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AN ASSESSMENT OF AN EFFORT TO DEVELOP
A NATIONAL SURVEY OF
YOUNG ADULT FERTILITY
IN THE PHILIPPINES

A Report Prepared By:
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ABBREVIATIONS

GOP	Government of the Philippines
NSYAF	National Survey of Young Adult Fertility
PCF	Population Center Foundation
POPCOM	Population Commission
RRT	Randomized Response Technique
SAQ	Self-Administered Questionnaire
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UPPI	University of the Philippines Population Institute

I. INTRODUCTION

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This report covers a two-week period (May 8-22, 1981) during which time the author met with Dr. Corazon Raymundo, of the University of the Philippines Population Institute (UPPI), to assist in the development of the proposed National Survey of Young Adult Fertility (NSYAF). The Government of the Philippines (GOP), through the Population Commission (POPCOM) and the Population Center Foundation (PCF), is attempting with various programs and services to reduce the level of fertility and population growth in the nation. In line with this goal, efforts are being considered that would lead to an increase in age-at-marriage of women.

POPCOM and the PCF are interested in the sexual, contraceptive, pregnancy, and pregnancy-related behavior of young, unmarried women. These women, for the most part, are neither exposed to nor integrated into the national family planning delivery system. Given the extensive social and economic changes that have occurred throughout Philippine society, there is reason to believe that sexual activity and pregnancy among this group of women are on the rise; there is, however, a dearth of reliable information about these phenomena at the national level and for significant sub-groups of the population. The lack of information impedes the development of policies and the implementation of programs designed to reduce the prevalence of premarital pregnancy.

The two subjects of interest, age-at-marriage and the sexual behavior of young, unmarried women, are not unrelated. To the extent that efforts to increase age-at-marriage are successful, (premarital) sexual activity and pregnancy are likely to increase beyond what would have occurred in the absence of any change in age-at-marriage. Although the net effect of an increase in age-at-marriage might be (some) reduction in the fertility of young women, the social costs of an increase in premarital pregnancy as a consequence of later marriage might exceed the benefits of reduced fertility. Furthermore, social concern aroused by increasing premarital pregnancy might redound negatively on programmatic efforts to increase age-at-marriage, as well as on other population program activities.

Premarital pregnancy creates personal, familial, and societal problems, especially among young women. Even when a pregnancy precipitates a marriage that otherwise would not have occurred, the outcome often is problematic for the individuals and families involved. The suspected (albeit undocumented) current rise in premarital pregnancy has led to the view that national programmatic efforts should be directed to young, unmarried women, with the aim being to reduce the magnitude of the phenomenon. Successful efforts to increase age-at-marriage will only heighten the need for programs and services oriented toward young, unmarried, women.

Given the absence of reliable information about the sexual, contraceptive, pregnancy, and pregnancy-related behavior of young, unmarried women,

the interrelations between these forms of behavior and marriage, and the intention to undertake efforts to increase age-at-marriage, it has been proposed that a national survey be conducted to collect the information needed to develop policies and programs on premarital pregnancy and increased age-at-marriage. The survey would involve personal interviews with a national sample of young women, ever- and never-married, aged 15-24, living in households. Information would be collected on the onset of index behaviors, current manifestations of those behaviors, and personal, familial, social, and demographic factors that, a priori or otherwise, are believed to explain the behaviors. The proposed survey would be conducted by the UPPI under the direction of Dr. Raymundo. USAID/Manila would provide support through the PCF.

Some specific aspects of the proposed study are discussed in Chapter II.

II. OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Omission of Males

Given the purposes and goals of the NSYAF, there is little, if any, reason to question (or even to discuss) the plan to conduct a national study of women of all marital states in the age range 15-24 years. It may, however, be worthwhile to discuss briefly the omission of males from the proposed study.

To say that males play an important role in sexual activity, use of contraception, pregnancy (and its resolution), and marriage is to state the obvious. The importance of the male's role would seem to be as great among married couples (at least with respect to sex, contraception, and pregnancy) as among unmarried couples, but that importance of itself is not sufficient to justify the inclusion of males in all fertility-related studies of married couples. (More often than not, males are not included. Scientifically, it is debatable that those studies that have included husbands have greatly advanced our ability to explain fertility levels and differentials among married couples.) Other factors, however mundane or practical, often argue against the inclusion of males in studies of marital fertility. Arguments against their inclusion in the NSYAF are at least as persuasive.

