

## **2. Sexual initiation**

Culture and the immediate environment have a powerful impact on how sexual experimentation begins. The average age at first intercourse in the 1990s in different parts of the world ranged from 15 to 25 years of age (Kontula, 2000a). In most Third World countries, women's first experience of sexual intercourse is still linked to marriage. In such countries, sex life only begins upon marriage and usually results in pregnancy very quickly. Sex is thus subordinate to the institution of marriage and reproduction, leaving young people with very little in the way of sexual rights.

The sexual revolution that began in Western Europe in the late sixties created a situation where subsequent generations of young people have begun to have sexual intercourse an average of two years earlier than preceding generations (Bozon & Kontula, 1998; Kontula, 2003). After the first years of the 1980s, the age at first sexual intercourse has remained constant for the most part. For men, the age is almost the same in the different European countries. For women, on the other hand, age at first sexual intercourse varies significantly from one part of Europe to another. Nordic women experience first intercourse at a much younger age than women in the Catholic countries of Southern Europe. Mean age of first sexual intercourse is around 17 in the Nordic countries whereas it is close to 20 in the Eastern European countries. Young Nordic women also begin to have sex at a slightly younger age than Nordic men, whereas in Southern and Eastern Europe men start before women.

Together, Finland and Sweden experienced the western sexual revolution, which introduced reliable contraceptive methods, made information concerning sexuality available to young people, and shaped attitudes in a way that was favorable to sexual intercourse among young people. The sexual revolution did not reach the former Soviet Union until two decades later (Kon, 1995). This situation created a cultural boundary between Finland and the Soviet Union, and has also had a delaying effect in Estonia in terms of the age at which young people begin to have sex.

### **Acceptance of sexual relations among young people**

Public opinion regarding the meaning and acceptability of young people's sexuality has an impact on the conditions in which young people encounter their

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sexuality in their own imagination and in their own experiences. The fact that society is often negatively inclined toward sex among the young is reflected in the willingness of sex educators to relate the information young people crave, and in the preparedness of service systems to create and develop the services that young people need. This may lead to growing pregnancy rates among teens, a reality in, for example, the United States.

Since the institution of marriage has to compete with other alternatives, particularly among young people, and as there is a growing emphasis on individual sexual rights, the values that are connected to young people's sexuality have been in flux in the West. These value changes have taken place in culture and have also been reflected in the public opinion concerning issues that are related to young people's sexuality. International cooperation in the field of sexual research now makes reference to the sexual rights of young people.

In the early 1970s, only a few percent of men thought that sexual relations between young people could only be acceptable in marriage. One out of two middle-aged men (fathers of the young people of the present time), however, did expect that dating should involve the intention to marry before considering sexual intercourse among young people acceptable.

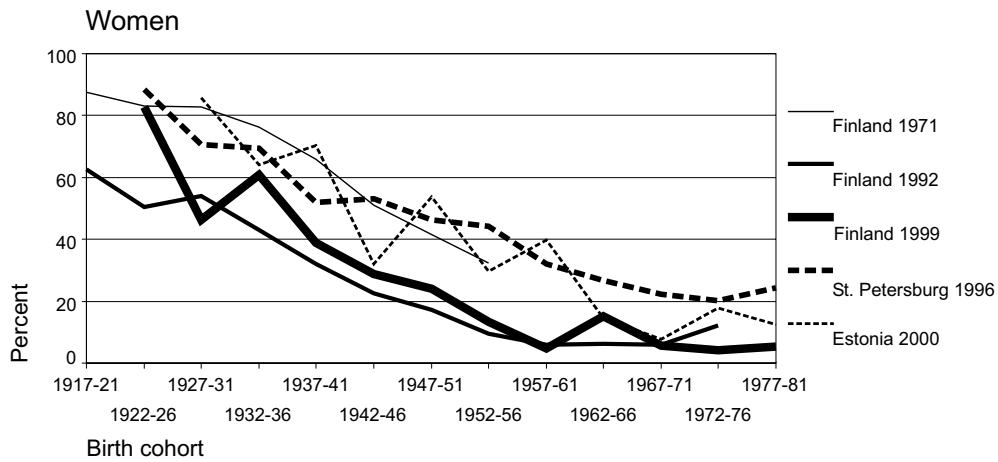
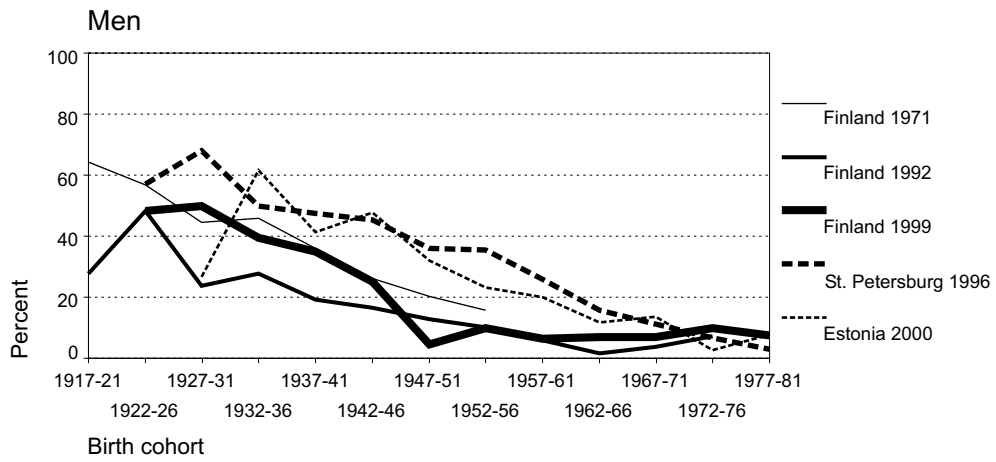
In the 1990s in St. Petersburg, one out of four men aged 54 or older continued to connect sex with marriage. The views held by young St. Petersburg men, on the other hand, did not deviate significantly from views among Finnish men of the same age. This points to a rapid change in sexual values in St. Petersburg following the break-up of the Soviet Union.

