SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN A DIGITAL AGE

Digital media are increasingly influencing the lives of young people. Around the world, adolescents are using digital media as a platform to learn, experience, and communicate. Across Asia, and increasingly in the Pacific, young people use smartphones, tablets and computers to engage in diverse online activities, such as social networking, instant messaging/texting, and browsing websites/ search engines.171 Mobile phone ownership among 15-19 year olds is high in several South Asian and Southeast Asian countries, and a notable proportion regularly use the Internet (figure 32 and 33). There remain gender disparities in access to digital media: in most countries with available data, boys have greater access to these technologies, particularly in South Asia.

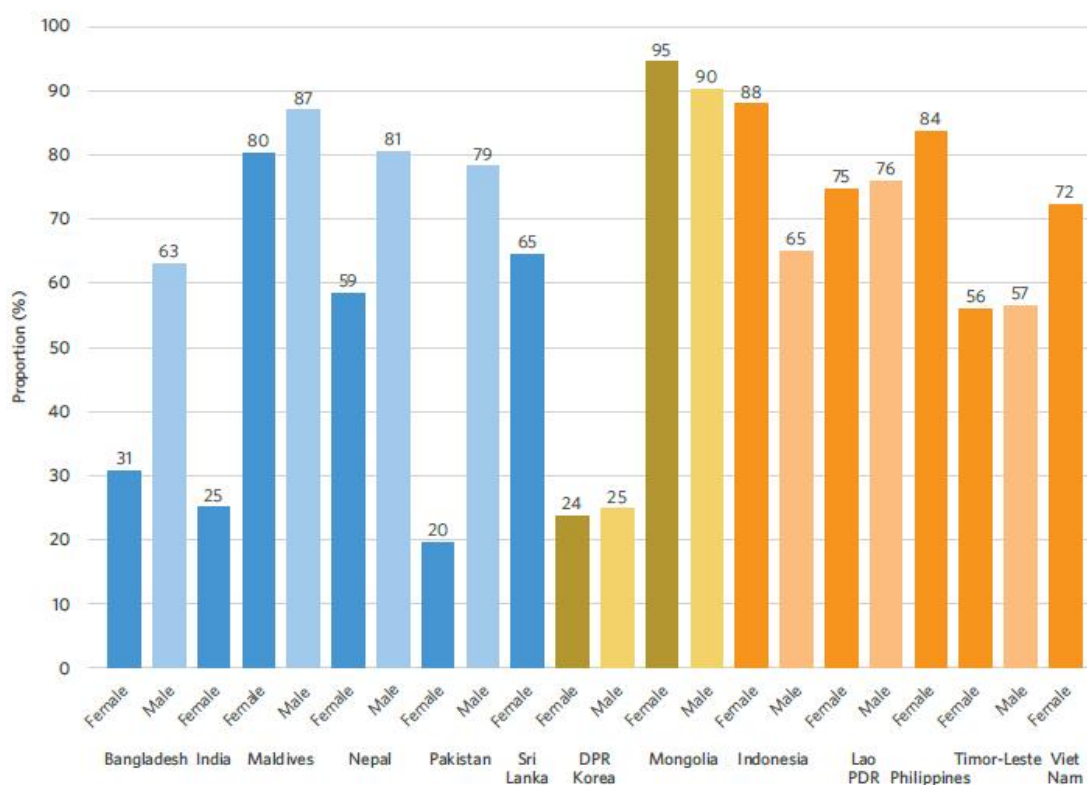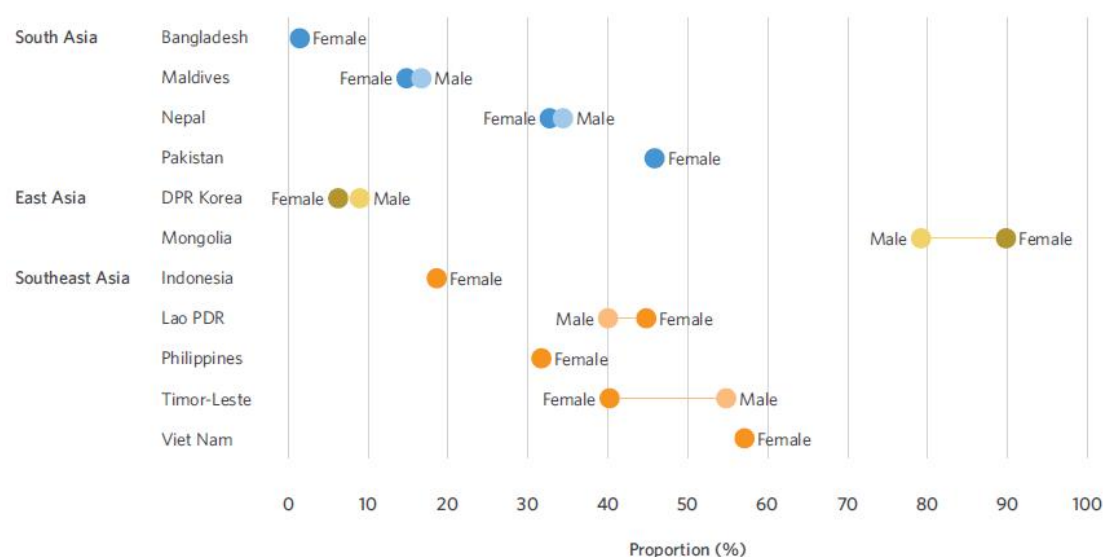**FIGURE 32. PROPORTION OF 15-19 YEAR OLDS WHO OWN A MOBILE PHONE**

