

I DIDN'T WANT TO BUT... SEXUAL INITIATION UNDER COERCION IN THE  
BUENOS AIRES METROPOLITAN AREA

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### INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of coerced sexuality is important beyond its obvious human rights dimension, since it can have negative consequences for the physical and mental health of the woman and for her interpersonal relationships (Heise, Moore and Toubia, 1995). In the particular case of coerced sexual initiation the consequences are probably magnified because coercion is exerted at a turning point making it a "formative experience" (Laumann *et al.*, 1994, p. 322). Some related research<sup>3</sup> suggests that first intercourse under coercion is the starting point of a reproductive "career" marked by risk taking (Calandra *et al.*, 1995; Heise, Moore and Toubia, 1995).

Any act of heterosexual coercion implies, is the manifestation of (the concretion of) the existence of gender asymmetry. Thus, we start from the assumption of the existence of such asymmetry. This asymmetry may be seen as objective (as between persons with different control over resources) and/or as subjective -as that manifested in the gender images that devalue women in their own and in men's views. Images of gender are a reflection of the cultural and societal gender stratification system.

What is meant by sexual coercion is far from being clear both for researchers ("etic" perspective) and for the actors ("emic" perspective<sup>4</sup>). We have adopted the following definition:

Sexual coercion is the act of forcing (or attempting to force) another individual through violence, threats, verbal insistence, deception, cultural expectations or economic circumstances to engage in sexual behavior against her/his will (Heise, Moore and Toubia, 1995, p. 8).

Regarding the actors' perception of the presence of coercion, matters are further complicated because traditional women may perceive they were coerced by their partner to justify their transgression of the norms while the ideological agreement with modern images of gender roles may conduce some women to deny that they have been coerced.

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<sup>3</sup> Research on coerced sexual initiation is scarce, but there is more accumulated knowledge about the consequences of early sexual abuse in general. For a review see Heise, Moore and Toubia, (1995); Stevens-Simon and Reichert (1994).

<sup>4</sup> The "emic" perspective is the perspective of the actors. It is appropriate for capturing the problem from the people's point of view and to understand it as they perceive it and categorize it . The "etic" perspective is that of the outside observer (Pelto and Pelto, 1978).

## THE CONTEXT

In our society, pre-marital sexual initiation is still, for women, a transgression of the "mother's mandate"<sup>5</sup>. Even though cultural emphasis on the value of female virginity is gradually changing, the main thrust of the maternal message is still in the direction of pre-marital purity (Geldstein and Delpino, 1995; Walters, 1991)<sup>6</sup>. Patriarchal societal values stress that the initiative for sexual intercourse should come from the male and propose the idea that men's sexuality is "untamable" and that men should never refuse intercourse (Gogna, Pantelides and Ramos, 1997; León and Stahr, 1995). For a woman, initiation before marriage is then a violation of norms and she "has to" resist. For men, some degree of pressure towards obtaining sexual "favors" is imbedded in the definition of the male role. Thus one could argue that some degree of coercion would always be present in the situation of first sexual intercourse. It is thus necessary to refine the definition of coercion treating it as a continuum where the value 0 is probably not the norm.

All available information on sexual initiation in Argentina comes from research on adolescents reproductive behavior in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area<sup>7</sup> (BAMA) (Calandra *et al.*, 1995; Kornblit and Méndez Diz, 1994; Schufer, M. *et al.*, 1996; Pantelides and Cerrutti, 1992; Pantelides, Geldstein and Infesta Domínguez, 1995). These studies show a large variation in the proportion of sexually initiated adolescents by age 18<sup>8</sup>. For women, the lowest proportion (63 per cent) was registered among those interviewed in schools (Shufer, 1995) and the highest among adolescents of the upper middle class (85 per cent, Pantelides, Geldstein and Infesta Domínguez, 1995). In the lower classes the proportions of initiated at age 18 registered by two of the previously mentioned studies was 74 and 77 per cent. Three of the studies also investigated the motives for initiation. Answering to open-ended questions about the motives for sexual initiation, an important proportion of female adolescents residing in the (BAMA) reported some kind of coercion. Proportions ranged from 5.5 (upper middle class) to 17.3 (lower class) (Pantelides and Cerrutti, 1992 and Pantelides, Geldstein and Infesta Domínguez, 1995). In the upper middle class all cases referred to psychological pressure, while in the lower class 7.7 per cent reported threat or actual use of violence. Schufer *et al.* (1996), who interviewed only adolescents attending high school, report 1.5 percent of initiation by rape and an additional 3 per cent initiated because of the "insistence" of their partner.

