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Female migrant workers' attitudes toward premarital sex in Binh Duong Province

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ABSTRACT

Premarital sex is one of the issues that female migrant workers currently face in Vietnam. This increases the risk of sexual and reproductive health issues among this vulnerable group. The article's goal is to comprehend and explain the attitude of female migrant workers regarding premarital sex while also analyzing the factors that influence their attitudes toward this issue. The theories of social control and migration are the foundation for this objective. The combined approach used in this paper collected quantitative data from 420 female migrant workers and qualitative data from seven female migrant workers who participated in in-depth interviews. According to research findings, female migrant workers are considerably more agreeable to premarital sex if both are voluntary, but they do not feel ready to discuss premarital sex with those around them. The level of education and length of residence in Binh Duong are factors that affect how female migrant workers feel about the premarital sex concern. In order to enhance their autonomy and reduce risky sexual behaviors, we can thus propose that female migrant workers, especially those with a residence length of more than five years, should have greater reproductive health capacity, including reproductive health knowledge and skills.

Keywords: *female migrant workers, premarital sex, reproductive health*

1. Introduction

Migration is one of the major factors impacting lifestyle changes, especially those affecting sexual behavior in a more liberal environment. Due to their low educational attainment, lack of understanding about reproductive health (RH)/sexual health, and lack of awareness

of how to protect themselves, female migrants are typically the most vulnerable group to RH-related accidents (Qian et al., 2005; Mantell et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2011; Ong et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2012; Tegegn et al., 2008; Qian et al., 2007; Shaokang et al., 2002; Hesketh et al., 2008). In addition, female migrant workers (FMWs) accept premarital sex (PS) more easily (Zheng et al., 2001; Puri & Busza, 2004; Hong et al., 2006; Tang et al., 2011). In contrast to the conservative sex culture in Cambodia, study by Nishigaya (2010) reveals that female garment workers usually engage in PS behavior. Tang et al. (2011) found that 13.1 percent of unmarried FMWs have a favorable attitude toward PS. Similar to this study by Cai et al. (2013) demonstrates that PS rates among unmarried FMWs in Shanghai, China, are relatively high (36.1%), along with the fact that they lack understanding of HIV/AIDS. Unmarried FMWs working in industrial zones in Vietnam also show PS behavior (Kim et al., 2012; Tran et al., 2018). The study by Tran et al. (2018) demonstrates that there are numerous hazards for young, unmarried FMWs in PS. Specifically, 12.6 percent of FMWs engage in PS behavior, and 27.8 percent of respondents indicated that they had not used any type of contraception in the previous six months. This can result in risky sexual behavior, which can then lead to unintended pregnancy, abortion, pregnancy problems, genital infections and others (He et al., 2012). In addition to analyzing and clarifying the elements influencing FMWs' attitudes about PS, this article aims to comprehend and explain the attitudes of FMWs toward PS.

2. Theory and research methods

2.1. Theory in consideration

The research applies Stack's framework (1994) on the relationship between social control and migration to provide an explanation for PS. The author argues that societal control lessened by migration patterns increases the chances of PS. Additionally, migration might weaken connections with known and significant subjects that limit sexual activity such as schools, senior relatives, and neighbors. Due to the transient nature of relationships, frequent travel can make it easier for someone to engage in sexual activity. Also, being away from home can reduce parental influence, particularly in terms of psychological support, which increases peer impact and encourages people to follow trends that are more comfortable for them. Further, the author claims that migration causes a void in parental supervision of their children, increasing the possibility of PS participation. Migration can make a person feel out of place and create a need to make friends in the new environment, therefore sex can be one of the strategies to battle loneliness. Moreover, the author made the argument that the joy of moving to a new place also promoted sexual arousal. Studies by Crockett et al. (1996); Nishigaya (2010); Lu & Qian (2022) all have the resemblance mentioned by Stack (1994) on the relationship between social control and migration while analyzing PS. According to research by Nishigaya (2010), migration weakens traditional normative values and decreases the ability of relatives to exert control; on the other hand, it increases self-control, personal freedom, and the influence

of friends in addressing one's own needs, such as increasing summer dates for fun, contact with friends of the opposite sex, viewing pornography, and dating from somebody that is typically prohibited in the presence of relatives. Additionally, using a motorcycle and a smartphone both raise the possibility of unintentional, spontaneous, direct, and independent contact with someone of the opposite sex. To sum up, migration is one of the reasons that weakens social control, raises the chance of PS and has negative impacts such as unintended pregnancies, violence, and sexually transmitted infections. Similarly, research by Lu & Qian (2022) illustrates that migration influences attitudes toward acceptance of PS, adultery, and homosexuality, emphasizing the significance of social networking in changing sexual attitudes toward greater openness.

