
VIII. Sexual Pleasure as a Key Component of Integral Sexual Health

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Latin American politicians, educators, and policy makers are finally recognizing the need for sexuality education. Within the past 10 years, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico have passed laws making sexuality education mandatory. These laws are a response to social and public health crises stemming from sexual behaviour: large numbers of teenage pregnancies, the spread of HIV and AIDS, and high incidence of other sexually transmitted diseases. In Mexico, where patriarchal social norms have traditionally blocked the dissemination of information about sex, negotiation with opposition groups and key authorities at different levels in the education structure has been important for the implementation of sexuality education nationwide (Pick et al., 2000).

This article focuses on Mexico, concentrating on research and educational projects carried out by our organization, IMIFAP (Instituto Mexicano de Investigación en Familia y Población, i.e. Mexican Institute for Research on Family and Population). Many studies analyzing discourses of sexuality in Mexico and other parts of Latin America suggest that sexual pleasure and empowerment have often been understood to be male prerogatives, while social norms have discouraged female agency or autonomy, especially with regard to women's sexuality. Much of the education that is imparted to girls within their homes reinforces gender stereotypes, urging girls to be 'good', loyal, and chaste and telling them that their 'body is for others' (Sayavedra and Flores, 1997). For example, a woman should sit with her legs close together, be very discreet in matters related to sexuality, and be resigned to the man that God/fate sends her ('que te toca'), as he will be the father of her children and her only sexual partner (Givaudan et al., 1994). A man, on the other hand, is expected to make decisions, have as many sexual partners and children as possible and have

different women for sex and for procreation (Pick et al., 1996a, 1996b). In this context, pleasurable sexual intercourse is exclusively masculine; women who possess sexual desire or agency are neither adequate for marriage nor to have children with (Rodríguez et al., 1995). Thus adolescent girls receive powerful messages stigmatizing their nascent sexual desire.

This is not to say that all women in Latin America, or Mexico, lack sexual agency or are completely confined by patriarchal gender ideologies. Not all 'traditional' gender ideology is repressive: the indigenous culture of Juchitán, Oaxaca, for example, has strong matriarchal aspects, with women and men celebrating women's power and sexuality (Rubin, 1998). Defying repressive social and sexual norms, a minority of women have sought sexual and emotional satisfaction in relationships with other women. Since the mid-1970s, lesbian (and gay men's) social and political organizations have become increasingly active and visible in Mexico, and Mexicans seem to have become more accepting of same-sex relationships, or at least of young people's sexual experimentation, over the past few decades (Gutmann, 1997). Recent political mobilization by women – often around issues like access to affordable housing, food, and health care – has challenged traditional roles and family structures (Ramos Escandón, 1994), and explicitly feminist organizations have emerged to promote the status of women, including taking steps to encourage women's sexual empowerment (Rodríguez et al., 1996). Changing economic necessities and opportunities, and the resulting patterns of labour and migration, have led to a variety of heterodox family structures and sexual relationships (Hirsch, 2003).

The resulting tension between sexual desire and perceived social norms leads to limited communication about sexuality and to anxiety about such interactions. Janda and O'Grady (1980) define sexual anxiety as a generalized expectation of external punishments that are non-specific, relating to the violation (or anticipated violation) of norms perceived to be the socially prescribed acceptable standards of social behaviour. The most important feelings associated with sexual anxiety are guilt, shame, tension or stress (Feeney et al., 1999; Gerrard, 1987), as well as fear and pressure (Merlo et al., 2001). The importance of sexual shame is highly gendered. In one study female Mexican adolescents reported that their highest levels of anxiety occurred when telling sexual partners that they wanted to have intercourse, and reported anxiety was significantly higher in females than in males when making out, kissing, caressing, and touching each others' genitals (Merlo et al., 2001). The resulting lack of open communication about one's sexuality leads to insufficient knowledge and inadequate skill formation to confront pressures, including pressure to initiate sexual activity in exchange for gifts or other favours (Stewart and Eckert, 1995). A second result is to promote sexual dependence and erotic passivity in women, which leads to a higher probability of unplanned sex (Szasz, 2003).