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<sup>5</sup> According to Walters (1991, p. 61), mothers have a "cautionary" role: the repression of the daughter's sexuality in order to preserve her for marriage and legitimate reproduction.

<sup>6</sup> On the lack of contemporaneity between the changes in gender identity, gender subjectivity and cultural and social possibilities see Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg (1993).

<sup>7</sup> The Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area concentrates 1/3 of the country's population.

<sup>8</sup> We selected age 18 because it is the only one included in all reviewed studies. Other measures, such as the mean age at initiation, are influenced by the end age of those selected to be interviewed and are thus not comparable.

In previous research we had "pictured" the typical behavioral and contextual patterns associated with the occurrence of initiation under coercion among adolescents<sup>9</sup>. Women initiated in such circumstances largely belonged to the poorest strata of society. They had generally migrated from less developed areas and were raised in households torn by migration and separation of parents. They did not attend school, which they had abandoned, generally before completing the primary level. The majority had an early sexual initiation and early and unplanned pregnancies. They typically did not use contraception. Their images of gender roles were traditional: they saw women in a subordinated position with respect to men. Some also reported being the victims of physical violence from their partner.

The present research suggests that our previous findings may not accurately describe the prevailing situation today, which seems to be one of transition and flux regarding the subjective correlates of coercion. However, there is no doubt that sexual initiation under coercion exists in our society, and that it is a sizeable phenomenon<sup>10</sup>.

The study discussed in this chapter aimed at estimating the prevalence of coerced sexual initiation among female adolescents 15 to 18 years old attending the gynecological service of the adolescents' department of a public hospital<sup>11</sup>, and at exploring and describing the correlates of sexual initiation both in situations where coercion was present and when it was not. Data were collected through a survey (201 cases) and through an in-depth interview to a sub-sample (30 cases, approximately half coerced and half non-coerced sexual initiation), between March and October 1997.

#### WHO ARE THESE ADOLESCENTS?

As with all public hospitals, the majority of the interviewees came from the low and low-middle class: almost one third of the heads of their households were unskilled workers (including domestic service), with unstable or sporadic jobs; an additional 10 per cent were unemployed or retired from low paying jobs. Among those in better positions (30 per cent) there were owners of small shops or taxi cabs, blue collar and skilled workers. Almost half of the heads of households had completed elementary school, but 13 percent were below that educational level. On the other extreme, 10 percent had completed high school and only 2 per cent (4 cases) had any university level education.

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<sup>9</sup> We present here partial results of a correspondence analysis of qualitative data (Geldstein and Pantelides, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Regarding the magnitude of coercion in sexual initiation in the United States Laumann *et al.* (1994, p. 329) report 24.5 per cent of "not wanted but not forced" and 4.2 of "forced" sexual initiation.

<sup>11</sup> Those who had a long previous contact with the service (defined as more than two previous contacts) were excluded. The purpose was to avoid interviewing adolescents that were already aware of the notion of coercion from their interaction with the physicians, and the possible effect of the physician's previous knowledge of the adolescent.

The sample of adolescents was skewed towards the older ages of the age span: 40 per cent were 18 years old and only 11 per cent were 15 years old. This is because women, especially in the lower social strata, tend to consult with a gynecologist in relation with menstrual disorders and pregnancies and seldom do so preventively. Thus, the probability of consulting with a gynecologist raises with age up to the end of the childbearing ages and then decreases (Ramos and Pantelides, 1990).

The majority of the adolescents (62 per cent) have incomplete high school studies (2/3 of them concentrated in the first two years), and close to 1/3 have elementary education although very few have not completed elementary school. The higher the educational level attained, the higher the proportions that continue studying.

As expected, only one fifth of the young women were working at the time of the interview: one third were in domestic service (including caring for children) and a little more were saleswomen. Of the remaining, half were blue collar workers.

