and values, and building the foundation of the world's future. They have high expectations for themselves and their societies and are imagining how the world can be made better. Youth are connected to each other as never before through new media (W. I. De Silva, 2000).

Many countries in the world define youth as those between ages 15-24 years, the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. In 2019, youth of age 15-24 years represented approximately 16 per cent of the global population, or nearly 1.2 billion out of the total population of 7.5 billion (Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). Deviating from the common definition used by most of the countries, some authorities in Sri Lanka defines youth as persons between the ages 15-29 years (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Skills Development, 2014). Sri Lankan youth population of 4.7 million enumerated in 2012 would increase to 5.2 million by 2032 (W. I. De Silva & de Silva, 2015).

Youth is the stage of ones' life where an individual usually commence love, dating and sexual behaviour. The general opinion is that love is an emotional attachment tending towards specifically identified objects or people. The theoretical basis of love is, "attraction of the opposites". Different facets of love such as face-to-face interaction, focused attention, shared emotions, and various symbols indicating love is a complex, intimate relationship (Synnott, 2017).

Dating is a competitive and "aim inhibited form of association between the sexes" in the period of romance which can happen at any time between puberty and mating. The concept of dating usually appears only where large numbers of youth whom due to various reasons postpone their marriage (Lowrie, 1951). Until late 90s South Asian cultural norms promote, entering to nuptial bonds should be done at an early age. For many years, the average age of entry into marriage in Sri Lanka was has been more than 25 years and 28 years for women and men girls and boys respectively (W. I. De Silva et al., 2010). The gap between puberty and marriage had widened in the last century. This has increased the role play by love affairs, dating behaviour, sexual activity and sexual behaviour before marriage especially among youth.

Sexuality is often simplified to sexual behaviour. But it is a complex biological process which exceeds mere sexual behaviour. It encompasses eroticism, sexual behaviour, social and gender roles & identity, relationships, and the personal, social and

cultural meanings that each of these might hold. The study of sexual behaviour itself is important, but is incomplete if divorced from personal, social and cultural context in which it occurs. Views about sexuality are specific to a particular place, time and group of people. They are dynamic in nature, as do the factors that govern the regulation of sexuality. Especially, age, attitudes and beliefs, education level, locality, exposure to the modern world, influence of mass media, etc. are some factors governing this situation (W. I. De Silva, 1998). Sex is exclusively a biological function, defined based on individuality and socio-cultural background of that individual. It is biologically associated with male and female reproductive organs. "Sex" touches upon so many different complex aspects related to human experience. There are four major characteristics of sex frequently focused by many researchers, namely sexual acts, sexual partners, sexual meanings, and, sexual desire and pleasure (W. I. De Silva, 2008).

The intimate relationships associated with love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour have a major impact on life of youth. Objective of this qualitative investigation was to describe the current status, trends and patterns of the love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour among unmarried youth in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lankan Context

Love affairs and dating behaviour among youth is a common life event in every corner of the world irrespective of one's religion, race, culture or geographical location. However, Sexual interactions resulting from love affairs and subsequent dating behaviour can vary depending on above factors. Sri Lankan National youth health survey conducted in 2012/13 reported mean age for starting a love affair of 17.0 years for boys and 17.3 years for girls (Family Health Bureau, 2013). Love affairs among Sri Lankan youth is common. A study conducted among university undergraduates in Sri Lanka found that 52 per cent of the respondents were engaged in romantic relationships (Gunawardena et al., 2012).

Only few studies have investigated the dating behaviour patterns in Sri Lanka. A study on dating behaviour stated that in Sri Lanka, at early stages of love affair majority use religious places or travel by automobile. However once love affair gets matured the visiting places may change to beach, cinema hall and finally to hotel/lodge (W. I. De Silva, 2008).

Some love affairs that progress to dating ends up as sexual interactions. A study among university undergraduates revealed that sexual relationships within romantic relationships were known to 81 per cent of students. Furthermore, 64 per cent reported

knowing females who unwillingly agreed to sexual relationships due to the fear of losing the relationship (Gunawardena et al., 2012). National Youth Health survey, Sri Lanka of 2012/2013 revealed that 68.4 per cent of male unmarried youth and half of female counterparts who were sexually active, did so with their boy/ girlfriend (Family Health Bureau, 2013). Confirming above argument, Silva and Schensul (2003) reported considerable level of premarital relationships between young men and women in Sri Lanka, according to survey data gathered among low-income youth and university students aged 17–28 years. Contrary to what the authors expected, this study found that university students were somewhat more likely than less educated young people to oppose premarital sex among women (K. T. Silva & Schensul, 2003). Furthermore, National Youth Health Survey of 2012/2013 conducted by the Family Health Bureau (2013) further revealed that around one-fifth of the unmarried youth in Sri Lanka was sexually active in preceding year. Furthermore, the National Survey further revealed that 2.8 per cent of unmarried youth in Sri Lanka responded positively for sexual intercourse (Family Health Bureau, 2013). However, the actual figure could be much higher than the reported figure as interviewer administered questionnaire was used for above National survey and it was administered at respondents' households.

