

Choosing Abstinence, Being Faithful or Condoms: Recent Trends in Sexual Behavior in Thailand

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Introduction

Although Thai society is tolerant to a variety of individual sexual practices, people still publicly express traditional values related to the value of female virginity and the need for women to maintain their reputation and family honor by not having sex before marriage. Yet the policy environment in Thailand differs from that in the US and many countries receiving US funding, where sex education based on abstinence has been the focus. Programs in Thailand to encourage and concentrate on sexual abstinence as the only or best preventive choice against HIV infection are not at all explicit. In practice these programs are implicit in Thailand, which as a conservative society maintains a number of barriers to providing sexual health services for young people.¹ Yet the gender-based sexual double standard and complacency in implementing sex education programs in the country frequently obstruct rigorous condom promotion efforts. Moreover the abstinence-only initiative, by design, straightforwardly obstructs and dissociates itself from condom promotion programs.

It is therefore logical to ask the question of whether it is possible to have a truly integrated ABC program in Thailand, with sufficient emphasis on the condom campaign, and how this agenda should be pursued. If abstinence and being faithful strategies work, and we can measure the extent to which they work, then there may be no need to rigorously promote condom use. But if abstinence and being faithful disconnect with the current sexual situation among the new generation, then condom promotion among young people has to be strengthened, either as a stand-alone measure or in a well integrated component with other programs. Too much reliance on traditional norms, in isolation of and in contradiction to safe sex measures, may run the risk of creating an environment conducive to unsafe sex where young people fail to be prepared to protect themselves, under conditions they had not anticipated. In this case condoms should be viewed not only as a back-up, but also as a leading and instrumental element in any HIV prevention program.

Comprehensive sexual behavior studies that show the current level of sexual risk of young people in Thailand are needed to investigate whether abstinence-only and be faithful programs could succeed among young people. The lack of data becomes especially crucial when we need to investigate issues of sexual health across all the segments of the population.

¹ Bronner, T., and Brocato, V. 2006. Comprehensive sexuality education versus abstinence-only -until-marriage programming. AIDS 2006 – XVI International AIDS Conference: Abstract no. THPE0875; Dailard, C., 2003. Understanding ‘abstinence’: implications for individuals, programs and policies, Guttmacher Report on Public Policy, Vol. 6, No.5, pp.4-6; Kanabus, A. and Noble, R. 2005. The ABC of HIV prevention. <http://www.avert.org/abc-hiv.htm>; Tangmunkongvorakul, A., Kane R. and Wellings, K. 2005. Gender double standards in young people attending sexual health services in Northern Thailand. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 7(4): 361-373.

This paper investigates these issues using data from the National Sexual Behavior Survey of Thailand 2006.² It explores the extent and determinants of the choice of abstinence, being faithful and condom use among younger and older male and female adults in Thailand. The operational definition of abstinence, being faithful and condom use will take into account marital status, reported sexual behavior in the past year as well as respondents' stated choice for HIV prevention. Data on safe or unsafe sex within the context of different types of relationships will be examined within these operational definitions.

Besides descriptive information on the extent and characteristics of the ABC choice, multivariate analysis in the form of multinomial logistic regression models will be used to examine the key factor determining the choice of abstinence, being faithful or condom use. Models will be run separately for males and females and for single and married respondents.

Methodological Issues in Defining Abstinence

Since age at sexual debut appears have declined rapidly in recent years in Thailand, while age at marriage has increased, the potential period of abstinence before marriage has lengthened.³ This increase has heightened the interest of researchers and program managers about the viability of approaches that stress primary abstinence (abstaining from first sexual intercourse) and secondary abstinence (abstaining from further sex before marriage for those who already have sexual experience).

In Thailand, abstinence is usually regarded as preserving virginity and virtue. This is seen in the Thai phrase of *rak nuan sa-gnuan tua* (love and preserve your young and feminine body and self). As seen from the phrase, the focus of abstinence is placed on women. For men, abstinence is not regarded so much as virginity or virtue rather is typically promoted in terms of a way of showing respect for women or as a means of STI and HIV prevention. In the paper primary abstinence, or abstinence from first sexual intercourse, is measured by two indicators. These indicators, defined below, are gross primary abstinence and net (or intentional) primary abstinence. Gross primary abstinence is defined as the percent of respondents who never had sex before marriage regardless of whether the abstinence is intentional or due to a lack of sexual opportunities. Net primary abstinence is defined as the percent who never had sex before marriage among those who say they intend to remain abstinent for HIV prevention. Those who express an intention to rely on condoms to avoid HIV prevention are excluded from this net primary abstinence measure, since they can be considered to be willing to have sex and that their celibacy is thus due to the lack of opportunity or sexual partners.

² Chamrathirong A., Kittisuksathit, S., Podhisita, C., Isarabhakdi, P. and Sabaiying, M. 2007. *The National Sexual Behavior Survey of Thailand 2006*. Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University.

