analysis provides a more complete picture of adolescent sexual behavior than can be drawn using data collected from teenagers (who are, on average, about 17.5 years old at interview).

Among women, sexual experience before age 15 is rare.* In Ghana, Mali, Tanzania, Jamaica and the United States, at least one in seven women aged 20–24 had had sex before their 15th birthday; about three in 10 had done so before age 16, as had more than half in Mali (Table 2). Levels are lower—for the most part considerably so—in the remaining countries.

Very early sexual experience appears to be somewhat more common among men than among women in all countries except Ghana, Mali, the Philippines and Tanzania. More than four in 10 Jamaican men aged 20–24 had had intercourse before their 15th birthday, as had one-third of their counterparts in Brazil and the United States, and about one-quarter in Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. Men in several other countries reached these levels of sexual experience by age 16, but in Zimbabwe, the Philippines and Thailand, even by their 16th birthday, no more than 15% of men had initiated intercourse.

In Ghana and Mali, substantially higher proportions of women (88% and 94%, respectively) than of men (70% and 64%, respectively) are sexually experienced by age 20. By contrast, in Thailand, Brazil, the Dominican Republic and Peru, the proportion of men with sexual experience by their 20th birthday is 18–28 percentage points higher than the proportion among women. In most of the remaining countries, gender differentials are very small, despite gender differences in marriage levels.

Country-level differences in the pace of sexual initiation can also be captured by comparing the median age at first intercourse (the age by which 50% of all individuals in the group had begun sexual relations). The median age for women ranges from 15.8 in Mali to 19.6 in Peru and exceeds 20 in the Philippines and Thailand. Contradicting the widely accepted view that males are generally more sexually precocious than females, a similar range is found among men—from 15.4 in Jamaica to 19.0 in Thailand and more than 20 in the Philippines. In Latin America and the Caribbean, men typically initiate sex at a younger age than women; the largest differentials (more than two years) are found in Brazil and Peru. Only in Ghana and Mali do women first have intercourse at a substantially younger age than men; in the remaining countries, men and women first have sex at roughly the same age.

Patterns of early sexual initiation (i.e., before age 17) vary widely by country and gender (Figure 3). Among women, the proportion having sex by age 17 in Mali, Jamaica, Ghana, the United States and Tanzania is 7–10 times that in Thailand and the Philippines. The proportion of men with sexual experience before their 17th birthday in Jamaica, the United States and Brazil is 9–10 times the level in the Philippines. The gender gap is very large in Mali and Ghana (where higher proportions of women than of men become sexually active early) and in the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Costa Rica, Peru and Thailand (where the reverse is true).

Premarital Intercourse Before Age 20
Table 3 (page 26) examines levels of premarital sexual intercourse by the end of the adolescent years. The rates are also calculated by urban-rural residence, in an attempt to explore possible differences in sexual behavior related to modernization and to rapid social change, or its absence. The proportion of women who had their first sexual experience before age 20 and while still single is 75–86% in the two developed countries and Jamaica; 38–58% in Ghana, Tanzania, Brazil and Haiti; and 25–32% in Mali, Zimbabwe, Costa Rica and Peru. It is much lower in the Dominican Republic than in the other Latin American countries (15%). However, since overall levels of sexual intercourse during adolescence are about the same in the Dominican Republic as elsewhere in the region, the lower level of premarital sexual intercourse probably reflects that higher proportions of women enter a union less than one year after sexual initiation or become sexually active within their first union.

In the Philippines and Thailand, premarital sexual relationships among young women are rare; only 4–6% of 20–24-year-olds initiated sexual activity as unmarried teenagers. While some women may have failed to report a premarital sexual rela-

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*Most of the surveys analyzed here obtained no information on whether first intercourse was voluntary. Therefore, the reported proportions having very early intercourse may be understated, since some individuals whose first sexual experience was involuntary would likely exclude that event.