The majority of the interviewees were born in the BAMA (73 per cent). The remaining were born in other provinces of Argentina (20 per cent), mainly poor ones. An additional 7 per cent were born in neighboring countries like Uruguay, Paraguay and Bolivia. Of those not born in Buenos Aires, one third had migrated recently, and half before age 10.

As expected, given their age and the nuptiality patterns of the area covered by the hospital, 3/4 of the adolescents were single and the remaining were in consensual unions. There were only two cases of legal unions and one separation. At the time of interview slightly over half of single adolescents were still cohabiting with both biological parents while 14 per cent were not living with either. The mother was "absent" in 6 per cent of the single's households and the father in 26 per cent of them. Of all adolescent in the sample, 13 per cent were living with their children.

These numbers have to be seen in the light of the household of origin<sup>12</sup>, where already 9.5 per cent did not live with both parents (in 14 cases -7 per cent- the father was not present, in 4 additional cases the mother and in 2 both were absent).

## SEXUAL INITIATION: WHO, WHEN, WITH WHOM

Almost 90 per cent of the adolescents interviewed were sexually initiated. As expected, the proportion of sexually initiated increases with age, but starting at a very high value of 78 per cent at age 15, and reaching 95 per cent at age 18. This high percentages are explained in part because these are women attending a gynecological service, and in part by their already commented upon high average age (due also to the particular setting of the interview). But it also reflects a relatively early age at first intercourse in the adolescent population of Buenos Aires (Pantelides and Cerrutti, 1992; Pantelides, Geldstein and Infesta Domínguez, 1995; Schufer *et al.*, 1996). Among those already initiated, in this sample the mean age at first sexual intercourse is 15.3 with the modal value at age 15. Almost 1/4 were initiated before age 14 (table 1).

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<sup>12</sup> The question was "¿who lived in your household when you were born? The answers presumably refer to the first household structure the subjects were aware of.

We found no relationship between educational level and the likelihood of sexual initiation (the yes-no possibility) but we did find a strong positive relationship between educational level and age at first sexual intercourse (chi square 40.9, significant at 0.000 level). Also, present schooling (currently being in the educational system) and the likelihood of sexual initiation are significantly related (chi square = 5.2, significant at the 0.02 level). It has been repeatedly said that staying in school "protects" from risky<sup>13</sup> sexual behavior. The mechanism of this "protection" is unclear. Staying in school may be an indication of a life project that is not limited to marriage and motherhood. Women that have this kind of attitude have been shown to be less prone to adopt risky sexual behavior (Geldstein and Pantelides, 1997; Pantelides, Geldstein and Infesta Domínguez, 1995).

These women had their first coital experience, in general, with men older than themselves, an expected pattern in our culture. The mean age of the partner was 19.6, with a range from 14 to 52 years old. However, more than 60 per cent of the partners were less than 20 years old and only 4 percent were 30 and older (table 1).

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<sup>13</sup> "Risky" sexual behavior is here defined as behavior that may lead to unplanned pregnancy or contagion of sexually transmitted diseases or AIDS.

Table 1  
Age at first sexual intercourse by age of the partner

Age of partner	Age of the female adolescent			
	up to 14	15-16	17-18	Total
14-16	4.4	12.2	0.0	16.6
17-19	12.2	22.8	10.0	45.0
20-24	4.4	18.8	5.6	28.8
25-29	0.6	1.7	3.3	5.6
30 and over	2.8	0.6	0.6	4.0
Total	24.4	56.1	19.5	100.0
Number of cases	44	101	35	180

The most frequent couple at sexual initiation is that formed by a female 15 to 16 years old with a male 17-19. Females 15 to 16 with males 20-24 constitute the second most frequent combination. Although, as we said above, initiation with men over 30 is rare, the situation is more frequent when the woman is in the younger age group. This is confirmed when the mean age difference between partners at first intercourse is calculated: for women initiated below age 14 the mean age difference with their partner was 6.4 years, this drops abruptly to 3.5 years for women initiated between the ages 15 and 16 and rises slightly to 3.9 for with first sexual intercourse at 17 or 18. This phenomenon is not exclusive of this sample: a related measure, births by age of the mother and the father also show that the percentage of older fathers is relatively higher when the mothers are very young (for Argentina, Giusti and Pantelides, 1991; for Spain, Delgado Perez, 1992).