In Estonia, attitudes among young people concerning sexual relations were closer to those held by St. Petersburg youth, rather than those held by Finnish young people. It was more common among Estonians than among Finns to view dating with the intention to marry as a precondition for sexual intercourse among young people, although the proportion of Estonians in the youngest age group who agreed with this was already rather small. Only a few percent of Estonians required marriage before intercourse. Estonians were different from the inhabitants of both St. Petersburg and Finland in that they were rather unlikely to approve of sexual intercourse among young people in the absence of a steady dating relationship. Judging by the frequency of responses of 'difficult to say' in both Estonia and St. Petersburg, respondents in those places found it somewhat more difficult than Finns to express an opinion about sexual intercourse among young people.

When assessing the rate of acceptance for sex among young people, men assigned less significance than women to marriage or the vows associated with it. Steady dating has replaced the marriage institution even among older men, as they determined the type of relationship that was required for it to be acceptable to start having sex (Figure 2.1). Young men often thought that going on several dates was sufficient to make it acceptable for young people to have sex. In other

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**Figure 2.1 Accepts sexual intercourse only when dating in order to get married**



words, these men did not even think that young people had to be in a steady dating relationship – it was enough to be previously acquainted with the partner. This view has become much more common also among young men and women in St. Petersburg.

In the 1970s, four out of five middle-aged women and half of all young people expected at least the promise of marriage to find sex among young people acceptable. In the 1990s, half of all ageing women still agreed. Young and middle-aged women, on the other hand, had generally stopped requiring at least a promise to marry as a precondition for finding sex among young people acceptable. The prevailing moral among women now was that before sex, young people had to be in a steady relationship.

Women, more than men, felt that a relationship should be a committed one before approving of intercourse between young people. Even though some young women permitted intercourse for young people after only several dates, among women only a steady relationship guaranteed a broader acceptance of sexual relations between young people. The attitudes of St. Petersburg women in the 1990s resembled the corresponding attitudes among Finnish women in the 1970s. In St. Petersburg, being in a steady relationship had not yet achieved the kind of recognized and valued status that it had in Finland.

The proportion of people who found intercourse among young people acceptable on the basis of mere acquaintance or a steady relationship grew by several percentage points in Finland during the 1990s. Four percent of people under the age of 55 set marriage as a precondition for sex between young people. The attitudes of these people basically emulated the American ‘True Love Will Wait’ campaign.

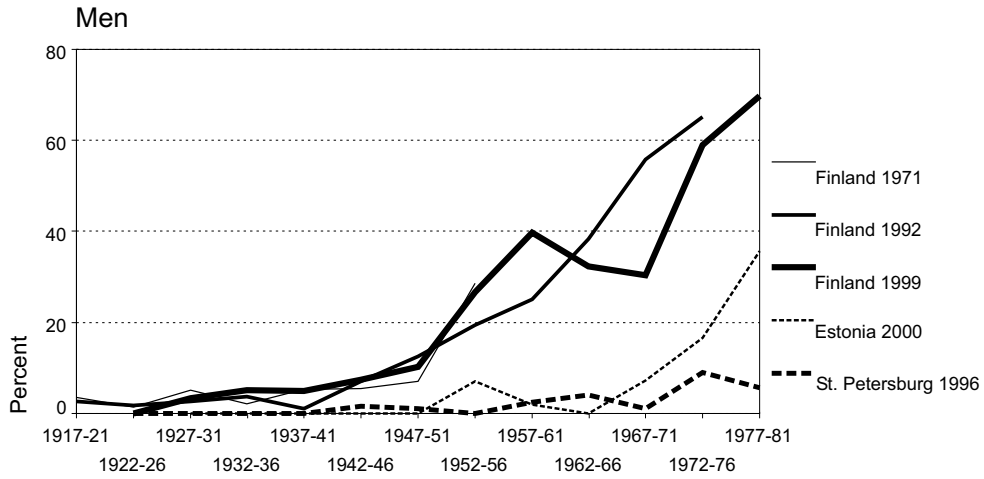
### **Talking about sex, and teaching young people about sex**

After the 1960s, it gradually became possible to discuss sexual matters at home and at school. Slowly, sex came out of the closet, in a manner of speaking. One factor that helped promote this process was the growing amount of information that was becoming available on the subject, including reinterpretations that assigned a more positive meaning to sex. Sex was no longer only something to fear or avoid, but was also seen as a force that could bring pleasure and bind together couple relationships that had become increasingly free. For those who were interested in the topic, mass media provided information and new interpretations, and works of nonfiction and various kinds of guidebooks were also available. These changes occurred only gradually because there was no tradition to point the way, and because adults were not accustomed to discussing sex or educating the young about it.