Source: DHS and MICS (country estimates provided in appendix)

USES OF DIGITAL MEDIA IN RELATION TO SRH

There are several new ways in which the Internet has changed the way that young people communicate, learn and experience SRH (figure 34). In particular, the Internet offers increased access to information, people, and communities, and increased anonymity.172 These features offer important opportunities for young people's SRH.

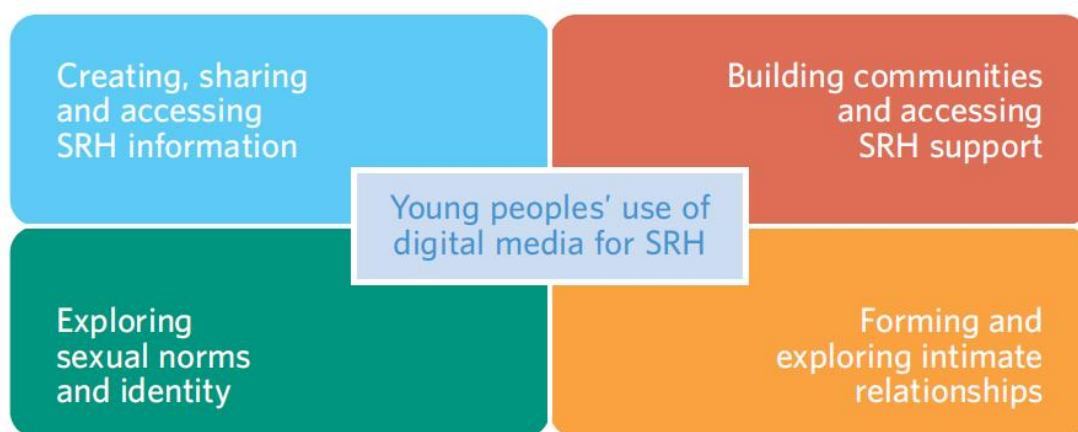### Creating, sharing and accessing SRH information

In the context of poor access to comprehensive sexuality education in the region, young people have turned to the Internet and social media to learn about sexuality and SRH. A survey of 1,432 15-24 year olds from across Asia and the Pacific conducted in 2019 by UNFPA found that the Internet (55% of respondents) and peers (56%) were the most important sources of information about sex, compared to schools (39%) (figure 35). Of note, however, this electronic survey sampled young people who had digital access (biased) and may not be representative of the preferences of all young people.

Around half of young people identify the **Internet/social media** as one of most important sources of information about sex.