Above numbers reinforce the prevalence of love affairs, dating behaviour and sexual interactions among unmarried youth in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, in 1901, the age of puberty was 14 years while the age of marriage was 18. In 2000 this was 12 years (age of puberty) and 26 years (age of marriage). The four-year gap had increased to 14 years (W. I. De Silva & de Silva, 2015). However, the age at first marriage has reduced up to 24 years in 2016, still the girls in Sri Lanka do not marry at the puberty but a decade later (Department of Census and Statistics, 2017). This increased gap too might have contributed to increase in prevalence of love affairs, dating and sexual activities among unmarried youth.

Number wise, studies have illustrated sufficiently on significant existence of love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour among unmarried youth in Sri Lanka. However quantitative studies do not provide the information on the dynamics of love affairs, dating patterns and why they choose the places for dating, why romantic relationship ends in sexual relationship. These aspects needed understood fully to better prepared to face the consequences of such behaviour from the youth. One such negative consequence was highlighted in a study conducted among undergraduate university students where 21 per cent knew of instances where violence was used by male partners to coerce females into sexual activities (Gunawardena et al., 2012).

Issues were raised in the past with the provision of SRH services including family planning to avoid pregnancy, as it is not encouraged to conceive before 20 years due to the risk of health problems in the mother and the baby. There are instances where, a sexual relationship was initiated against the will of the parents and when exposed they were forced to marry and where the couple were less than 16 years, and the girl sent to parents/ probationary centre and the boy is taken into custody, citing statutory rape, even if it was consensual. This is due to the fact that the Penal Code considers age 16 as the legal age for a female to express her consent for sexual intercourse. If the female is less than 16 years of age, any male who engages in sexual conduct with a female less than 16 years commits 'statutory rape' which is a criminal offence in Sri Lanka (*Sri Lanka Age of Consent & Statutory Rape Laws*, 2021).

However, in local context, very few studies have qualitatively explored in depth on these aspects. Therefore, this study explored the current status and patterns in love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour among unmarried youth in Sri Lanka.

DATA BASE AND METHODOLOGY

To achieve the objective of investigating the current status of love affairs, dating and related sexual behaviour of Sri Lankan unmarried youth, qualitative exploratory design was adopted. Three types of approaches were used to collect data. Due to sensitivity of the discussion and the differences in preferent method of disclosure of information all 3 of following data collection techniques was included. Further these were considered to capture all the important aspects, practices and views on love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour of unmarried youth of Sri Lanka.

- (1) Focus group discussions
- (2) Key informant interviews
- (3) Case studies

Study setting

Case studies, KIIs and FGDs were conducted in 3 selected districts namely, Puttalam, Hambantota and Nuwara-Eliya. According to initial investigations about the population composition of the above districts, it was found that the above selection would enable the study of an adequate and representative sample of Sinhala, Sri Lanka Tamil, Indian Tamil and Moor communities. In addition, these 3 districts represent major sectors in Sri Lanka namely, urban, rural and estate. Nuwara-Eliya district is predominately comprised of estate sector, Hambantota; rural and Puttalam; a mixture of urban and rural communities. FGDs and case studies were conducted in conducive environment which

preserves privacy outside their homes, namely in Vocational Training centres, Universities and premises of Non-government organizations. Key informant interviews were carried out at their respective workplaces.

Study participants

For Case studies and FGDs

Unmarried youth between 15-24 years of age were selected

Inclusion criteria. The following were taken into consideration during sampling:

- Age of youth: Only youth aged 15–24 years were included in the study. To acquire adequate information from both younger and older youth, effort was made to recruit adequate younger 15-19 and older 20-24 aged youth in the sample
- Place of residence: Only youth who are permanent residents of the 3 selected districts were selected with adequate representation from all 3 districts
- Gender: Respondents were selected from both male and female youth so that adequate representation from both groups are included
- Sector: Respondents were selected from urban, rural and estate sector to include adequate representation from all sectors
- Ethnicity: Youth for case studies and FGDs will include adequate representation from all 4 major ethnic groups in Sri Lanka namely, Sinhala, Moor, Indian Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamils

Population and sampling. Quota sampling technique was used to accommodate the unmarried youth representing all the categories mentioned in the inclusion criteria above.

Focus group discussions

The method of focus group discussions (FGDs) could be considered as one of the appropriate approaches for ensuring adolescents and youth to express their own opinion about sensitive issues. The research team conducted twelve FGDs encompassing the districts of Hambantota, Nuwara-Eliya and Puttalam in Sri Lanka with 4 per each district. Given the sensitiveness of the issues, the team realized that participants felt more comfortable in expressing their views openly if they perceived other members of the group sharing similar experiences. Thus, participants were grouped into male and female segments. Therefore 2 FGDs with unmarried male youth participants and 2 with female

counterparts were conducted in each district with each male and female FGDs further divided as younger youth (15-19 years) and older youth separately.