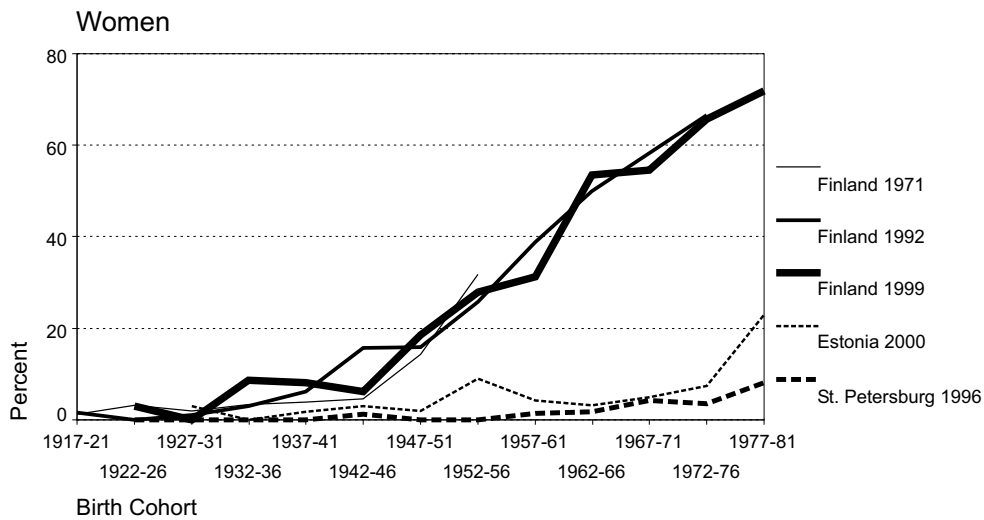
Finnish respondents’ assessments concerning the sufficiency of school sex education did not change from 1992 to 1999 (Figure 2.2). Not even careful

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Figure 2.2 Received enough sex education at school



Birth Cohort



Birth Cohort

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comparisons between age cohorts indicated that more people than before were questioning the sex education they had received in school. This is probably connected to a lack of expectation that schools should provide personal guidance or discussion in sexual matters. Sex education was primarily evaluated on the basis of the amount and quality of cognitive knowledge it provided.

The younger the age cohort, the higher the proportion of those who reported receiving enough sexual education in school. Among the youngest respondents (who had been in school in the early and mid-1990s), 70 % considered the instruction they had received sufficient, and only a few percent did not recall receiving any sex education at all. Among the oldest age groups, however, school sex education had been extremely rare.

In Estonia, school sex education was as rare as it had been in Finland prior to the sixties. Instruction began in the 1990s, but its quality is difficult to assess because of the small number of respondents in the relevant age category. The instruction did not occur at the rate at which it did in Finland, but it was more common than in St. Petersburg. In St. Petersburg, it was rare for respondents to consider sex education sufficient, at least among those who went to school during the 1980s. Half of the St. Petersburg residents reported not receiving any sex education at all during that period.

In Finland, mainly generations born in the 1950s and subsequently had been taught about sex in school. Starting in the late 1960s, sex education in school became more common. After the beginning, the level of sex education was improved in the 1970s and again in the late 1980s. Answers by both men and women to questions about school sex education corroborated each other well.

The proportion of those who considered school sex education sufficient rose in the 1990s among men aged 54 and under by 11 percentage points and by 13 percentage points among women. The increase is a result of the fact that the younger generation had received more and constantly improving sex education prior to the mid-1990s, compared with preceding generations. It will remain to be seen how the cuts in hours spent on sex education in schools, implemented in Finland in the middle of the 1990s, will affect assessments by later generations regarding the sufficiency of school sex education.

### **The beginning of dating**

Young people meet at school, at parties, and in the context of various hobbies and activities. But only once they establish a steady relationship do they get to know each other at a deeper level and receive feedback from the opposite sex concerning themselves, as young men and women. In a steady relationship, people test the compatibility between partner, relationship and one's own needs and expectations. A steady relationship also offers the physical intimacy that young people crave,

and the opportunity to be touched by the opposite sex. For most young people, a steady relationship has become a rather essential precondition for engaging in a first-time sexual experience, and young people's relationships may have strong sexual motives.

Generational differences were significant within each study year (Figure 2.3). The younger the group of respondents, the younger the age at which they had begun to go steady. In 1971 and 1992, men's responses were fairly consistent with women's responses, but in 1999, men in all age groups reported that they had begun steady relationships at a later age than women. This may be due to the bias in the 1999 data discussed in the Appendix.