2.2. Research methods

In our article, we used a mixed method of data collection. In-depth interviews with the FMWs were used to gather qualitative data in addition to quantitative data using a questionnaire. The survey had been conducted on FMWs who live and work in industrial parks in two regions of My Phuoc I ward, Ben Cat town, and Binh Chuan ward, Thuan An city, Binh Duong province. By March 2021, there should be 422.280 FMWs, according to the report of the Labor Confederation of Binh Duong province; consequently, using Slovin's (1960) formula, we determined that 420 FMWs will constitute the minimal sample base for the survey. The quantitative data was processed using SPSS 20.0 software, which focused on defining and explaining the FMWs' attitudes concerning PS and identifying the variables that influence the FMWs' attitudes toward the aforementioned issue. Additionally, direct interviews with FMWs were used to gather qualitative information. In this paper, we used data from seven of these interviews and cited the gleaned qualitative materials. To enhance security, the names of the interviewees were encrypted. Additionally, FMWs who were 18 to 49 years old and had a temporary stay in Binh Duong of six months or longer were the criteria for the survey sample selection for quantitative and qualitative data. The participation of the FMWs in this study was voluntary, and they were free to stop at any stage if they found it had uncomfortable or awkward questions. Prior to use, the data gathered from the FMWs has been kept private and encrypted.

3. Results

3.1. Female migrant workers' attitudes to premarital sex

The sexual attitudes and norms of adolescents and young people in developing countries are gradually changing due to the influence of mass media, social development, and modernity (Gao et al., 2012), with young people generally being more liberal in PS (Yip et al., 2013; Shu et al., 2016; Ghaffari et al., 2016). The following indicators are used in our study to evaluate FMWs' attitudes to PS: we can accept PS if both parties agree to it and we can share PS with others. The overall mean score (mean) of the FMWs' attitudes regarding the mentioned statements is 3.05, which illustrates their uncertain attitude toward PS.

TABLE 1. Female migrant workers' attitudes to premarital sex

Female migrant workers' attitudes to premarital sex	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean
we can share premarital sex with others	1.4	57.1	14.8	26.2	0.5	2.67
we can accept premarital sex if both couples agree to it	1.9	23.3	5.5	68.1	1.2	3.43
General evaluation	1.65	40.2	10.15	47.15	0.85	3.05

Source: Survey results of the project in May 2021

With consideration to uncertainty, the thought "We can share premarital sex with others" has an average score of 2.67. It shows that FMWs are still reluctant to share PS with others, and more respondents (58.5%) disagree with this attitude than agree with it. It illustrates that there are still some FMWs who believe that PS should be kept a private and confidential issue. The majority of young, unmarried FMWs still view PS as a private affair that shouldn't be interfered with, which is comparable to the study by Zheng et al. (2001).

PS is still a private matter for two people, in Ms. A's opinion, FMW, 32 years old from An Giang, who we quote below:

"PS is a private concern of two people not being shared with anybody. I wouldn't discuss it with others if I were in that circumstance because it made me feel embarrassed and shy. Perhaps people believe that having PS is a terrible thing. Nowadays, there are a lot of PS and cohabitating couples" (PVS02, FMW, An Giang, Thuan An city)

Agreed with Ms. A's viewpoint as well, FMW, 40-year-old from Tien Giang said: *"I think PS is my private problem that should not be revealed to anybody because if they understand, it is good to express it, but they don't, they will say it again. therefore, it's wise to stop sharing!"* (PVS01, FMW, Tien Giang, Thuan An city)

According to the study above, the FMWs did not truly consent to discussing PS with others because they were worried about how others could perceive them in light of Ms. A's and Ms. N's shared ideas. The attitude of FMWs is showed, however, significantly agreeable if PS is voluntary between two persons, with 69.3 percent of respondents. Young women accept their first experiences with sex if the relationship is secure or if it is with a partner they intend to marry, according to a study by Nguyen and Liamputtong (2007).

Ms. N.L., 12th grade education from An Giang who has lived and worked in Binh Duong for five years, serves as a good example to assist us in comprehending their viewpoints:

"If both couples volunteer, I believe it is still permissible. In my case, I will consent to premarital sex if I believe the other person must be certain that he? will be my partner for the rest of my life" (PVS07, FMW, An Giang, Ben Cat Town).

Similarly, Ms. T.N, FMW, 37 years old, from An Giang, voiced her agreement with PS if the two are accountable: *"In my perspective, pre-marital interactions are popular currently. It is allowed to have premarital sex if two people are in love and responsible."* (PVS11, FMW, An Giang, Ben Cat Town).