Case Studies

The case studies provided a detailed, in-depth description of individual cases and served as examples of the larger phenomenon studied irrespective of the fact that the case was typical or exceptional. Case study interviews elicited the kind of information that the informant felt too private to talk openly in a group. Thus, it provided insights that enabled generalization to uncover basic truths related to their love affairs, dating and sexual behaviours.

The research team conducted 15 case studies with unmarried youth which are mentioned in inclusion criteria. In addition, to enhance the representation and to capture wider range of practices, unmarried youth were recruited from various backgrounds, including persons out of school, technical and higher education, employed and unemployed. Interviews were conducted in Hambantota, Nuwara-Eliya and Puttalam districts. Five case studies per district was conducted with unmarried youth with above mentioned characteristics.

Key Informant Interviews

A total of eight key informant interviews were carried out with governmental and non-governmental sector executives who either were engaged in activities related to youth or interested about them. Since the key informants were knowledgeable on the subject, these interviews were intended to gather information to assess the status of love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour of the unmarried youth in Sri Lanka. Following KII were selected purposefully for the study.

- (1) A Medical Officer of Health (MOH) from each of the 3 districts. MOHs were selected as they are the principal health service providers for youth at grassroot level including preventive health activities.
- (2) Consultant Venereologist who works in a health institution in one of the districts
- (3) Consultant Psychiatrist who works in a health institution in one of the districts
- (4) Divisional Secretary who works in one of the districts
- (5) A representative from an NGO who works with youth in any of the 3 districts
- (6) Head of a vocational training institute in any of the 3 study districts

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

Focus group discussions

Eligible youth of the selected districts were first identified through the assistance of a number of Non-Government Organizations, universities, various educational centres of the area. Thereafter, the eligible respondents were requested to arrive at the particular center. NGOs which were selected possessed health related experiences that collaborated in the data collection exercise. Apart from them, a few vocational, technical and educational centres in the selected districts also supported the data collection. This ensured that youth were provided with adequate freedom and opportunity to express their views and experience in an environment which is conducive for them away from home with close relatives. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants before seeking their consent to participate in the study. The duration for each FGD was about one hour. All the FGDs were conducted in local languages using a FGD Guide. Out of the study Investigators, an investigator of same Gender who was less than 35 years of age, with both medical and sociology backgrounds was tasked with conducting the FGDs to improve the outcome of the FGDs. FGD guide was only used to keep the discussion focused on love affairs, dating and related sexual behaviours of the unmarried youth, and participants were given adequate freedom and encouragement to express their own and their friends' experience on love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour.

Case Studies

Similar method was used as FGDs to recruit the participants for case studies. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants before seeking their consent to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted in Hambantota, Nuwara-eliya and Puttalam districts. No attempt was made to tape the interviews to avoid respondents being uncomfortable. At a given time two members of the research team sat with each respondent, one conducted the interview while the other took notes. In order to build rapport with the respondents, interviews were mostly conducted in places chosen by the respondents. The duration of a case study lasted between 45 mins to 1hr. Interviewer guide was used to capture main aspects of love affairs, dating and related sexual behaviour. However, the respondents were given adequate freedom to explain their experience or of their friend's experience if they are confined within the scope mentioned above. In order to build trust among unmarried youth so that they could speak freely on their love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour, the questions in case studies were conducted in a sequence. Usually questions started with "Tell me about your family?", "What sort of activities you are engaged at present", "What do you prefer to do most?"

Data Analysis

Deductive thematic analysis was used for data analysis. All field notes and recordings were reviewed by two investigators for number of times to familiarize with the data so that they were able to select the important sections and recordings. These selected sections were translated to English language and thus transcription was completed. Important and unique characteristics and cues in the translated notes and transcripts were identified and coded systematically. Process of coding was completed by organizing the codes systematically. Then, the course of identification of themes by grouping of the abovementioned codes was carried out. Some identified codes formed main themes, whereas some codes did not lead to any identifiable theme. These codes which were cannot be categorized into a theme was grouped under “miscellaneous” theme. Then the synthesized themes were again studied with available data. The themes which did not have adequate substance to support by data were collapsed and excluded. Codes under miscellaneous themes if not fall under any synthesized main themes, were also removed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Below mentioned themes were formed following above steps.