The budget is fixed; therefore, increasing the coverage of the study to include males would require a smaller sample of females. Given the lack of information on, for example, the level of sexual activity among females and the uncertainty about the number of female cases needed, in a study such as the NSYAF, any reduction in the number of women below that which would otherwise have been obtained could have serious consequences. For example, important cells in the analysis might have too few cases for statistical purposes. Furthermore, the inclusion of males would undoubtedly raise the unit cost of a completed interview, thus further decreasing the number of female cases. A survey of x males and y females would be more expensive than a survey of $(x + y)$ females.

It is unlikely that a study similar to the NSYAF but which included males would, or should, sample the two sexes in proportion to their distribution in the population (i.e., at approximately equal rates). Males, it is presumed, would be selected at a rate different from (and lower than) that used for females. (Relatively fewer males would be needed because they have a higher rate of sexual activity; to sample equally would be wasteful.) A differential sampling rate and the presence of households containing eligible males and females would combine to create a complicated sampling scheme that would be difficult to implement and control; the end product would probably be biased sample results.

The development of a questionnaire appropriate to the young, female population in the Philippines is difficult, time-consuming, and in some respects even problematic, but the development of a questionnaire for males is even more so. Any efforts along this line would delay the entire project.

There is little reason to believe that the simultaneous collection of information from males and females to describe or explain pregnancy among young women, or even to develop more effective programs to reduce pregnancy, is inherently better than the collection of information from females only, or from both sexes separately and sequentially. In the Philippines, where a "double standard" exists, data from each sex, even if they are accurate, are likely (or may appear) to be "inconsistent," reflecting the rather different experiences of males and females. Moreover, the information that males would provide on contraceptive use, pregnancy, and pregnancy outcome is likely to be far less detailed and accurate than comparable information from females. Under these conditions, it would be very difficult to integrate the data from the two sexes.

Experience in the United States provides other "arguments" for not including males in the NSYAF. In a U.S. study on comparable issues that included male and female respondents, the overall quality of the male data was below that of the female data; completion rates were lower for males; the recruitment and training of male interviewers were both difficult and expensive; and males' ability to obtain completed interviews was far inferior to that of females. (The latter deficiencies required a complete restructuring of the male questionnaire and the use of female interviewers, an alternative that might not be possible in the Philippines.) The NSYAF represents a new area of inquiry in the Philippines, with all the attendant problems of subject matter; it should not be burdened with the unnecessary additional problems that would occur if males were included.

To argue against the inclusion of males in the NSYAF is not to argue against the collection of information from female respondents about their male partners. Nor is it to argue against an eventual study of males to understand the part they play vis-a-vis female sexual behavior, use of contraception, and pregnancy. It may be better to focus a study of males more on the psychosocial aspects of their sexuality and less on behavioral aspects, such as contraceptive use. Regardless of the preferred direction, attention can be given to the development and pretesting of a questionnaire once the NSYAF is fielded. The task probably will be time-consuming, arduous, and frustrating.

Sample Size

A number of issues about the overall design of the NSYAF remain to be resolved. One such issue is sample size. Is the currently proposed

number--5,000--adequate? A related issue is whether urban areas should be oversampled and, if so, by how much. The optimal size of the sample is problematic; it might even be said to be "undeterminable," given the lack of reliable information on the level of sexual activity and the fact that the sexually active become the basis for subsequent considerations of contraceptive use and pregnancy (just as pregnancy becomes the basis for considerations of pregnancy outcome). Similarly, it is not possible to determine whether urban areas should be oversampled and by how much.

In the absence of information about the levels of sexual activity in urban and rural areas, a decision to oversample one area would be arbitrary (as would be a decision about total sample size, the issue of oversampling ignored). With an urban-rural break of 30-70, it is rather simple to posit "fairly reasonable" levels of sexual activity that would suggest no oversampling, or even oversampling, in rural areas. In this situation, the informed judgment of the individual(s) responsible for the NSYAF would be as good a basis as any on which to settle the question of oversampling (with available funds determining the overall size of the sample).

Regardless of the decision on oversampling urban (or rural) areas, with a total sample of 5,000-6,000, it is quite likely that, as the analysis (whether descriptive or multivariate) proceeds from sexual activity to contraceptive use and pregnancy and pregnancy outcomes, the number of cases available will prove to be too small for desired or anticipated comparisons or distinctions. This "diminution" of sample size may characterize many, even all, studies, but in the present context it poses a special problem. To mention that such a situation might arise is not to detract from the merit of the NSYAF, but to caution against expecting too much.