The qualitative findings of our study indicate that FMWs' attitudes toward PS are also considerably more relaxed; nevertheless, FMWs' openness to PS frequently comes with the caveat that PS must be "voluntarily", "responsible", or "must marry". Similarly to Stack's (1994) theory, our study proves that the migration process led to changes in the attitudes of FMWs toward PS, which decreased the power of conventional normative values to exert control over them and increased autonomy and self-reliance in the new living environment. In comparison to when they don't live with their families and communities, younger FMWs are frequently more open about sex (Cash and Anasuchatkul, 1993; Ford and Kittisuksathit, 1994). The study by Hsu & Du Guerny (2000) suggests that a decline in traditional values and norms occurs with growing social and physical distance from family and community; this can increase unprotected sexual behavior and have unfavorable impacts on RH.

In conclusion, the FMWs in our study have a reluctant attitude toward PS. FMWs did not feel at ease or prepared to discuss PS with others after taking into consideration each individual viewpoint, although they exhibited an open mindset when accepting PS if both volunteered. The majority of young, unmarried FMWs believe PS is acceptable if both individuals aim to get married or engaged, which is comparable to the study by Zheng et al. (2001).

3.2. Factors influencing female migrant workers' attitudes regarding premarital sex

The analysis's findings from Table 2 indicate that education has a statistically significant impact on FMWs' attitudes on the belief that "We can share premarital sex with others." In particular, the OR coefficient of the FMWs group with level 3 or higher education is 2.040, which indicates that this group agrees with the preceding idea 2.040 times more than the reference group, which is the FMWs group with level 2 and below education. This demonstrates that education plays a significant role in influencing how FMWs feel about discussing PS concerns with others. The more educated they are, the more relaxed and accepting they are of others' perspectives on PS.

Our study's qualitative analysis of the data reveals that while the majority of FMWs still view PS as a sensitive subject and limit sharing with others, there is still a minority of FMWs who feel comfortable discussing PS with someone with whom they have a positive bond. For instance, Ms. H.H., 11th grade education from Gia Lai who spent six years living and working in Binh Duong, stated the following:

"It's up to you whether or not to discuss your pre-marital relationship with others because many people find it unpleasant to do so out of concern that they'll be judged. However, in my experience, if I feel close enough to and trust someone, I can still talk to them about it when I need to confide in them or when I have inquiries."

(PVS13, FWM, 11th grade education, Gia Lai, Thuan An city)

TABLE 2. Factors influencing female migrant workers' attitudes of the idea that "we can share premarital sex with others"

Independent variables	OR Coefficient
Residence time (less than 5 years - reference group = 0) From five years or more.	.728
Working time (less than 8 hours – reference group = 0) From 8 hours or more	1.197
Marriage (unmarried – reference group = 0) Married	1.324
Education (grade 2 or below – reference group = 0) Level 3 or higher	2.040*
Religion (no religion – reference group = 0) Having a religion	1.472
Residential area (rural”– reference group = 0) Urban	1.491
Model prediction coefficient (R-squared -R ²)	.43
Number of observations (N)	358

Note: * Significant level * $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$; *** $P < 0.001$

Source: Survey results of the project in May 2021

Meanwhile, residence time and education both have an impact on FMWs' attitudes about the thought that PS is acceptable as long as both parties are willing to participate. According to the findings of our study, the OR ratio for FMWs with a residence time of five years or more compared to the reference group is 1.826, which indicates that this group has a relaxed and open attitude 1.826 times more frequently than FMWs with a residence time of five years or less. It implies that migration length has a favorable impact on minors' attitudes regarding PS with voluntary in that FMWs with migration periods of five years or longer express greater agreement on PS voluntarily than the group with migration periods of less than five years.

Migration is a factor that affects PS attitudes and behaviors, according to numerous prior studies (Stack, 1994; Zheng et al., 2001; Puri et al., 2004; Tang et al., 2011; Lu et al., 2012). According to Puri et al. (2004), migration has significantly changed the attitudes, thinking, way of life, and sexual behavior of young FMWs in favor of greater freedom. The vulnerability of young FMWs is thereby increased by migration because they are no longer under the authority of their families, communities, or exposure to social networking sites. Similarly, study by Lu et al. (2012) shows that FMWs modify their sexual behavior toward greater freedom after leaving their families and communities. According to Stack (1994), the migration factor made clear by residence time is regarded as a crucial signal that influences PS's attitude and behavior in accordance with the length of residence and has a favorable association with PS. Ms. T.L., an FMW from Thanh Hoa who has lived and worked in Binh Duong for ten years, expressed with us her opinion on PS if both volunteered:

“People are no longer very critical of premarital sex because it is so common. I've lived here for 10 years, heard it from others, and witnessed many individuals form relationships and stay together. Thus, I don't focus on premarital sex too much. In general, it is simple to develop feelings for each other when going to work because of living far from home, having no family, and coming here to work, enabling PS easy to develop. Premarital relationships, in my opinion, are still permitted if both parties are willing to have them because they are both of legal age.”