- 1) Initiation of Love affairs
- 2) Dating and sexual behaviour, preferences, pattern and places
- 3) Psychological, physical and sexual issues and violence related to love affairs and dating behaviour
- 4) Assistance and advice on issues, problems in love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour

Following identifying themes and assigning group codes under each theme, each theme was described adequately. Themes were organized to form a sequence and continuity among the themes

Measures of Trustworthiness

Selection of participants and process of data collection was carefully planned and conducted to preserve the trustworthiness as its constructs of credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability were maintained throughout the data collection process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To improve the trustworthiness, the investigators conducted several rounds of reviewing the data to familiarize with the collected data. Thus, significantly committing time to improve the thoroughness with the data. In addition, several methods of data collection were used. These include case studies, focus group discussions and key

informant interviews. And triangulate the data to improve the data quality. Investigators kept data including the field notes and transcriptions organized according to the themes with the ones that does not fall into any theme under “miscellaneous theme”. In addition, investigators’ reflective thoughts on the data too was stored the data. During the process of code generation, investigators conducted weekly briefing where each member present their code generation process and reflection upon the work followed by thoughts and ideas by fellow investigators to improve the coding process. Documented records were kept in each of these meetings as reference and to audit the process of coding. During initial theme formation, all themes were considered despite initial assessment raised doubts on some themes where they are significant. We used diagrams and peer reviews to analysis whether identified themes fulfil the criteria for a major theme. Then all the remaining themes were reviewed with the data to assess whether they truly represent the data, ideas and views. Above-mentioned processes were conducted to maintain the trustworthiness to an acceptable level.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical clearance was obtained from Ethics review committee of Child Fund, Sri Lanka. Informed written consent was taken from all the respondents of case studies, focus group discussions and key informant interviews and consent from the parents were obtained, if the youth was less than 16 years old. Privacy and confidentiality were maintained throughout the data collection process with youth was given freedom to remain silent for questions and during discussions. Further they were given the freedom to withdraw from the study at any given time. Investigators did not obtain any personal identifiable markers such as name, address during data collection process.

RESULTS

Love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour among unmarried youth in Sri Lanka was grouped to four themes. These themes describe and capture the current status, factors, patterns in love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour among youth.

Initiation of Love Affairs

Majority of love affairs among Sri Lankan youth initiated through physically meeting which were usually limited to their close circles of interactions. These physical meetings are supplemented with the use of mobile phones and texting. Use of these traditional ways of initiating love affairs meant that, there is a close circle of people where they can find love in contrast to social and online platforms. This was evident by the responses in case studies and focus group discussions conducted. Majority have

commenced love affairs with either a friend at school or private tuition classes, vocational training centres, universities or within same village. This has confined the majority of Sri Lankan youth in choosing a partner within the same ethnicity, socio-economic class and geographical location.

“When I was study in Grade 13, I started my 1st affair with a girl. She was studying at a Girls School in Chilaw whereas I was studying in a Boys School close by. She was a Grade 12 Bio student. I first met her when we were going to the same private tuition class. Another girl from same class....same school helped me to start the relationship”

(A 21-year-old unmarried male youth from Puttalam district)

Dating and sexual behaviour, preferences, pattern and places

Many parts of Sri Lanka do not have separate places where couple could date. Many common places such as parks restrict either entry or close interactions of couples in Sri Lanka. Therefore, dating behaviour at early stages is usually confined to the common places the couple visit to carry their day to day work/ studies. General pattern observed among the youth is usually they prefer to start dating by visiting a place which is part of their daily routine; If both partners are from the same school, a place in the school where less people visit; if they are from same private tuition class, a place close to the tuition like bus stand or in public transport on the way or going back; If they are from the same village, less crowded roads. Such places were chosen by youth in Sri Lanka as physical dating “openly” is not encouraged by majority in Sri Lankan society. This is true within Sri Lankan education system as well. Within school premises such open dating is usually prohibited. However, this does not mean that such physical dating is not a common behaviour among younger Sri Lankan youth.

“I am having an affair with a girl. It started last year. She is also Muslim and is from my same school and studying at grade 11. We use to meet during the school hours. Sometimes, especially during school holidays I travel to her village to meet her close by her house near a by road which is not very crowded. If we want to meet at school, there is a place which is well hidden and a popular place among school couples. It is situated behind the toilets”

(A 17 year old school going male youth from Hambantota district)

With time these places change, Younger youth favouring public places away from usually visited places by them and older youth opting for riskier places include lodges and lonely, less crowded places. Mostly younger youth try out public places like public parks, beaches during the less crowded hours such as morning on weekdays. However, some older youth with time, look for places with more privacy and freedom to involve in sexual behaviour whereas some older youth still prefer to continue their dating at usual public places as mentioned above. Preferred places for sexual behaviour include lodges

which rent out rooms on hourly basis and box seats in cinema. Types of sexual behaviour ranges from touching sexual organs to sexual intercourse. However, none of the youth did express any instance where either of them or their friends having sexual activities in either of their partners residence. Only few male youths expressed female partner's residence as place of dating whereas none expressed vice versa.

In addition, many youths expressed that there is a growing trust to online communication methods for continuing their love affairs and dating irrespective of the geographical location, financial status or ethnicity. Many youths expressed that dating through online social media platforms and apps is financially favourable and culturally conducive than meeting in person. This was true for the couples who were able to date physically daily. Youth who meet their partners while travelling to universities, vocational centers or to work, expressed that the time permitted for dating through above methods are limited to less than hour or two. In addition, topics for discussion are limited as others could listen in. Therefore, they too use online platforms in addition to physical dating more frequently.