FIGURE 34. YOUNG PEOPLE'S USE OF DIGITAL MEDIA FOR SRH

Creating, sharing and accessing SRH information

Building communities and accessing SRH support

Young peoples' use of digital media for SRH

Exploring sexual norms and identity

Forming and exploring intimate relationships

Source: UNFPA 2019[73]

FIGURE 35. PROPORTION OF 15-24 YEAR OLDS WHO STATE THAT THE INTERNET / SOCIAL MEDIA IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT SOURCES OF SRH INFORMATION

Female 54%

Male 57%

Transgender 58%
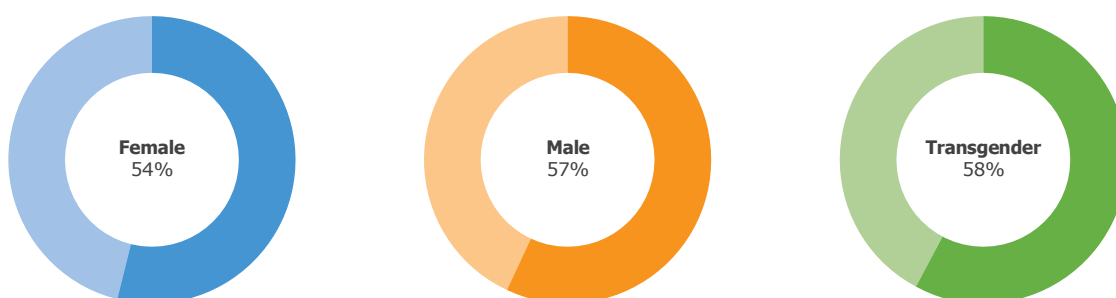
Source: UNFPA 2019173

The Internet offers unprecedented access to information from a wide range of sources and from all around the world. Anonymity also allows adolescents to seek information about SRH that they may otherwise feel too shy to obtain. Conservative sociocultural and religious norms often prevent families and communities from discussing sex and SRH openly. As a result, online sources information are particularly popular among young people because they can be reached privately, free from sociocultural restrictions and taboos, and with less stigma and

discrimination.

There are many different ways in which young people interact with SRH information online. Social media, such as YouTube and Instagram, have become popular places for sex educators and young people to share information in the form of photos, audio, text and videos. In this region, many websites (Love Matters, Sobat ASK, and Love9) are also present on social media, with dedicated Facebook pages and YouTube channels. For example, Youth Chhlat is a platform developed for Cambodia, where young people can access SRH information through their website, app, YouTube info-cartoons, mobile podcast, and question-answer services.

These platforms also offer Q&A forums, or "Chat Bots," where adolescents can ask a range of SRH questions that they may normally feel too embarrassed to ask. For example, Love Matters has a discussion page, called "Let's Talk," where users can either post their own questions anonymously, send questions privately to the website's moderator, or read the questions posted by other users and the answers provided by the website's moderators.

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**I went through YouTube videos for entertainment and came across HIV prevention, so I took a look.....
I used Facebook to see how to use a condom to prevent infection.**

99

(Young person, Thailand)

Building communities and accessing SRH support beyond regional boundaries

Social media, like Facebook, allow users to build online communities and stay connected with friends, peers and family, as well as finding and interacting with people that they may not have normally met offline. This can allow young people to find support from peers with similar experiences and questions regarding their SRH. For example, for young people with diverse SOGI/E, online networks can provide a source of support. Through online groups, young people are able to receive support and connect with SOGI/E communities that they may not be able to access in their offline world, particularly in settings where same-sex behaviour is criminalised or highly stigmatised. Through these networks, young people with diverse SOGI/E are able to discuss problems and concerns, openly acknowledge their sexual orientation and identity, and seek information and advice about SRH and other related issues from peers.

Supporting healthy adolescent development by exploring sexual norms and sexual identity

Adolescence is a period of intense social and emotional development during which sexuality, sexual identity, and gender roles are consolidated. It is also when young people acquire sexual values and norms, through their interactions with their peers and sociocultural contexts. Potential harms are discussed below, but digital media can also be a very useful tool for adolescents to develop their sexuality, and explore norms, values and identities, particularly in conservative settings where open discussion of sexuality is restricted.