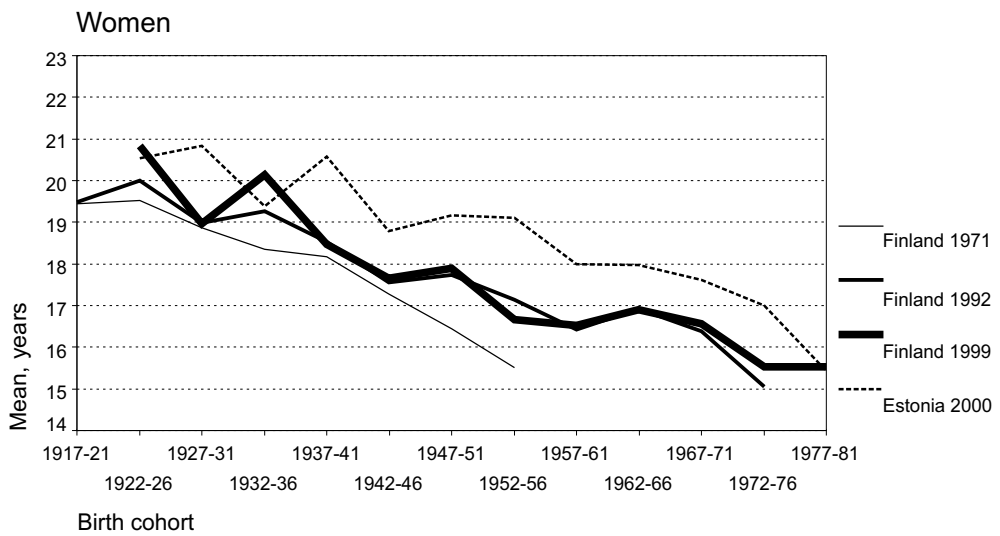
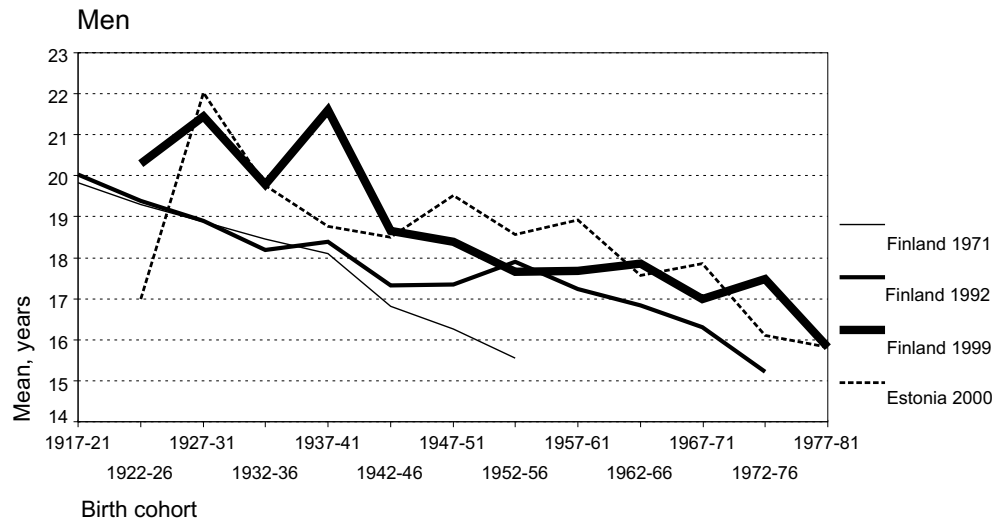
When comparing the responses of women with the same data in earlier studies, the age when they had their first steady relationship declined from the 1970s to the 1990s in Finland. The proportion of women aged 18–54 who had begun to go steady before the age of 16 was 18 % in 1971, 30 % in 1992, and by 1999 it was as high as 37 %. The proportions of women who experienced their first steady relationship before the age of 18 were, respectively, 55 %, 63 % and 73 %, and of those who had had a relationship by the age of 20, the proportions were 81 %, 84 % and 90 %. Women were experiencing steady relationships at an increasingly young age.

When the responses of women in different age groups were compared, it was found that women had begun to experience steady relationships earlier to a degree that was even more pronounced than shown above. For example, in 1971, only one-third of women aged 35–54 years had experienced a steady relationship before the age of 18, but among women aged 18–35 the same proportion was four-fifths in 1999. A steady relationship before coming of age had almost become the rule, not the exception. Almost half of all women studied in the 1990s had begun a steady relationship before age 16. This change was accompanied by earlier experiences of sexual intercourse, which will be discussed later.

In Estonia, the average age of men experiencing their first steady relationship was 18,2 years, women at 18,3 years; in other words, nearly the same age. The case was not the same in Finland in 1999, when women had begun one year before men. Estonian men reported starting a steady relationship at approximately the same age as Finnish men, though middle-aged men had begun approximately six months later than Finnish men. Young men in both countries had experienced a steady relationship at around the age of 17.

Estonian women had begun a steady relationship later than Finnish women. In 2000, the age when young and middle-aged Estonian women had begun a steady relationship was approximately the same as it had been among similarly aged Finnish women in the early 1970s. In the younger birth cohorts (except in the very young cohort born in 1977–81), there was a difference of one to two years in the age of starting dating between Estonia and Finland.

Figure 2.3 Age at first dating (going steady)





### **The sexually uninitiated**

Before examining the age at which people begin to have intercourse, it is necessary to remind readers that not all adults have experienced sexual intercourse in their lifetimes. Among people under the age of 25, lack of experience is usually explained by youth (they have not met the right partner yet). But when people reach the age of 30 without having experienced sex, it often means that they never will.

When we look at all four areas, it becomes apparent that of men aged 30 and over, 1–5 %, and of women, 1–7 %, had not experienced sexual intercourse in their lifetime. In Finland (1999) and in Estonia, only 1–2 % of men and women over 30 had not experienced intercourse, in Sweden 4 % of men and 2 % of women had not, and in St. Petersburg 5 % of men and 7 % of women never had.

In St. Petersburg, one can see that nearly one-tenth of those aged 40–64 had not experienced intercourse. This generation was young in the 1950s and 1960s. Presumably, the economically difficult postwar times, on the one hand, and strict moral rules on the other, acted as exceptionally powerful deterrents to marriage and sexual relationships. A similar effect can also be seen in Finland among women in the oldest generations in the 1971 and 1992 studies. By the late 1990s, the proportion of female participants who had not experienced sexual intercourse was already very low.