“At present I am having another affair who is studying an IT course at same Vocational Training Center. She is also working as an IT assistant in a company while studying. We usually meet daily while we are travelling to study and work. However still we chat 1-2 hrs on WhatsApp when we are home around 10-11pm daily. We feel that we can talk freely though WhatsApp even though we meet physically daily, as no one is close by”

(Male 20 year old student from Vocational training Centre in Chilaw- Puttalam district)

Some youth try to avoid common social media apps and platforms because; School going younger youth fear that others might observe their affairs and inform parents because Sri Lankan culture discourages love affairs and dating behaviour among school going adolescents; Some older youth values privacy. Therefore, some tend to avoid popular platforms among Sri Lankans like Facebook, WhatsApp and Viber.

“Now I talk with my girlfriend through “Line app”. I prefer this app as it is more clear and less people in Sri Lanka is connected to this app. Since using this app, sending of accidental messages by me is drastically reduced. I downloaded the app from Play store. I talk with her for around one hour through this app each day”

(A 19 year old student from Nattandiya, Puttalam district)

Role of Sexual behaviour in dating and love affairs

Most of the youth expressed that they were aware that at least one of their friends were sexually active with their partner contrary to the belief that conservative Sri Lankan culture would result in less pre martial sexual activity among partners. It was observed that in many such relationships, one partner (either male or female) is at least

few years older. Secondly, one partner usually dominates the relationship and decision making and the said partner is the older one. In addition, the older partner has a stable source of income, either by working or if female by a family member.

“Many of my friends had sexual relationships with their partners and I can remember that a girl who was studying same grade as mine, conceived following an affair with an elder person working in Army. She didn’t come to school following this rumour. Later I got to know that she has discontinued schooling and now she is married to that person.”

(A 18 year old Male school student from Hambantota district)

“There is another community where at least a single family member is employed in a European country, mainly Italy. Usually, this family member is the husband. Their spouses and children usually stay behind as they seek employment through illegal routes. Characteristics of this community are recently elevated to upper socio-economic class and generally not well educated. As the wives are usually left behind, it is a well-known fact that some of these wives have extramarital affairs with adolescent males including school children and these women are called “scooty akkas” which means older females who travel on motorbikes”

(Medical Officer of Health from Puttalam district)

Psychological, physical and sexual issues and violence related to love affairs and dating behaviour

Many youths faces challenges and problems due to their love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour. One such issue is regret, low mood and hopelessness due to breakdown of love affairs and following sexual interactions with the lover. There are instances where such youth lovers contemplate or commit suicide either due to impulsive act or due to depression.

“I wanted to end it with marrying her. However, she started another relationship with an Advance level student in same school. I felt like committing suicide. I seriously contemplated on ending my life. Luckily my best friend was there to help me”

(A 20 year old male youth from Chilaw-Puttalam district)

Physical violence also a significant issue among the youth love affairs. Usually society visualize only the tip of the iceberg where many kept hidden by the victim aided by the South Asian culture. Though it is a common belief that usually male youth are the perpetrator and female youth are the victims, there are incidences where these positions are changed.

Unwanted pregnancies are a negative outcome of sexual behaviour among unmarried youth. Several youths expressed such issues faced by their friends. Such unwanted pregnancies would have a long-lasting negative financial, psychological and social impact on the teenage mother, child and the family.

“One of my friends had an affair with married person.... Few months ago, she delivered a little boy. Unfortunately, that man disappeared from that area.....I think if she knew the ways and means of proper sexual and reproductive health, she would have never faced that sort of situation. Now they are facing severe financial hardships. It is not easy being a single mother. However, her widower mother looks after them”

(A female youth from Hambantota district)

Casual sexual interactions among unmarried youth with majority unprotected, is another issue which can have significant negative outcome among youth in Sri Lanka. This is a major issue in Nuwara-eliya district which consists of significant estate sector population in Sri Lanka which is a marginalized community. In estate communities, elders are out in the field plucking tea leaves from early morning to late evening which leave younger youth all alone at their homes. There is considerable number of females who work as housemaids in other parts of the country which aggravate the above situation. This exposes the younger female youth who have less knowledge on contraception and SRH, to have casual sexual interactions with similar aged male youth as well as older males. Sometimes, forcibly resulting in sexual abuse among these female youth.