(PVS09, FMW, Thanh Hoa, Ben Cat town)

Unlike Ms. T.L, Ms. H, from DakLak, who has lived and worked in Binh Duong only for two years, exhibits an unfavorable attitude about PS:

"I suppose that since having sex is something that is frequently discussed, individuals should avoid doing it if you are not married. Women are severely disadvantaged if PS results in pregnancy, and men are already held in lower regard than women. Everyone is understanding, yet I believe they reject PS".

(PVS05, FMW, Dak Lak, Ben Cat town)

Along with residency time, education is a significant factor in determining how FMWs feel about the statement that "PS can be accepted if both voluntarily desire to do it". The OR coefficient of the educational group level 3 and above is 2.173, meaning that the group of FMWs with an education level of 3 or higher show 2.173 times more agreement than the FMWs group level 2 or lower for the concept that PS can be done if both agree. Thus FMWs with an education level of 3 or above can more readily accept the issue of voluntary PS than the FMWs group with level 2 or less education, proving that education is a factor determining the attitude of minors in voluntary PS. The results of our study, however, differ from those of earlier studies, which have shown that education plays a significant protective role against PS risks (Joshi & Chauhan, 2011; Azmawati et al., 2017; Yip et al., 2013; Adanikin et al., 2017), particularly that higher education increases one's capacity to prevent risky sexual behaviors in PS. Education is a factor that protects people from risky sexual behaviors and reduces the likelihood of beginning sexual relationships, becoming pregnant, and giving birth early, according to research by Joshi & Chauhan (2011). Referring to research by Wong (2012), pre-university students are more at ease with PS than first-year and third-year students are. Further, a study by Lat et al. (2020) indicated that PS acceptance is higher among young people with lower levels of education.

TABLE 3. Factors influencing female migrant workers' attitudes of the idea that "we can accept premarital sex if both couples agree to it"

Independent variables	OR Coefficient
Residence time (less than 5 years - reference group = 0)	
From five years or more.	1.826*
Working time (less than 8 hours – reference group = 0)	
From 8 hours or more	.826

Marriage (unmarried – reference group = 0)	
Married	.798
Education (grade 2 or below – reference group = 0)	
Level 3 or higher	2.173*
Religion (no religion – reference group = 0)	
Having a religion	.684
Residential area (rural – reference group = 0)	
Urban	.770
Model prediction coefficient (R-squared -R ²)	.061
Number of observations (N)	396
Note: * Significant level *P<0.05; **P<0.01; ***P<0.001	

Source: Survey results of the project in May 2021

4. Conclusion

According to the findings of our study, the majority of FMWs do not feel ready to discuss PS with others since, in their thoughts, it is still a personal and secret subject. In fact, FMWs showed an open mindset in embracing the PS issue with voluntary because PS is nowadays also quite popular. Thus, FMW's attitude toward PS is still ambiguous. Regarding influencing factors, education and residency time are the variables that have the most impact on FMWs' perceptions of voluntary PS.

The perspective of Stack (1994), who argues that residence length impacts PS in terms of migrating to a new residence, is essential for explaining how migration affects premarital sex. Longer residence times result in less social supervision from the family system or relatives back home, which increases the likelihood of PS. Stack's empirical study, however, has not confirmed his theory; in contrast, our paper's findings provide evidence for this conclusion. Although Stack (1994) has not emphasized how education affects attitudes toward PS, our findings indicate that there is a meaningful relationship between education and attitudes toward PS.

In certain studies by Joshi & Chauhan (2011), Nawi et al. (2017), Yip et al. (2013), and Adanikin et al. (2017), the authors found that having a high level of education reduced the likelihood of engaging in sexually risky behaviors. Additionally, research by Tran et al. (2018) indicates that FMWs with secondary school education or higher frequently participate in safer sex activity compared to the rest of the educated group. Education has an influence on FMWs' attitudes to PS in our study, as those with higher levels of education find it easier to share PS with others than those with lower levels of education. Moreover, FMWs' attitudes toward PS voluntary change in a more acceptable way when they pursue higher education. As a result, additional theoretical perspectives appropriate for FMWs should be used to explain this study's outcome. One of the article's limitations is that it does not fully address how friends and coworkers affect FMWs' attitudes to PS. We believe it is crucial to emphasize RH/sexual health skills and knowledge as a direct

indicator of the educational aspect in the impact on FMWs' attitudes and behaviors regarding PS. Similar results are presented in some studies by Nguyen et al. (2019); Yip et al. (2013); Joshi & Chauhan (2011).

Therefore, we can recommend that FMWs, in particular those with a residence length of more than five years, should have better RH capacity, including RH knowledge and skills, in order to optimize their autonomy and reduce dangerous sexual behaviors. Furthermore, it is necessary to take into consideration the increase of the availability of information and their connection to RH services in order to ensure that this vulnerable population has a healthy sexual and reproductive life.

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