### **First time of sexual intercourse – at what age?**

Some people interpret ‘sexual experiences’ as sexual intercourse, only considering intercourse as the mark of the beginning of their sexual lives. Many do not even include oral sex as a criteria to measure the extent of their sexual experience. Conceptually, this study defines all touching and caressing, and the feelings that are associated with them, as sexual experiences – as is the case nowadays in studies conducted in other countries as well (Laumann et al., 1994; Lewin et al., 1998; Wellings et al., 1994). The first experience of intercourse does, however, have special significance as a central rite of initiation into adulthood. After experiencing intercourse, a young person feels ‘authentically’ sexually experienced. One measure of the event’s importance is also that almost without exception, people recall their first intercourse in detail. In 1999, people of different generations remembered their first intercourse in a very similar way, as did the corresponding age groups in 1992 and 1971.

Data on age at first sexual intercourse was available for each studied region and year of study. In Finland, the average age at first intercourse among men aged 18–54 had dropped from 18,3 years in the early 1970s to 18,1 in 1999. For women, the change was greater, the age dropping from 19,7 to 17,6 years (in 1992, men’s

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first experience occurred at age 17,9 and women's at age 18,0). In Sweden in the same age group, age at first intercourse was 17,0 for men and 16,8 for women, in Estonia, 18,3 for men and 18,6 for women, and in St. Petersburg 18,2 for men and 19,8 for women.

On average, then, Swedes had been younger than others when they first experienced intercourse. Differences between Sweden and Finland were minor in the youngest birth cohorts, but considerable in the older cohorts (Figure 2.4). The higher age at first intercourse among Finnish men in the 1999 study is a result of the selection of respondents, which is discussed in the Appendix. Particularly among men who were born before 1942, the study included people whose average age at first intercourse was higher and who had been more monogamous than average. But also among women of the oldest and middle-aged generations, Swedish women had begun earlier than Finnish women.

The age when men in Estonia and St. Petersburg first had intercourse did not differ significantly from Finnish or Swedish men, with the exception that Swedish men born in 1937–51 had started distinctly earlier.

Estonian men, born before the 1950s, had first intercourse at approximately the same age as comparable Finnish men. Estonian men born thereafter had first intercourse later than men in Sweden, Finland or St. Petersburg. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that men began to have intercourse at fairly young ages: nearly two years younger than Estonian men born in the 1960s. Estonian women in nearly all age groups began to have intercourse later than Swedish or Finnish women, though slightly earlier than women in St. Petersburg.

St. Petersburg men born before the 1950s experienced first intercourse later than men in Sweden and Finland. Differences between men born subsequently in St. Petersburg and the Nordic countries largely disappeared thereafter. Female residents of St. Petersburg began to have intercourse two to three years later than Swedish and Finnish women. The age at first intercourse among them resembled the situation in Finland in the early 1970s.

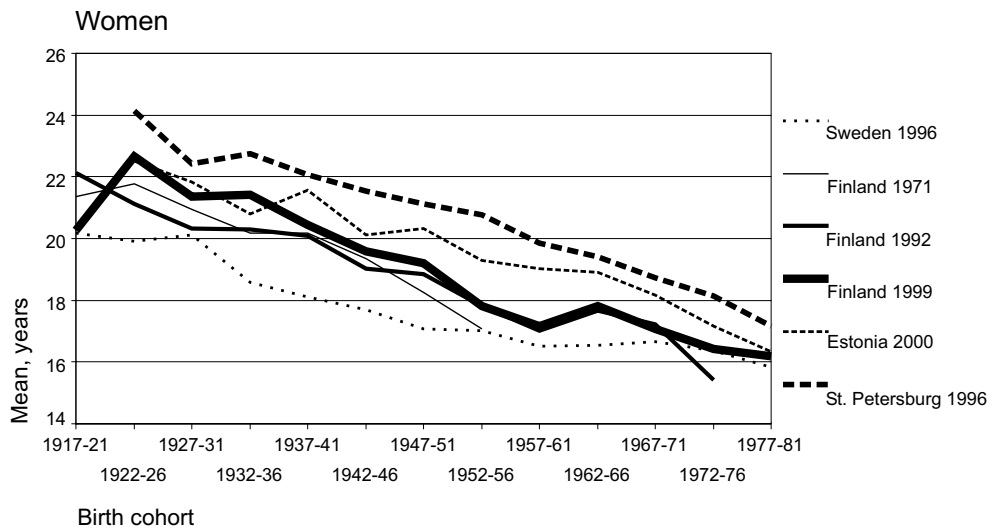
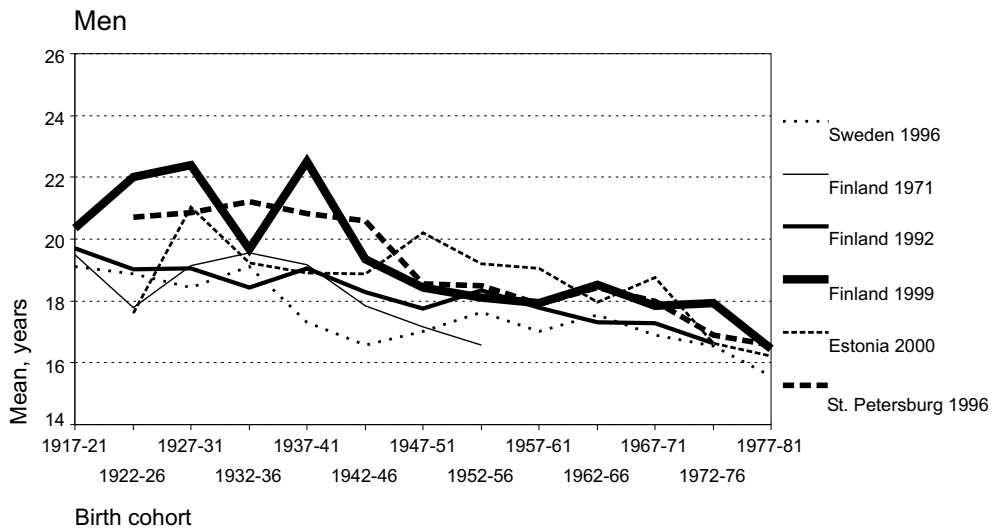
Next, we will compare differences in the age at first intercourse of men and women in different regions and generations. Swedish men born before mid-1940s reported that they began to have intercourse at a younger age than Swedish women of the same age. On average, Swedish men born thereafter experienced first intercourse at the same age as Swedish women.