“Due to higher early drop out from schools, more adolescents stay in their respective homes usually alone during daytime. As their elders are working in the field plucking tea leaves and clearing weeds sometimes more than 5 kms away from their respective homes. Female adolescents being at home alone during the daytime lead to formation of causal sexual relationships mostly unprotected with similar male adolescents in the neighbourhood and sometimes with older males. These relationships, most of the time, are mutual”

(District Medical Officer of Maternal and Child Health, Nuwara-eliya)

The geographical and related socio-cultural variation in sexual interactions among unmarried youth in Sri Lanka was evident as male youth in Puttalam district revealed difference circumstances which led to unprotected casual sex. Mainly in coastal areas of Puttalam district, where tourism industry is established, many illegal establishments providing commercial sex are present despite Sri Lankan law does not permit commercial sex of any form in the country. Significant number of school going youth visit these places to obtain paid sex. As these places are not regulated, these youth are susceptible for STIs. STIs carry a significant stigma in Sri Lanka which result in late presentation as such youth are unveiling to inform their parents of their condition and are financially dependent on their parents.

“Youths seek employment at much younger age. Their employment preference includes working in small & medium scale tourist hotels and small “Chinese” restaurants. Their sexual behaviour is risky. They usually seek the services of commercial sex workers. To meet the demand, there are many places which provide commercial sex services. Usually the women who serve as commercial sex workers have emigrated from other areas of the country to seek employment. They reside in

boarding places and usually cover their true occupation by claiming that they work in textile factories. Network of three-wheel drivers usually direct the customers and sometimes get paid by the commercial sex workers as provision of sex. It is hard to predict the prevalence of STIs in youths in Puttalam district as most of them bypass STI clinics within the district to seek treatment from STI clinics in Colombo, Gampaha or get treatment from private sector because of the stigma attached to STIs.”

(A Medical Officer of Health from Puttalam district)

Assistance and advice on issues, problems in love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour

Most of youth were unwilling to discuss their issues related to love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour with their parents due to numerous reasons. Firstly, they don't want their parents to know about the love affair or the dating due to cultural norms in Sri Lanka. Secondly, youth feel that their parents would assume that their behaviour is immoral. Thirdly, many youth believe that their parents are not formally educated enough to understand their issues. Fourthly, they believe the cultural gap between them and their parents is too far to bridge and therefore they will not understand the problems. Most suitable person they would like to talk is male School teacher in his thirties for male youth and similarly a female school teacher for female youth.

“We don't want to discuss our affairs and sexual matters with our parents. Our parents are not knowledgeable enough. They will think that I am a bad person. Best person to talk would be “Sir” at school. But even he may not understand our problems”

(Six Male youth aged 16-19 years in Nuwara-eliya district)

However, many youths expressed that they end up in seeking advice from friends or similar aged close relations. Outcome from seeking advice from such people could depend on their maturity, beliefs and experience.

DISCUSSION

Sri Lankan youth main preference of initiation of love affairs was physical meeting complemented by calling or texting via social platforms or audio calling. Initiation of love affairs. This may be due to two factors as expressed by the respondents. First, early love affairs in Sri Lanka observed within close circles like in schools, same village etc. Secondly, there is a lag among Sri Lankan youth in catching up with the global revolution in communication and information technology. As, globally, using online platforms to intimate love affairs were observed. These include social media, online apps and websites (Frazzetto, 2010). However, in recent years Sri Lankan Youth is making up for the lost ground as many youths expressed willingness to trust online platforms with improved IT skills.

As mentioned before, majority of Sri Lankan youth finding a partner from same background have noticeable advantages as well as disadvantages. Main advantage includes higher chance of creating a strong relationship. It is more likely you find the like-minded people which is a recipe for a strong relationship. In addition, it is much easier to find time to spend together and interact and to participate in partners activities which he or she enjoys. Furthermore, the instances where chances of cheating are less when you know the partner in person and his or her close circle of friends at studies or at work (Bell & Daly, 1984).

Many studies have highlighted the powerplay within the relationships among youth in Sri Lanka. A study conducted among undergraduates revealed an undesirable male dominance in romantic relationships as well within sexual relationships. As mentioned by our study participants, Sri Lankan culture tend to direct the blame of any issue in a romantic or sexual relationship towards the female partner. This may have given unnecessary power to the male partner as revealed by Nalika and others as they describe “Gender-related double standards and imbalances of power play a crucial role in coercive and abusive sexual behaviour within romantic relationships. The undesirable short term repercussions on sexual and reproductive health among female undergraduates as a result of this” (Gunawardena et al., 2012). A separate study conducted among internal migrant female workers in the largest industrial zone of Sri Lanka- Free Trade Zone-Katunayake revealed similar findings. The study concluded that men’s desire to exert and demonstrate power over their female counterparts was a result of their disrespectful attitude towards females (Jordal et al., 2015).