As in all other research that has come to our attention, including our own (Pantelides, Geldstein e Infesta Domínguez, 1995), the absolute majority of these adolescent women (82 per cent) said that the man with whom they had sexual intercourse for the first time was her fiancé; friends came a very distant second (7 per cent). Those whose first intercourse was with a relative were only two cases and another three started their sexual life with a complete stranger. As we will see below, extreme cases of coercion at first intercourse were typically perpetrated by relatives (again, a repeated finding) or complete strangers.

In previous research (Pantelides and Cerrutti, 1992) a relationship was found between the constitution of the household where the young woman lives and sexual initiation: adolescents in

intact households were less likely to be initiated than those in which one parent (especially the mother) was absent. That relationship is not present in our data. Also, age at first sexual intercourse is unrelated to the presence or absence of biological parents in the household at the time it happened.

## SEXUAL INITIATION AND COERCION

The first approximation to the detection of coercion during initiation was through a question about the age at which the adolescent would have liked to have first intercourse, which was compared with the actual age that happened. Nobody preferred an age younger than the actual one, and the higher the actual age at initiation the higher the proportion that said they were happy with that age (table 2): 48.3 per cent of the interviewees gave this answer. Older adolescents seem to have more control over the decision-making process regarding intercourse, something that the data on age differences between partners also suggest. But this kind of answer may also point to the fact that the older the age at first intercourse, the less the women feel they are transgressing social norms which in turn may lead to acceptance of their own behavior. Some of the answers explicitly reflected a retrospective evaluation of the situation but we suspect that others that said they would have preferred to start later also were giving a retrospective account.

Table 2  
Age at which she would have liked to have first sexual intercourse  
by age at first sexual intercourse

Age at first sexual intercourse	Age at which would have liked to have first sexual intercourse				
	13-14	15-16	17-18	19-22	Total
9-12	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
13-14	19.0	26.2	42.9	11.9	100.0 (2)
15-16	0.0	53.5	35.6	10.9	100.0 (42)
17-18	0.0	0.0	88.6	11.4	100.0 (101)
Total	4.4	36.7	49.5	9.4	100.0 (35)
N° of cases	8	66	89	17	180



To those that answered that they would have preferred to start at an older age, a question was posed about why, then, they had it at that moment (table 3 ).

Table 3  
Reasons for having first sexual intercourse  
at an age she did not want to

Reasons	Percent	Number of cases
1. In love	25.8	23
2. Rape, abuse	12.4	11
3. Partner's pressure	10.1	9
4. Desire	9.0	8
5. Retrospective assessment	9.0	8
6. My time came	6.7	6
7. He convinced me	5.6	5
8. Peer pressure	4.5	4
9. It happened	4.5	4
10. Alcohol consumption	3.4	3
11. Curiosity, lack of information	3.4	3
12. Rebellion against parents	3.4	3
13. Ashamed of saying no	2.2	2
Total	100.0	89

Besides those who said that they did it because they were in love, there was a large spread in the answers. We can attempt a certain classification: categories 2 and 3 clearly fall under coercion which will then amount to 22.5 per cent of the cases. It could be hypothesized that "ashamed of saying no" also indicates a certain degree of domination of the partner over the woman or, alternatively, a yield to social pressure. The cases of alcohol consumption seem also to fall in the category of coercion given the description of the situation, and this makes a total of 28.1 per cent. Peer pressure, although leading to an unwanted initiation cannot be put in the same category, since the pressuring agent is not the partner but friends or "the prevailing norms"<sup>14</sup>. "He convinced me" is in a grey area, since

<sup>14</sup> These categories could fit into those of "personal pressure" or "internalized social pressure" (Holland *et al.*, 1992).

the woman said she would have wanted to postpone sexual initiation but she is also accepting that she was convinced at the time. Other answers have a still less clear meaning. "It happened" may reflect lack of control of the situation but may also be akin to shrugging. "My time came" might mean that she was not able to resist the man's pressure any more, but may also remit to some idea of ripeness. As in previous research (Pantelides and Cerrutti, 1992; Pantelides, Geldstein and Infesta Domínguez, 1995) the proportion of women that recognize pure desire as their motivation for initiation is low.

