

Premarital Abortion in China: Cohort Trends and Educational Gradients

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In China, there is greater theoretical and practical significance in studying abortion by marital status. On the one hand, premarital abortion is important for understanding China's second demographic transition. The proportion of premarital pregnancies has been rising in China in recent years, but marriage is still a necessary precondition for childbearing, and out-of-wedlock births are not generally accepted by society. The vast majority of premarital pregnancies do not manifest themselves in an increase in single mothers, and if they do not pursue a marriage, they can only end in premarital abortion. On the other hand, as marriage and childbearing are still common in Chinese society, the premarital and young people almost overlap, and sexual and reproductive health services are more often targeted at the married couples only, so pregnancy and abortion while premarital further increases the vulnerability of these young women in terms of their access to health services, and may affect their education, employment, and later life trajectories.

Previous studies of premarital abortion have been based on service records of abortion clinics or surveys of unmarried youth, and little is known about the incidence of premarital abortion in the general population due to data limitations. This possibility is offered by data from China's 2017 National Fertility Survey, which includes a nationally representative sample of 221,990 both single and married women born between 1960 and 1999. This study hopes to present a more comprehensive picture of the incidence of premarital abortion in China and further analyze whether higher education may reduce the likelihood of premarital induced abortion.

This study first descriptively analyzed the cumulative incidence rate, period trends in the incidence of premarital abortion, and used discrete-time, competing-risk survival analysis to predict the hazard of premarital abortion by educational attainment and birth cohorts.

The results discover that premarital pregnancies gradually mounted up with the lapse of time and birth cohort. As one of consequences on premarital pregnancy, premarital abortions also embarked on an upward trend, though their proportion to all abortions edged down slightly after 2010. Although women who have experienced premarital abortion took only up a minor share of less than 5 percent, this proportion is soaring upward in the later birth cohorts. Premarital abortion is more likely to take place and to occur earlier in the younger cohort.

Overall, education plays a pivotal role in preventing the occurrence of premarital abortions, and can effectively delay the occurrence of first abortions. The risk to premarital abortion for women with education at college and above is two thirds of those at junior high school and below. In the case of unintended pregnancy before marriage, education would have a positive effect on the choice of induced abortion. Only 62.3 percent of women with education at junior high school and below would take induced abortion as the option compared to those at college and above. This suggests because it may not only greatly reduce the occurrence of premarital pregnancies, but also increases the possibility of opting for induced abortion when women encounter unintended pregnancy before marriage.

This study provides, for the first time, data on the incidence of premarital abortion in the general population, which enriches the study of abortion in China and opens up the possibility of future international comparisons, as well as having great policy implications.