Assistance and advice on issues, problems in love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour

Appropriateness and the wisdom of the advice and support given to youth who are having issues on love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour could determine the outcome of such issues and overall health of the concerned youth. Major factor which determine whether or not the youth would receive positive advice is the choice of the person they seek for help. Sri Lanka was one of the leading countries with suicides during the past decade. Though there is a reduction observed, it remains as a high suicidal rate country. Youth was a major contributory factor for the said “Suicidal epidemic” in Sri Lanka. As qualitative investigation among rural youth in Sri Lanka highlighted that female youths’ suicide in Sri Lanka commonly precipitated and initiated by “explosive feelings of anger, frustration, humiliation and annihilation, not by long-standing depression”. They further stated that these acts are a direct result from domestic disputes, quarrels between

intimates, and other crises of an intimate nature. This highlights the lack of professional support on handling issues related to relationships of romantic or sexual. Thus, pointing towards the necessity towards improving SRH and counselling services to Sri Lankan youth (Marecek, 2006; H. De Silva et al., 2015)

There is a focused effort by Sri Lanka to address the SRH issues of youth in Sri Lanka including addressing the issues related their relationships and other sexual and reproductive issues recently. At present Family Health Bureau of Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka has identified the gap in service provision of youth including SRH services. “Yowun Piyasa” was initiated to address the gap. “Yowun Piyasa” is an adolescent and youth friendly health service center based within government Hospitals Island wide. They were established to provide quality adolescent health services at the primary care level and to strengthen the public sector’s ability to respond to adolescent health needs. “Yowun Piyasa” facilities provide the health service package which includes information, counseling, preventive, promotive, diagnostic and treatment services, with referral, follow up and linkages with other services. However, lack of human resources and equipment is a cause for concern in providing services. In addition, lack of awareness among youth on the availability of such services too is an issue. At present youth are referred to these centers for services by Public Health Midwives, Public Health Inspectors and other staff at the offices of Medical Officers of Health (W. I. De Silva & Tissera, 2000).

Impact of COVID 19 on love affairs, dating and sexual behaviour of unmarried youth

One of the significant impacts of COVID-19 would be ‘Physical distancing’, which would have implications on sexual behaviour not only among the unmarried youth but among many segments of the Sri Lankan society and all other countries in the world. For each and every youth in the country “Physical distancing” is a novel experience and the 1st such occasion during their lifetime. How “Physical distancing” is affecting the love affairs, dating and sexual behavior of youth in Sri Lanka?

A very few studies have investigated implications of COVID 19 on sexual behavior of youth. However, some similarities can be identified from epidemics erupted in the recent past. For example, Ebola epidemic which originated in Africa. One such study during the outbreak of Ebola, has suggested that school closures which is an important step in social distancing often lead to increased sexual activity amongst teenagers (Kostelny et al., 2016). However, such similarity might not be an observation during the present COVID-19 crisis since school closure was implemented simultaneously with social distancing and lockdown in many countries including Sri Lanka. Yet, in rural villages in

Sri Lanka where such social distancing and curfew laws are not closely monitored, similar occurrence cannot be entirely ruled out. In the 'lockdown' environment most of the unmarried youth who by nature seeks freedom and exploration are confined to their houses. Closure of universities, schools, leisure activities and public places does not mean that falling in love, flirting, courtship and curiosity about sex among youth too are under 'lockdown'. Some youth may turn to internet including online social spaces using their computers and mobile phones for dating and to satisfy their sexual desires.

CONCLUSIONS

A mechanism to identify high risk youth groups: those who have multiple love affairs, youth with inadequate knowledge of STIs, youth with casual sex, victims of sexual harassment should be designed and implemented not as a one-off activity but as a sustainable continuous process coordinated by different stakeholders within the government and NGOs.

Sustainable strategies to provide services to high-risk youth should be in place, especially for those who may not approach the conventional clinics due to the negative attitudes among some providers on sexual matters, psychological and physical health issues due to love affairs and dating because of privacy issues and social stigma. Dedicated youth friendly clinics were started in Sri Lanka a few years ago and at present expanding; but these are facing major challenges in attracting and providing services to youth due to above mentioned reasons. These clinics should be provided with adequate facilities and trained and skilled health professionals to address sexual and reproductive health issues of youth including counselling services appropriately. Further, empowering the teacher counsellors to provide SRH services, and counselling services for issues related to love affairs and dating at schools could be another such solution to provide better access.

Youth in general and unmarried youth in particular, should be desensitized of the norms that inhibit the communication of love affairs, dating, sexuality and reproduction. The knowledge of adults such as the mother, the father and close relatives of the family should be improved, and young people should be encouraged to seek their advice as a source of information on such issues. The close family should be encouraged to engage in an open discussion with young people where needed. Improve the knowledge base of young people on social values and norms, whereby family solidarity could be strengthened. This could be an important supportive strategy to produce productive and balanced youth for post-COVID-19 era and for the well-being of Sri Lanka.