These feelings of embarrassment, shame, and guilt also reduce the initiative to look for reliable information related to sexuality, including contraception, therefore reducing the possibility of safe-sex behaviour (IMIFAP, 1999). Adolescents

report that talking about sexuality or asking for a condom in a drugstore is associated with anxiety (Gonzalez and Pick, 1995). Sexually active adolescent girls fear that partners would interpret asking to use condoms during sex as evidence of their promiscuity or untrustworthiness, making them reluctant to do so (Piñones et al., 1992). Thus the association of male sexuality with pleasure, and 'good' female sexuality with marital monogamy and motherhood, reduces communication about, and knowledge of, sexual practices, which in turn contribute to low rates of contraceptive use and other unsafe behaviours among sexually active adolescents.

The recent implementation of sexuality education in Mexico, for which there is wide support, helps to provide female (and male) adolescents with information about sexuality and sexual health and to end the shame and silence that surround sex. Polls conducted in Mexico showed that over 95 percent of the population wanted sexuality education in schools from the elementary level onwards (IMIFAP and Gallup, 1993), and parents' reactions to sexuality education programs (Pick de Weiss et al., 1990) have provided enormous support for the programs. However, without the addition of a life skills component, the current curriculum is unlikely to significantly reduce adolescents' risky sexual practices (IMIFAP, 2002).

Many limitations of these programs can be traced to the inadequate education and preparation of Mexican adults, including parents and teachers, to talk about sex with young people. We found that even some groups of parents generally opposed to school-based sexuality education do want sexuality education for themselves and their children, but do not have the elements they want and need to provide it (Givaudan et al., 1998; Givaudan et al., 1999). Most adults have the same attitudes of shame and embarrassment about female sexuality as their children and students, but this has not been taken into account in the process of introducing sexuality education in schools. The new programs have only been introduced through official textbooks with four hours of limited training of teachers. In order to effectively educate children and adolescents about their sexuality within the formal educational system, teachers must receive extensive training in participatory pedagogical techniques and communication skills. And, especially because adolescents prefer to receive information about sex and sexuality within their families (Givaudan et al., 1994; Merlo et al., 2001), parents should have access to similar training in order to facilitate their role as educators within the home.

IMIFAP's integrated program for adolescents, 'Planeando tu vida' (Planning your life), responds to some of these challenges and provides a proven alternative to the narrowly information-oriented school curriculum. 'Planeando tu vida' concentrates on training the adults who will run the program. Through training, adults develop the sensitivities and skills needed to discuss difficult themes related to sexuality – such as how to manage one's emotions in specific anxiety provoking situations, and how to deal with sexual pleasure and desire – with adolescents. The section of the program directly involving teenagers aims to

create spaces where adolescents can develop safe, healthy, informed (and pleasurable) sexualities. The program focuses on life skills and empowerment, emphasizing the development of self-esteem, the use of dialogue to resolve problems, autonomous and responsible decision making, and assertive communication, as well as more specific discussion of sexuality and contraception. Teenaged participants engage in a variety of activities that include role-play, and apply new information and skills rather than being passive recipients of information. Controlled evaluations of 'Planeando tu vida' have demonstrated that the program is quite successful in increasing the likelihood that teenagers will use condoms when they initiate sexual intercourse (IMIFAP, 2003; Pick de Weiss et.al., 1990). IMIFAP's program 'Yo quiero, yo puedo' (I want, I love, I can) uses similar approaches and yields similar results with younger children (IMIFAP, 2003).

We need to have a better understanding of the multiple and contradictory cultural messages about sexuality that adolescents receive, and how these messages are understood and acted upon differentially by boys and girls. We need to attend to the ways that class, location, and ethnicity – as well as gender – influence sexual norms and practices. We need to better understand and address the needs of adolescents, which too often go overlooked in sexuality education programs. We need to challenge cultural norms that continue to stigmatize female sexual empowerment and pleasure, which engender shame and silence – and consequently unsafe sexual practices – even as young women do engage in sexual experimentation. Progressive sexuality education, through formal and informal channels, in Mexico and elsewhere, has tremendous potential to validate women's sexuality and encourage open communication about how to safely and responsibly pursue sexual pleasure.

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