Sensitivity

There is concern about the presumed sensitivity of the items in the questionnaire and the possibility that respondents may resist participating in the survey or refuse to answer specific questions. The issue of sensitivity cannot be determined a priori, but it can be determined empirically (i.e., on the basis of adequate pretesting). If pretesting indicates widespread resistance, then, presumably, the decision to field the NSYAF would be canceled. If particular items in the questionnaire are the cause of resistance, then possible suitable alternatives could be found. However, widespread resistance to questions on, for example, experience of sexual intercourse or use of contraception, which do not seem to lend themselves easily to alternative wordings of varying degrees of sensitivity, could lead also to cancellation of the study. In every study there is some resistance; some eligible respondents refuse to participate and others refuse to answer specific questions. If pretesting indicates a level of resistance within acceptable limits, the NSYAF should be fielded without hesitation.

Design of the Questionnaire

The concern about sensitivity has led to the suggestion that the more sensitive items in the NSYAF be included in a self-administered questionnaire (SAQ) for the literate, but be made part of the interviewer-administered questionnaire for the illiterate. This suggestion implies that there is an association between being literate and being sensitive to certain items. If no such association exists, the suggestion has no merit. If sensitivity is fairly widespread (but is not associated with literacy), the results will be heavily biased in favor of the literate (assuming, as does the suggestion, that SAQ items are far less sensitive than comparable interviewer-administered items). If sensitivity is not widespread, the unnecessary expenses and complications that will have been introduced will produce non-comparable data.

The suggestion implies that comparably worded items are not in fact comparable in their effects. One could add that it is difficult to conceive of an SAQ and an interviewer-administered questionnaire that would contain the exact same questions in the exact same sequence. If the NSYAF can be fielded, the mode for obtaining information should be uniform for all respondents, and the questionnaire should be administered in its entirety. (An SAQ for all respondents is automatically ruled out because it would be inappropriate for the illiterate.)

Origin of Respondents and Site of Interview

Two other issues stem, in part, from the issue of sensitivity. One is the quality of the data; another is whether a household survey--a sample of eligibles living in households, and interviewed therein--is the best means to obtaining respondents.

Little would be gained by spelling out the defects, deficiencies, and drawbacks of alternative procedures. It is sufficient to say that a household survey, which follows the canons of scientific sampling, is the only means to producing an unbiased sample that allows for the estimation of various population parameters with corresponding sampling errors and that contains the "controls" (those who have not experienced or been exposed to some event) required to determine causal factors.

A household survey may be problematic if privacy during the interview cannot be ensured. Such a survey may be more of a problem in the Philippines than in the U.S., where interviewers will, if necessary, go to great lengths to ensure privacy during the interview. Interviewers should use every reasonable stratagem to conduct interviews in private; failing that, interviews should not be conducted or, if they are started, they

should be terminated. Logistically, it is simply not feasible to identify respondents in households and then conduct interviews at a central "interview point."

Quality of Data

In all large-scale social surveys, the question of the quality of data can be raised. Presumably, the sensitive areas of questioning proposed for the NSYAF could cause respondents to provide false information that would be both unusual and troublesome.

The writer is aware of three large-scale fertility-related surveys that attempted to measure the reliability of survey data.* In each survey, a sub-sample of the sample was reinterviewed shortly after the original interview (measuring reliability by asking the same items in different places of the original interview reduces the amount of information that can be obtained). The first survey involved married women in the U.S., the second was a survey of married women in Thailand, and the third was a survey of adolescent women (aged 15-19) in the U.S. Essentially the same areas of behavior that have been proposed for the NSYAF were considered.

Generally, the findings of the three studies were similar. There was a relatively high degree of consistency among the population (i.e., the distributions from the original interview and the reinterviewers were similar); there was greater inconsistency among individuals; and there was less inconsistency in responses to questions on behavior than to questions on attitude. In the third study extensive comparisons were made of sample-generated estimates and external, independent bodies of data; the survey also involved the application of the randomized response technique (RRT). The results of the various tests indicated that the overall quality of the data was at least as good as the quality of data from surveys of older, married women who, presumably, were asked less sensitive questions. These results do not, of course, prove that the NSYAF will generate data of comparable quality.

* N.B. Ryder and C.F. Westoff, Reproduction in the United States, Princeton University Press, 1971; J. Knodel and S. Piampite, "Response Reliability in a Longitudinal Survey in Thailand," Studies in Family Planning 8(1977):55-66; M. Zelnick, J.F. Kantner, and K. Ford, Pathways to Adolescent Pregnancy, Beverly Hills, Sage Publications (forthcoming).