We proceeded then to ask the interviewees to classify their first intercourse in one of the following three categories<sup>15</sup> (which were shown to them in a card): something you were forced to do against your will; something you accepted to do but you did not want to happen at that moment; something you wanted to happen at that moment.

Table 4  
Degree of willingness at first sexual intercourse by age at that moment

Age at first sexual intercourse	Degree of willingness			Total
	Forced	Accepted but did not want it to happen then	Wanted it at that time	
9-12	100.0	0.0	0.0	100.0 (2)
13-14	16.7	57.1	26.2	100.0 (42)
15-16	1.0	43.6	55.4	100.0 (101)
17-18	0.0	15.1	84.8	99.9 (33)
Total	5.6	41.0	53.4	100.0
N° of cases	10	73	95	(178)

Note: Excludes those that had their first sexual intercourse after marriage.

A full 46.6 per cent said that either they were forced (5.6 per cent) or accepted but did not want it to happen at that time. The proportions of those that initiated sexual life without any

<sup>15</sup> Adapted from Laumann *et al.*, 1994, p. 652.

pressure is positively related to age at first intercourse, confirming our earlier assertion that older adolescents have a higher degree of control over the decision-making process<sup>16</sup>. Among the factors that make younger girls more vulnerable to coercion may be the lack of experience (Holland *et al.*, 1992) and the largest age-difference with their partner (Abma, Driscoll and Moore, 1998).

Of the 10 cases which the women characterized as forced, physical force was present in 7 and threat of different kinds in the remaining 3. In 2 of them the perpetrator was a relative (stepfather, uncle), in 3 it was a stranger, in 2 cases the man was a friend or somebody known to the woman, and in 3 cases it was her fiancé. On the other hand, 42.1 per cent of the women that had first sexual intercourse with their fiancé either did not want it to happen at that time or were forced. When the partner was a friend the percentage rose to 58.3 per cent, and when it was a "transa"<sup>17</sup>, the unwanted first intercourse increased to 66.7 per cent, but the numbers became too small to draw a firm conclusion. All cases in which the man was either a relative or a stranger were classified by the women as forced.

Of the women that said they did not want to have their sexual intercourse at that moment, the reason for finally accepting was love in 32 per cent of the cases and curiosity in 23 per cent. Somewhat different are the cases that fall under partner's insistence (12 per cent) and under partner's threat of leaving them (10 per cent), that involve a greater degree of perceived coercion. Other reasons mentioned were pleasure, peer pressure (7 per cent each), and other with very few cases. In only three instances the presence of alcohol was mentioned as the cause for unwanted sexual intercourse. Drugs do not seem to be present among women but the in-depth interviews report drug users among their partners.

Love was the overwhelming reason (70 per cent) given by women that declared that they had their first sexual intercourse willingly. Other reasons were pleasure (11 per cent), "my time came" (10 per cent) and curiosity (8 per cent).

Educational level is again associated with the type of initiation (table 5): the higher the educational level, the lower the proportions of unwanted first sexual intercourse (chi square= 22.1, significant at the 0.005 level)<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Heise, Moore and Toubia (1995, p. 13) state that the "...tendency toward young victims appears to hold true in both industrial and nonindustrialized countries".

<sup>17</sup> "Transa" is a word of the adolescent jargon that describes a non-romantic relationship that implies petting, sometimes sexual intercourse, but not great involvement.

<sup>18</sup> Of course, educational level is correlated with age, but the sample size does not allow for controlling variables.

Table 5  
Degree of willingness at first sexual intercourse by educational level

Level of education	Degree of willingness			
	Forced	Accepted but did not want it to happen then	Wanted it at that time	Total
Incompl. elementary	11.1	55.6	33.3	100.0
Complete elementary	8.7	60.9	30.4	100.0
Up to 2 years of high school	5.7	40.0	54.3	100.0
3-4 years of high school	2.6	23.1	74.3	100.0
Complete high school or some university	0.0	21.4	78.6	100.0
Total	5.6	41.0	53.4	100.0
N° of cases	10	73	95	178

Note: Excludes those that had their first sexual intercourse after marriage.