In Finland, gender difference remained traditional for somewhat longer; in other words, men had first intercourse at a younger age than women. Men's age at first intercourse remained younger than that of women until the birth cohort of those who were born in the late 1940s. In younger generations, men's first intercourse occurred at the same age or later as women's.

The degree of change that has taken place in the age at first intercourse of Finnish women is reflected in the finding of the 1971 study, indicating that, of the

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Figure 2.4 Age at first intercourse



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women who were 18–54 years old in 1971, more than half waited until at least the age of 20 to begin having intercourse. In the 1990s, starting at that same age had already become rather rare. Sexual intercourse among people under the age of 20 had become a normal aspect of young people's relationships.

According to the latest findings regarding Finland, approximately three-quarters of women and over half of men had intercourse before turning 18. The explanation for women's earlier experience of intercourse is probably that psychologically and physiologically speaking, adolescent girls mature more rapidly than boys, and have relationships with young men who are on average slightly older than them. Since there have been fewer restrictions and less oversight of young women's early sexual experiences than before (cf. Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 1995), the fact that steady relationships begun to occur at a younger age has also gradually led to a decline in the age at first intercourse among women.

Estonian women born before the early 1940s had their first intercourse experience a couple of years later than Estonian men. Estonian men and women born after 1946 began to have intercourse at about the same age.

The age at first intercourse among St. Petersburg women, compared with men of the same age, followed a similar trend present in many Third World countries with a moral double standard and a strong macho culture, as well as in some Catholic Mediterranean countries and other Eastern European areas (Bozon & Kontula 1998; Kontula 2000; Kontula, 2003). Men reported experiencing first intercourse at a much younger age than women of the same age. The figures for level of sexual experience among St. Petersburg women, for example at age 18, were similar to those of Finnish women 20–30 years earlier. A difference of a corresponding magnitude between women in Finland and St. Petersburg can also be found in many other comparisons conducted in this study.

### **The first sexual partner**

In Finland, a typical first partner in intercourse for women in all age groups was someone approximately two year older. Among men, averages differences compared with the first intercourse partner were around one year at most. The ages also fluctuated in different directions in relation to the men's age within the different male birth cohorts.

The age difference between first-time sexual partners indicates that women generally choose an experienced man several years their senior as their first intercourse partner. Men mostly picked a woman of approximately equal age, but with prior experience. It is this assumption alone that allows the correlation between men's and women's responses. We speculate that women also chose, as partners, men (boys) of their own age after first acquiring experiences with men who were older and more experienced.

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The degree of commitment in the relationship where the first intercourse occurred changed significantly from one generation to another. One in ten Finnish women born in the 1920s and 1930s experienced intercourse for the first time with their spouse, and one-third or more had been engaged to their partner. Only a very low percentage of women in this generation reported that their first sexual partner had been a temporary acquaintance.

In the youngest age group, only one percent of women experienced first intercourse with their spouse. Women whose first-time experience occurred with a temporary partner made up nearly one-third. In the older age groups, the corresponding figure was one-fifth.

The explanation for this transition, too, was the late 1960s sexual revolution. Women who were young in subsequent years reported having a steady relationship (without a marriage vow) with their first sexual partner at a rate of 70 %. Although women's commitment to the first partner had declined significantly, the presence of a steady relationship was nonetheless important and had replaced the earlier requirement of being engaged as a precondition for intercourse.