The inclusion in the NSYAF of a reliability test depends on the allocation of available resources. An important, but seldom raised, question is: What should be done with a survey with relatively high levels of unreliability? Rarely will a sponsor or investigator be willing to discard such a survey. For example, in the study of married women in the U.S., the investigators used some of the weakest, and most unreliable, items in their analyses.

It must be recognized that even high degrees of reliability do not mean that the data will be either accurate or valid. If a respondent falsifies her answer because an item is sensitive, a second attempt to obtain the same information, whether in the original survey or in a re-interview, could, and presumably would, result again in a false answer. It may not be possible to determine (realistically) that data are valid.

The results of the NSYAF can be compared with other bodies of data; furthermore, some sense of the quality of those data can be obtained through limited and judicious use of the RRT. Most of the professional literature describes the RRT as a test of validity, but some investigators have argued--persuasively, if not conclusively--that it is a measure of reliability. In either case, the question remains: What should be done with the data if various tests either suggest or indicate that they are of poor quality?

Timing of Survey and Residents of Dormitories

The NSYAF has been described, in part, as a survey of women living in households. Among the groups excluded from this universe are young women who, by virtue of attending school, are living in a dormitory or comparable facility. It has been suggested that this living arrangement has significance and that such young women probably differ from those who live in a household while attending school. Data on the number of young women who live in dormitories do not seem to be available.

Because it is presumed that young women who reside in a dormitory differ from young women who live in a household, it has been suggested that the NSYAF be carried out during summer vacation, when residents of the dormitories are apt to be staying at parents' homes (or in some other household) and can be included in the survey. Technically, the universe would then be young women living in households and young women living in a dormitory (i.e., the usual place of residence) but staying in a household during summer vacation.

Two related points should be noted about enlargement of the universe. First, because all the respondents will be in households, it will be necessary to introduce questions that separate those whose usual place of residence is the household from those whose usual place of residence is a dormitory. Second, because the survey will cover women aged 15-24, one should expect that

some of the respondents will have resided in a dormitory. If the dormitory experience is truly significant, it should not be ignored or overlooked. The second point is more important than the first. The effect of a previous and completed experience (of life in a dormitory) will have begun to manifest itself in the behavior of respondents who have been graduated, but for those who were residing in a dormitory at the time of the survey, the experience may have been too recent to have had an effect on behavior.

Thus, the concern should be with previous dormitory residence, and not current residence. The implications are that the universe of inquiry should remain as it was defined initially, and the survey should not be taken in the summer. Additional work is needed to develop the questionnaire. The optimal time to field the survey may be the three-month period preceding summer vacation.

Households With More Than One Eligible Respondent

No matter when the survey is taken, and no matter what is decided about women whose usual place of residence, at the time of the survey, is a dormitory, a decision has to be made about the number of eligibles to interview in those households that contain more than one eligible respondent. One can argue both for and against either of the two alternatives: interviewing all eligibles or interviewing only one eligible. The interviewing of all eligibles in a household is cause for concern because of "respondent contamination" and reduction of sample heterogeneity. The advantage of this alternative is that it probably reduces the unit cost per completed interview.

If the decision is to interview only one eligible, the procedure that is used to randomly select one person for the interview should be as simple as possible. One method would be to list the eligibles in alphabetical order and uniformly select the first (or last) name on the list. It is possible, but extremely unlikely, that such a procedure could bias the sample selection. A more complicated procedure might have more technical appeal, but it would be more difficult to execute and would cost more.

Questionnaire Development

In principle, it is relatively easy to develop a questionnaire. A series of questions are developed to elicit information about the behaviors of interest (the "dependent" variables) and about the factors that are believed to be responsible for "causing" or "explaining" the index behaviors (the "independent" variables). The development of a questionnaire for the NSYAF

is likely to be difficult, time-consuming, and frustrating. In addition, the final document may suffer as a result of selecting certain subjects and covering a specific population.

Undue concern about sensitivity should not be permitted to inhibit the lines of questioning before pretesting occurs. Respondents often react in ways that differ from investigators' expectations. Judgments about the sensitivity of questions and areas of inquiry should (within the limits of reasonable scientific inquiry) be made on the basis of pretest results, and not a priori, to avoid deleting unobjectionable questions.