REFERENCES

- Bell, R. A., & Daly, J. A. (1984). The affinity-seeking function of communication. *Communication Monographs*, 51(2), 91–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758409390188>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- De Silva, W. I. (1998). Socio-economic changes and adolescent issues in the Asian and Pacific Region. In Asian Population Studies Series (Ed.), *Report and recommendations of the Expert Group Meeting on Adolescents - Implications of population trends, environment, and development* (pp. 46–81). United Nations. <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/biblio/9424553>
- De Silva, W. I. (2000). Transition from childhood to adulthood: Reproductive health issues among adolescents in the Asia-Pacific Region. In *Demography of Sri Lanka: Issues and challenges* (pp. 1–31). Department of Demography, University of Colombo.
- De Silva, W. I. (2008). *A national study on adolescent sexual and reproductive health*.
- De Silva, W. I., & de Silva, R. (2015). *Sri Lanka 25 million people and implications: population and housing projections 2012-2062*. United Nations Population Fund. <https://catalog.princeton.edu/catalog/10004916>
- De Silva, W. I., NPerera, B. N., & Anuranga, K. C. (2010). Below to above replacement: Increased fertility and its determinants in Sri Lanka. *Asia-Pacific Population Journal*, 25(2), 27–52. <https://doi.org/10.18356/ef4505c9-en>
- De Silva, W. I., & Tissera, S. (2000). Youth: Policy Perspectives. In W. I. De Silva (Ed.), *Sri Lankan Youth: Sexual and Reproductive Health* (p. 214). CildFund, Sri Lanka.
- Department of Census and Statistics. (2017). *Sri Lanka, National Demographic and Health Survey, 2016*. Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka. <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/Health/StaticInformation/DemographicAndHealthSurvey-2016FullReport>
- Family Health Bureau. (2013). *National Youth Health Survey*. [http://www.fhb.health.gov.lk/images/FHB_resources/AdolecentHealth/Publication/NationalYouthHealthSurvey2012-2013\(coverpage-58\).pdf](http://www.fhb.health.gov.lk/images/FHB_resources/AdolecentHealth/Publication/NationalYouthHealthSurvey2012-2013(coverpage-58).pdf)
- Frazzetto, G. (2010). The science of online dating. *EMBO Reports*, 11(1), 25–27. <https://doi.org/10.1038/embor.2009.264>
- Gunawardena, N., Weerasinghe, M., Rajapaksa, L., Wijesekara, P., & Chathurangana, P. (2012). Romance, sex and coercion: insights into undergraduate relationships. *Sri Lanka Journal of Psychiatry*, 2(2), 54. <https://doi.org/10.4038/sljspsyc.v2i2.4042>
- Jordal, M., Wijewardena, K., Öhman, A., Essén, B., & Olsson, P. (2015). “Disrespectful men, disrespected women”: Men’s perceptions on heterosexual relationships and premarital sex in a Sri Lankan Free Trade Zone - A qualitative interview study. *BMC*

International Health and Human Rights, 15(1), 3. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12914-015-0040-4>

Kostelny, K., Lamin, D., Manyeh, M., Ondoro, K., Stark, L., Lilley, S., & Wessells, M. (2016). *“Worse than the war”: An Ethnographic Study of the Impact of the Ebola Crisis on Life, Sex, Teenage Pregnancy, and a Community-driven Intervention in Rural*.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. SAGE Publications. <https://in.sagepub.com/en-in/sas/naturalistic-inquiry/book842>

Lowrie, S. H. (1951). Dating Theories and Student Responses. *American Sociological Review*, 16(3), 334. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2087606>

Marecek, J. (2006). Young Women’s Suicides In Sri Lanka: Cultural, Ecological and Psychological Factors. *Asian Journal of Counselling*, 13(1), 63–92. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228343591_Young_Women’s_Suicides_In_Sri_Lanka_Cultural_Ecological_and_Psychological_Factors

Ministry of Youth Affaires and Skills Development. (2014). *National Youth Policy*. https://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Sri_Lanka_2014_National_Youth_Policy.pdf

Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and, & Social Affairs. (2019). *Ten Key Messages*. <http://bit.ly/2SgEZSs>

Silva, H. De, Kasturiaratche, N., Senaviratne, S., Senaratne, D., Molagoda, A., & Ellawala, N. (2015). Suicide in Sri Lanka: points to ponder. *Ceylon Medical Journal*, 45(1), 17. <https://doi.org/10.4038/cmj.v45i1.7975>

Silva, K. T., & Schensul, S. (2003). Differences in male and female attitudes towards premarital sex in a sample of Sri Lankan youth. In S. Bott, S. Jejeebhoy, I. Shah, & C. Puri (Eds.), *Towards adulthood: exploring the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents in South Asia* (1st ed., pp. 88–89). World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/42781/9241562501.pdf;jsessionid=BD5CCCE78D210884DC8B46A54D1E02F9?sequence=1>

Sri Lanka Age of Consent & Statutory Rape Laws. (2021). Age of Consent & Sexual Abuse Laws Around the World. <https://www.ageofconsent.net/world/sri-lanka>

Synnott, A. (2017). *The Mystery of Love and Attraction | Psychology Today*. Psychology Today. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/rethinking-men/201712/the-mystery-love-and-attraction>