³ Abac Poll Research Center. 2004. *Experience and Attitude of Adolescent to Sexual Behavior Problem: Case Study of 15-25 age People in Bangkok and Metropolitans*. Bangkok: Assumption University; Teantai, J. 2005. *Sexual Behavior among Thai Adolescents and Risk Behavior to HIV*. In Pongsapit, A. (ed.) *Gender and Sexuality in Thai Society*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University; Nansunanon, S. 2006. *Knowledge, Attitude, Belief and Sexual Behavior of Thai Youth*. Institute of Health Research, Chulalongkorn University.

The level of gross primary abstinence (the percent who never had sex among single people, either intentionally or not intentionally) is shown in Table 1. The majority of women (74 percent) who are single and not living with someone have not had sexual experience. The levels are much lower among men: 27 percent of males aged 18-24 and 20 percent of those aged 25-59.

Table 1: Sexual experience and preference for abstinence-only for HIV prevention among single respondents aged 18-59, by age and sex (in percents).

	Male			Female		
	18-24	25-59	Total	18-24	25-59	Total
Unmarried and never had sex	26.9	19.9	23.7	74.4	72.7	73.7
Choosing abstinence only	11.2	13.6	12.3	44.3	34.5	40.4
Not choosing abstinence only	15.7	6.2	11.3	30.1	38.1	33.3
Unmarried but ever had sex	73.1	80.1	76.3	25.6	27.3	26.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Weighted N	490	418	908	289	194	483
Unweighted N	1248	301	1549	838	145	983

Source: National Sexual Behavior Survey of Thailand 2006.

However those without sexual experience do not necessarily all prefer to abstain. Among men, net primary abstinence is low—only 12 percent of single men say that they choose to be abstinent. In other words nearly 90 percent of single men do not prefer to practice abstinence or celibacy, as they either have already had sex (76 percent) or would prefer to have sex and use condoms to prevent HIV infection (another 11 percent). These figures do not differ much by age; though a lower percentage of young men have already had sex only 11 percent say that they choose to be abstinent. Among single women, although only 26 percent say that they have had sex, and additional 33 percent say they would choose condom use over abstinence for HIV prevention. Thus net primary abstinence (by choice) is only about 44 percent for women aged 18-24 and 34 percent among the older group.

The End of Primary Abstinence: First Sex

If primary abstinence is to be promoted, especially for women, the nature of first sex is important and needs to be investigated. Since abstinence presumably means that women should abstain from sexual relations until marriage, the extent to which the partner of first sex is a spouse signifies the current prevalence of abstinence. If first sexual relations are non-marital the prevalence of abstinence until marriage is probably low.

Table 2 shows that for the majority of young people (both male and female) first sexual relations are not within marriage. On the contrary, first sexual relations are mostly “casual”, i.e., with boy friends or girl friends, lovers (referred to in Thai as *giks*), friends, acquaintances, fiancés, sex workers, strangers, and relatives. For men, first sex is almost universally non-marital, with 98 percent of young men aged 18-24,

and 88 percent of the older generation of males reporting that first sex was non-marital. A very small number of men (2 percent) currently engage in abstinence until marriage among the new generation of males.

Table 2: Proportion of first sex being marital or non-marital sex, among population aged 18 – 59, by age and sex.

First Sexual Partner	Male			Female		
	18-24	25-59	Total	18-24	25-59	Total
Marital sex	1.9	12.5	10.7	34.2	73.0	67.4
Spouse – registered	0.4	7.8	6.5	6.1	31.8	28.1
Spouse – not registered	1.5	4.7	4.1	28.1	41.2	39.3
Non marital sex	98.1	87.5	89.3	65.8	27.0	32.6
Boy/girl friend	68.8	42.6	47.2	58.0	23.1	28.1
Friend	14.1	14.3	14.3	3.0	1.5	1.8
<i>Gik</i>	2.7	0.3	0.7	0.3	0.0	0.0
Acquaintance	8.7	10.8	10.5	2.3	1.5	1.6
Fiancé	-	-	-	1.5	0.6	0.7
Sex worker	2.7	18.9	16.0	0.3	0.1	0.1
Stranger	0.8	0.5	0.5	0.3	0.2	0.2
Relative	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.3	0.0	0.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Weighted N	481	2249	2730	395	2345	2740
Unweighted N	1175	1472	2647	917	1417	2334

Source: National Sexual Behavior Survey of Thailand 2006.

For women, the prevalence of abstinence until marriage is much higher than among men. For women aged 25-59, only about 27 percent had first sex that was non-marital, therefore the majority of these women practiced abstinence until marriage. However, when the younger women are observed, a marked difference is revealed, with the majority of first sex (66 percent) being non-marital.

The paper will also investigate secondary abstinence (defined as abstaining from further sex before marriage for those who already have sexual experience), being faithful (defined as having only one non-paid partner in the past year) and condom use among those who are sexually active. Besides presenting findings on how younger and older men and women fall into these categories, the paper will model the determinants of these choices using multinomial logistic regression. The results are discussed in light of their policy implications, particularly with regard to designing HIV prevention programs for the younger generation.