The NSYAF represents the first national survey of young women. It may, therefore, include questions that, although they are of interest to someone, are not relevant to the immediate concerns of the NSYAF. It may be cost-effective to do two studies at one time, but every effort should be made to exclude extraneous lines of inquiry, however interesting or otherwise important.

Care should be taken to avoid increasing the number of dependent variables, especially those related to sexual activity. Kissing, petting, masturbation, etc., may be interesting areas of study, but they are more appropriate to and can be better addressed in a small, intensive study on sexuality.

There is little in the extant literature on specific, testable hypotheses, as opposed to vague and unconfirmable speculation, and there are few empirical studies on young women's sexual and reproductive behavior. Thus, it would be possible to increase the number of independent variables in this area beyond "reasonable" limits. Again, pretesting should be useful in determining how many explanatory variables should be included. One should not ignore the possibility that too many such variables can be used.

Because the NSYAF may be viewed as "exploratory," it probably is better to be too inclusive than too exclusive. The pursuit of explanatory variables should not, however, be aimless; rather, each item that is included should be defensible, reasonably and logically. Because the NSYAF will be as much (or more) concerned with the onset of certain behaviors as with the current manifestations of those behaviors, additional care should be taken to ensure that the presumed explanatory factors do indeed temporally precede the behavior of interest.

In the development of the questionnaire, items may be included that apply to very few respondents. Again, pretesting should be useful in solving this problem; pretest results, though, are often ignored or excused. If very few respondents are eligible for a question or series of questions, very little will be gained by including those items.

Perhaps the major problem in developing the questionnaire is making specific the broad and general areas that represent the dependent behaviors and the explanatory factors, even where these areas are limited in number.

This is not simply a matter of "operationalizing" concepts; one must also decide what to "operationalize." A first step is to list the behaviors that will be studied during the survey. These may be premarital sex, contraceptive use, pregnancy, childbearing, and marriage. The next step is to translate these areas of behavior into specific aspects of behavior. It is axiomatic among social scientists that a person's upbringing is an important determinant of later behavior and, conversely, that clues to the interpretation of behavior are found in the family of orientation. But what aspects of upbringing and of the family are important? Once the family situations that are believed to be significant or determinants of behavior have been identified, efforts can be made to operationalize those factors.

III. THE FINAL ISSUE: ADMINISTERING THE NSYAF

III. THE FINAL ISSUE: ADMINISTERING THE NSYAF

In the preceding chapter, specific aspects of and recommendations for the proposed NSYAF were made. One question remains: Should the NSYAF be undertaken? The answer to this question should be placed in the context of the expectations for the proposed study and what it is likely to accomplish or provide. It is presumed the NSYAF will (1) provide information on the sexual, contraceptive, reproductive, and marital behavior of young women, and on the factors that explain those various forms of behavior, and (2) assist in the development of policies and programs that will lead to a reduction in the prevalence of premarital pregnancy and an increase in age-at-marriage.

If the questionnaire is designed properly (and if the study can be fielded and completed), there is no question but that the NSYAF will provide the desired, and otherwise unavailable, information on sexually-related behaviors. In a situation where data on these forms of behavior are not available, and are not likely to become available, the provision of "hard" data (as contrasted to rumor, speculation, personal impressions, etc.) would be an important contribution and could, by itself, justify the administration of the NSYAF.

It is likely that other information gathered during the study will not be particularly useful in explaining the forms of behavior, and the factors presumed to be of importance will prove to have little or no significance. Such "negative findings" should not be dismissed. The accumulation of knowledge requires the determination of what is important, as well as the determination of what is not important, to explain some phenomenon. At the least, negative results should help clear away some of the intellectual debris that characterizes discussion of the sexual and reproductive lives of young women. Investigators do not always know what to ask and how to ask. If they did, the survey process (to say nothing of other research modes) would be a simple, mechanical matter--and far fewer surveys would be performed.

It is not likely that the NSYAF will facilitate directly the development of policies and programs oriented toward young women, although it may indicate that family planning services should be made available and accessible to young women. The results of the survey may point to possible "lines of attack," but whether those lines of attack are feasible--politically, socially, etc.--is another issue.

Thus, the answer to the question of whether the proposed study should be undertaken can be provided only by the agencies and individuals involved. The NSYAF will (or should) provide data on the prevalence of certain forms of behavior, but it may provide little information to explain those behaviors.

Furthermore, it may reveal that current "explanations" are merely speculation. The survey probably will not facilitate the development of policies.

The author believes that the study is justified because it will provide data that can be used to understand sexually-related behavior. He would caution against assuming that the study will be useful in policy development.