'Sexting' is used to describe the sending, receiving and/or sharing of sexually explicit text messages, photos and video.

The 2019 UNFPA online youth survey found that **31% of girls** and **51% of boys** aged 15-24 years in this region had engaged in sexting.

Research from other regions indicates that young people are increasingly using social media to develop their

sense of sexual identity. This can include posting sexually suggestive photos to receive positive feedback from peers, in order to reduce uncertainties that are a normal part of puberty and adolescent development.178 Although the use of social media in this form has sparked intense concern amongst parents, teachers, researchers and policymakers, it is important to consider how these activities (when done safely) can fit within the healthy sexual development of adolescents. A growing body of research has pointed to the ways in which consensual sexting can potentially fit within the healthy sexual development of older adolescents, by helping young people evaluate their own sexual feelings and actions. Sexting may be used to seek positive feedback on body image from peers, and therefore help to improve self-esteem and sense of identity. Greater self-esteem and
a positive understanding of sexual identity may, in turn, improve young people's assertiveness in relationships and reduce risk-taking. It is important to note, however, that the existing evidence related to sexting is limited to North America and European contexts, with a significant gap in knowledge for this region.

> **Some health facilities use the internet and social media.**
> **One example has Facebook and Instagram accounts.**
> **Some of them have a hotline you can directly consult through WhatsApp."**

(Young person, Indonesia)

> **I think people who use the same dating app or an app**
> **that is mostly for sharing sexual issues can really get along**
> **and feel more comfortable sharing secrets.**
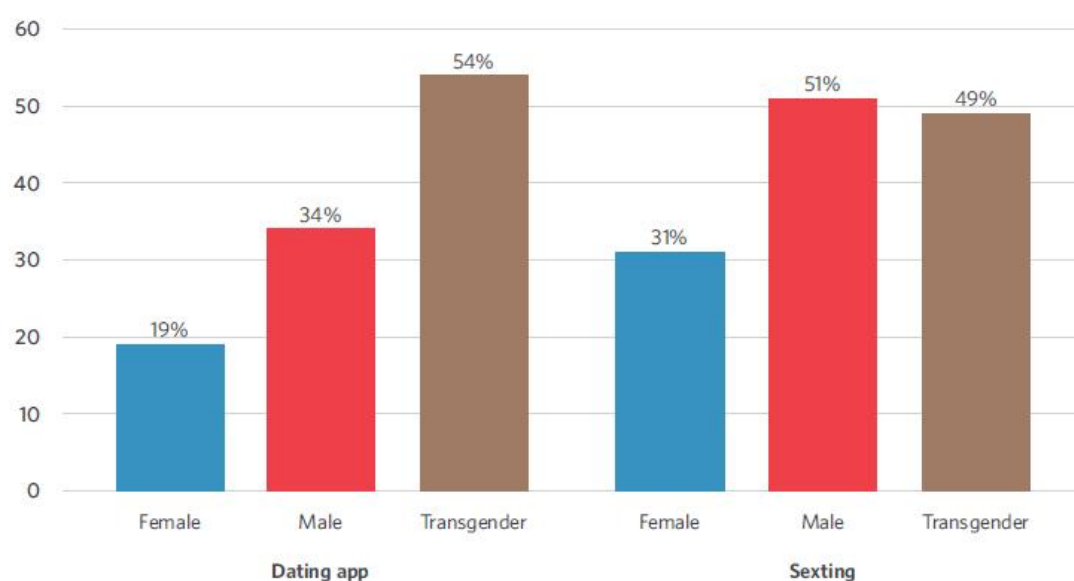
(Young person, Thailand)

Forming and exploring intimate relationships

Experimenting with relationships, within a safe environment, is a normal part of adolescent development. For many young people, this experimentation and aspects of intimate relationships are increasingly conducted using digital platforms.