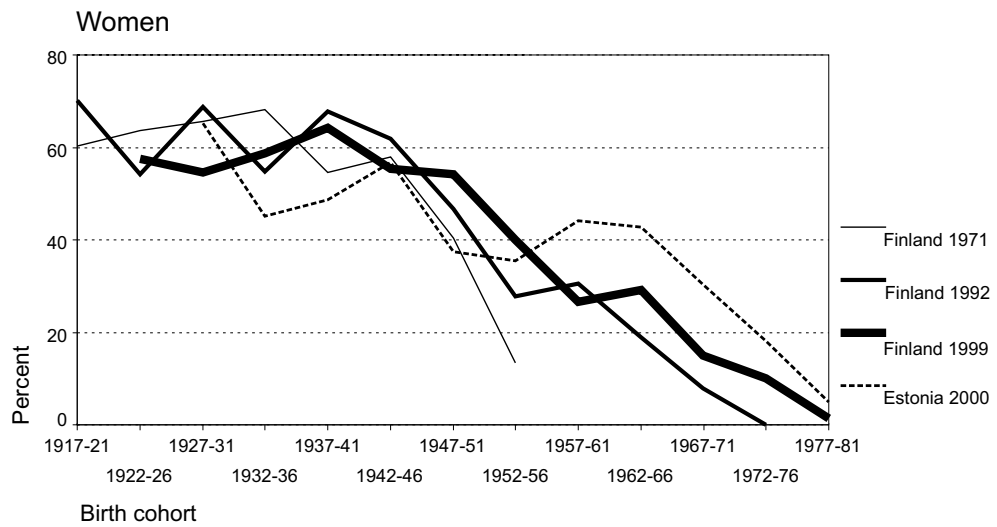
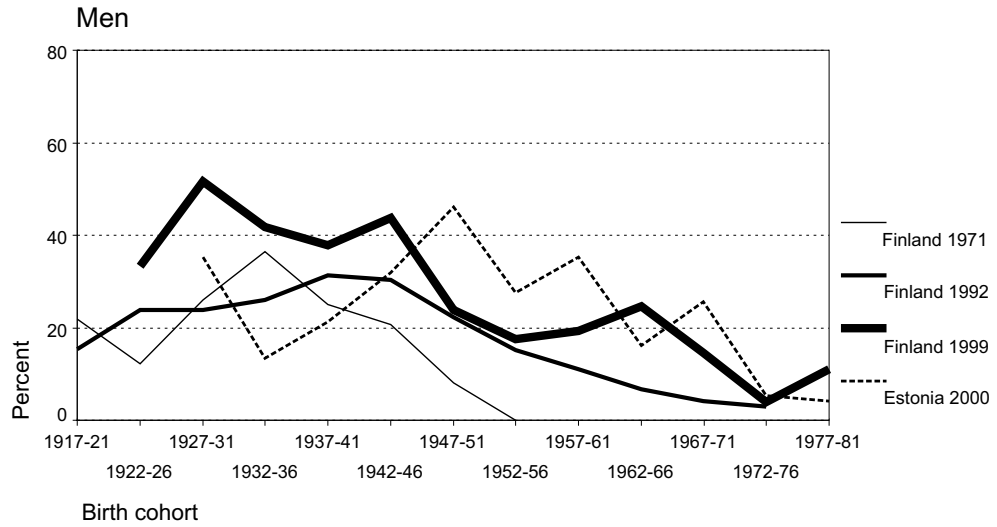
In the 1990s, men began increasingly to have sexual intercourse in the context of a steady relationship, at the same time as the proportion of men who experienced intercourse for the first time with a temporary partner decreased. Among women, temporary partners had become more common in first intercourse and the significance of an engagement had declined noticeably. Of men and women under age 55, only two percent had intercourse for the first time with a spouse.

In other words, some people married as virgins, having intercourse only after being married. In addition, many Finns and Estonians later married their first sexual partner (Figure 2.5). A majority of women born before the end of World War II married their first sexual partner. In most cases, intercourse occurred during the engagement, meaning that the promise of marriage had been made before sexual intercourse commenced. The sexual lives of women in Finland and Estonia were strongly tied to the institution of marriage at that time. Contraception was still undeveloped, and sexual intercourse could easily lead to pregnancy. Waiting to 'give oneself' to a future spouse was the safest way to avoid unwanted pregnancy.

An illustration of temporal changes is that of women under the age of 55 studied in 1971, 54 % reported marrying their first sexual partner (nearly 50 % of women under 35 reported this). In 1992, this proportion was 34 %, and in 1999 it was 26 %. Starting to have sex had become largely unconnected to marriage. In the youngest age groups only one in ten women married their first sexual partner, even post facto.

For men, first-time sexual intercourse has never been connected to marriage in the same way. In earlier decades approximately one-fifth of men married their first sexual partner, and this proportion did not change much from study to study.

Figure 2.5 Married the first sexual partner



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A majority of men had acquired experiences with other women before marrying. As cohabitation has become increasingly common, it is now rare to marry one's first sexual partner.

A comparison between Estonia and Finland shows that there were only minor differences among those born before the 1950s. Older Estonians married their first sexual partners at a rate that was nearly the same as that of Finns studied in the 1990s. In Estonia, this marriage pattern was preserved longer than in Finland. In the middle generation, the differences between the two countries were quite significant. Only Estonians born after the middle of the 1960s (and men earlier than women) experimented with different partners before making the marriage commitment, in the manner of their young Finnish counterparts.