Like other courtship practices such as dating or flirting, sexting can be part of normal sexual behaviour. For many young people, sexting may be a first expression of sexuality during adolescence. This is particularly true for young people with diverse SOGI/E, for whom sexting may allow private exploration of sexuality and intimacy. Sexting also has the potential to be beneficial as a way of sustaining intimate relationships, and is often conducted in the context of a romantic relationship to demonstrate love, trust and commitment. In this way, consensual sexting can have a positive role when done in a safe and mutually respectful context.

Sexting can be a safer alternative to other sexual behaviours, particularly for adolescents who are forming their first romantic relationships but do not feel 'ready' to engage in other sexual activities with a partner. Through sexting, young people can explore sexual thoughts and feelings, that are common during adolescence, while potentially avoiding the risk of pregnancy and STIs. Sexting can also be combined with other behaviours, such as masturbation, that may help young people become more familiar with their bodies and their likes and dislikes. While research in this region is limited, the 2019 UNFPA online youth survey found that almost a third of girls, and half of boys and transgender young people had engaged in sexting (figure 36).

FIGURE 36. PROPORTION OF 15-24 YEAR OLDS WHO HAVE USED DIGITAL MEDIA FOR SEXTING OR DATING APPS

Source: UNFPA 2019[73]

FIGURE 37. POTENTIAL SRH-RELATED HARMS OF DIGITAL MEDIA

CONTACT
- Online sexual grooming
- Online sexual abuse and exploitation

CONDUCT
- Discrimination and cyberbullying
- Non-consensual sharing of sexts
- Revenge porn

CONTENT
- Unwelcome exposure to sexually explicit content
- Inappropriate or harmful content (e.g. violent pornography)
- Misinformation

POTENTIAL HARMS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Unfortunately, the very features of the Internet that facilitate new opportunities also create new risks for young people's SRH. Common harms have been organised in the following categories: contact, conduct and content (figure 37).

CONTACT

Harmful contact refers to instances where a young person participates in risky communication with another person, particularly where there is a power difference-such as an adult. Within the context of SRH, risky communication often comes in the form of an adult seeking inappropriate online or offline contact with a young person for sexual purposes.

While the increased accessibility of social media can provide important connections with like-minded people, it can also facilitate easier connections between young people and potential predators. As young people are increasingly developing online profiles on these platforms, it has become easier for adults seeking inappropriate contact to connect with potential victims. By having much more access to communication networks, traffickers are also able to more effectively exploit young people. These contact risks include online grooming where they may solicit an adolescent for sexual purposes, or try to encourage sexual risk-taking. Young adolescents are particularly vulnerable to these risks as they are more likely to see stranger contact as an opportunity to make new friends. Following initial grooming, young people are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and online abuse. The online world has created new forms of child sexual abuse. Labelled as 'live streaming,' 'pay-per-view', 'on-demand child sexual abuse,' or 'child sexual abuse to order,' perpetrators sexually exploit children by asking them to perform sexual activities via webcam for money. There are examples of this in the Philippines, where older men pay for online sexual activities of girls aged 13 to 17 years old.

CONDUCT

There are various ways in which young people engage in conduct online that is potentially harmful to themselves and/or others. While these platforms can be used to provide peer support that reinforces self-esteem, they can also be used to do the opposite. Like the offline world, discrimination based on gender, sexuality, race, and disability are common on online platforms. In fact, due to the anonymity of online communication, online discrimination and cyberbullying can often be enhanced compared to the non-digital world. For example, girls commonly report experiencing increased surveillance and shaming if they post a sexually revealing image online. Young people with diverse SOGI/E report higher levels of cyberbullying through social networks in comparison to their heterosexual peers.

Another form of harmful conduct is the non- consensual distribution of sexts. This can come in the form of forwarding a privately sent image/ video to others, posting it on social media, or showing it in-person to others without consent. Non-

consensual sharing of sexts is significantly gendered: girls are at greater risk of having their sexts shared without their consent and consequently report experiencing far greater negative outcomes when their sexts are shared without their consent.

FIGURE 38. PROPORTION OF 15-24 YEAR OLDS WHO HAVE USED DIGITAL MEDIA TO ACCESS PORNOGRAPHY

Female
49%

Male
81%

Transgender
86%
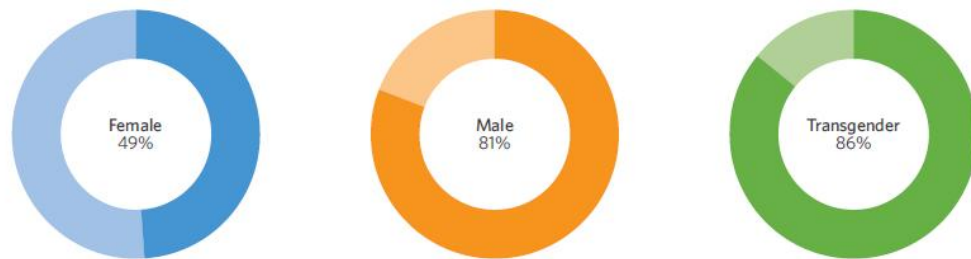
Source: UNFPA 2019[173]

A potentially more harmful outcome of sexting is the risk of 'revenge porn' or non-consensual pornography. 'Revenge porn' refers to the online distribution of private sexually explicit content of an individual by their partner on a social media site or pornography site. Often, this occurs following a relationship breakdown, with a partner using photos or videos that were taken consensually during their relationship to share online in an act of vengeance and demonstration of power over the victim. These activities can have damaging impacts for victims of revenge porn, such as humiliation, poor mental health, and offline harassment.

CONTENT

Content risks refer to instances where a young person is exposed to unwelcome, inappropriate or potentially harmful online content. This can take various different forms, including pornographic content, discriminatory content, and misinformation. Increased accessibility of the Internet has facilitated the dissemination of harmful content to young people. Strict anti-pornography laws exist in many countries in the region, however, a significant proportion of young people are exposed to pornography online, either by accident or deliberately seeking it out. In this region, around half of girls aged 15-24 years, and more than 80% of boys and transgender young people have used digital media to access pornography (figure 38). A study in Indonesia found pornography to be as readily and widely consumed as in less conservative countries. Significant gender differences were also observed, with men consuming more often, for longer periods, and at an earlier age than women.

There is good evidence that young people's attitudes, values and norms about sex are affected by exposure to pornography, particularly in the absence of access to comprehensive sexuality education.

Sexual activity portrayed in online pornography is often not safe, with limited content including the use of condoms or addressing issues such as consent. Of particular concern is the increasing accessibility and normalisation of violent pornography, and/or content that perpetuates harmful gender norms that underpin gender- based and sexual violence. Studies from other regions have indicated that boys experience greater exposure to more violent and abusive content and at a young age, and those exposed to violent pornography are 2-3 times more likely to perpetrate dating violence.

Another potentially harmful aspect of digital content is misinformation. While there are many comprehensive, reputable and high quality online SRH resources, there are also many websites and other platforms that provide unreliable, incorrect, or misinformation.

> 66
> **Considering the truthfulness of the information on the internet, it is complicated to distinguish between a genuine and an unreliable source...... this has resulted in many misunderstandings.**
> 99
>
> (Young person, Viet Nam)

DESPITE THESE CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS, DIGITAL PLATFORMS PRESENT AN IMPORTANT OPPORTUNITY TO BETTER UNDERSTAND AND ADDRESS YOUNG PEOPLE'S SRH

However, there remains a considerable knowledge gap in Asia and the Pacific, particularly research to understand the influence of digital media on young people's knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and health outcomes, and the effectiveness of using these platforms to improve SRH.

Although there has been an increase in digital tools adapted for Asia and the Pacific, they are still lacking in terms of reach, independent access, targeted content, and/or age appropriateness and appeal. Key to developing more effective and acceptable approaches is ensuring young people are engaged in the development and implementation of these platforms. These efforts can also support youth-led entrepreneurial activities, and include young people in dialogues about untested, creative alternatives to traditional websites, apps, and other digital media. By including the voices of young people, there is potential for the development of culturally sensitive, age-appropriate and innovative digital tools that reduce the risk of harm and support SRH.

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