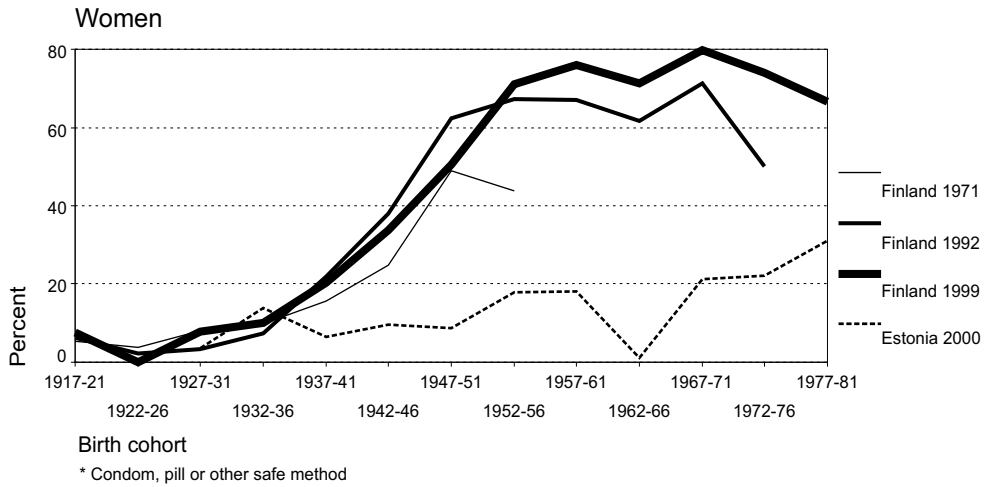
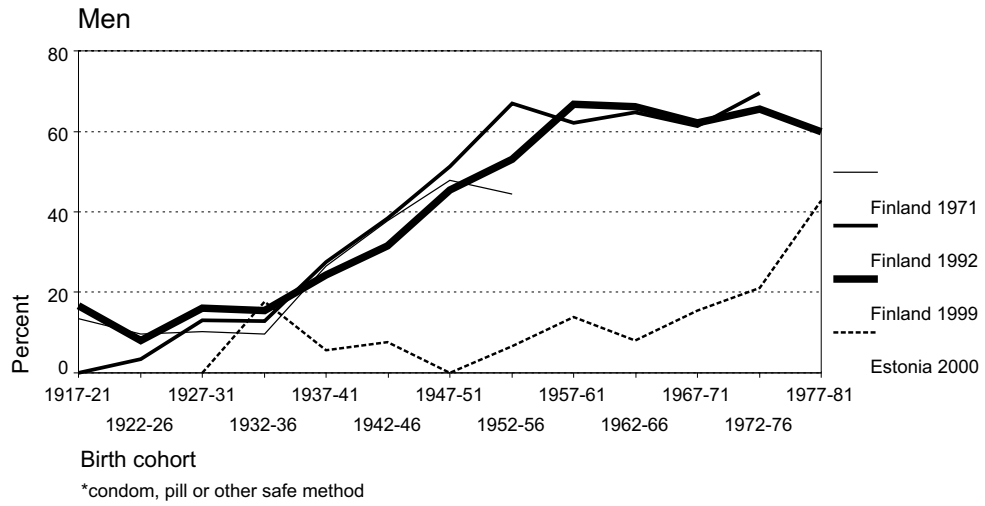
### **Use of contraception in first sexual intercourse**

The use of contraception in first-time intercourse has become more common in Finland with each consecutive generation. Approximately half of all those born before the 1940s (who experienced first-time intercourse before the 1960s) had used no contraceptive methods (Figure 2.6). A comparison of the three age groups (Table 2.1) shows that in the 1990s approximately one in ten 55–74-year-olds used a condom in their first intercourse. If a condom was not available, one in four had resorted to coitus interruptus. For the oldest generation, the risk of pregnancy was tangible from the very first instance of sexual intercourse.

Condom use became more widespread among young people in Finland from the late 1950s. Thereafter, condom use gained in prevalence in the course of ten years. Among middle-aged men and women in the 1990s (whose first-time intercourse occurred in the 1960s), half reported using a condom the first time they had sex. The use of condoms became even more popular during the 1970s. According to the responses of the youngest age group (aged 18–34), two out of three women and over half of the men had used a condom the first time they had had intercourse. Responses by the youngest respondents even point to a further increase in condom use in first-time intercourse after the 1970s. On the other hand, statistics show that condom sales dropped slightly in the late 1990s.

In Estonia, the use of contraceptive methods in first-time intercourse has been fairly rare up to now. With the exception of the youngest respondents, the majority of respondents had used no contraception. Contraception was used as infrequently in Estonia as it was used frequently in Finland in the 1990s. Condom use became more common only in the latter half of the 1990s, when approximately one-third of those who were then young reported having used them.

Figure 2.6 Contraception\* in first intercourse





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**Table 2.1 Contraception in first intercourse in three age groups (%)**

Contraception in first intercourse	<i>Men</i>				<i>Women</i>			
	Finland 1971	Finland 1992	Finland 1999	Estonia 2000	Finland 1971	Finland 1992	Finland 1999	Estonia 2000
<i>18–34-years olds</i>								
Condom	44	55	57	25	38	61	69	20
Contraceptive pill	1	13	13	2	0	9	10	2
Coitus interruptus	22	9	5	16	25	10	7	25
No contraception	33	23	25	57	37	20	14	53
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
(N)	388	377	175	128	752	367	295	195
<i>35–54-years olds</i>								
Condom	11	47	47	5	8	49	56	7
Contraceptive pill	-	4	7	-	-	2	7	1
Coitus interruptus	31	14	10	18	32	17	13	18
No contraception	68	35	36	77	60	32	24	74
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
(N)	281	442	240	122	498	422	327	221
<i>55–74-years olds</i>								
Condom		10	18	9		5	15	7
Contraceptive pill		-	1	-		-	-	-
Coitus interruptus		17	25	21		24	31	23
No contraception		73	56	70		71	54	70
Total %		100	100	100		100	100	100
(N)		183	141	81		257	169	135