There seems to be no relationship between the age difference between the partners and the degree of willingness at first intercourse. However, when the age difference between partners was 2 years or less (or when the woman was older than her partner) there were no cases of initiation by physical force.

We tried to understand also the situation of the women that were not initiated, especially in the cases in which they had successfully resisted a situation in which a man asked them to have sex. However, the number is exceedingly small to draw any conclusion: of the 21 women who were still virgins, only 9 were ever put in that situation. Nothing happened because their boyfriends accepted their negative, which was based on fear of pregnancy or believing they were too young to start having sex.

## PERCEPTION OF COERCION

The word "coercion" is not used by the adolescents. A group discussion on the issue did not yield any precise term that would designate what we researchers name "coercion". Terms like "pressure", "abuse" and "chamuyo" (talk designed to convince somebody) appeared, showing that both the use of force and of psychological pressure could be included in the concept. It was thus impossible (also not advisable) to ask directly about coercion and we devised an indirect approach. We designed four short incomplete scenarios in which a woman, who was virgin, was faced with a demand for sexual intercourse, and asked the interviewees to tell us what they thought about the men's conduct. The "vignettes" were the following:

1. Both a boy and his girlfriend want to have sexual relations, but when the time comes the girl doesn't feel like it. Her fiancée then calms her down, has patience and waits until she decides. What do you think about the boy's behavior?
2. A boy and a girl got acquainted in a dance, they petted and got very excited. She didn't want to have sexual intercourse. But he didn't accept her telling him no, saying that she had excited him and that she couldn't let him go like that. What do you think about the boy's behavior?
3. A professor invites a student to meet him after class in order to help her with her studies. When they meet he tells her that he wants to have sex with her. She doesn't want but she is afraid to fail the exam. What do you think of the professor's behavior?
4. A girl is very much in love but she doesn't want to have sexual intercourse yet. He tells her that he needs sex very much to "unload" and that if she doesn't accept he will have to find somebody else. What do you think about the boy's behavior?

The first vignette depicts a situation in which there was no coercion; the second one is the type of situation in which there could be discussion about mutual behavior, guilt and responsibilities; the third is a typical case of sexual harassment and the fourth aims at detecting acceptance of the naturalization of the "indomitable sexuality" of males.

Scenario 3 was the one in which most interviewees (79 per cent) clearly detected a wrongful conduct, although differently characterized: sexual harassment, transgressing of the professor-student roles and relationship, sexual abuse of a minor, requests for sanctions (legal or at the school level) or just wrong. Expressions of outrage were frequent. The majority perceived the asymmetry of power that characterized the situation.

Scenarios 1 and 4 did not command such kind of responses, but for different reasons. In the first vignette the situation was clearly not one of coercion but most responses were of the type "he understands her" (37 per cent), "he doesn't pressure her/ doesn't force her" (12 per cent), which have a certain flavor of concession: he is good to her although he could do otherwise. The same flavor, although less clear is present in the 22 per cent of the responses that attributed the man's behavior to his loving the woman (if he did not, would he be allowed to insist?). Only 24 per cent saw the situation as one in which the man "respects her decision".

In the last vignette, where from our perspective coercion is clearly present, 56 per cent of the adolescents attributed the man's behavior to lack of love for the woman. Only 11 per cent clearly signaled the presence of coercion, although others were aware of the man taking advantage of the woman's love (of her vulnerability to pressure), and small numbers said that the

man's behavior was "machista" or self-centered, that there was no such "need" (of having intercourse), that his behavior was plain bad. A group of respondents (9 per cent) advised women to say no to such kind of pressure, and 11 per cent said he should respect the woman's will. Only 4 interviewees found that the man's behavior was "natural", but the meaning of this expression is not clear.

We thought that the second vignette was -within our culture- the more ambiguous in terms of the presence or absence of coercion, since the girl had initially accepted heavy petting. However 30 per cent of the women said that the man was "machista", that he should respect the woman's will, that if he got excited it was "his problem". Other 36 per cent qualified the behavior negatively in general or because this was a recent relationship and the situation did not allow for such kind of proposition. On the other hand, the tendency to blame the victim (which we were purposefully trying to detect) appeared under two guises: some said that both the man and the woman were "guilty" (18 per cent) and a few, that the woman was to blame (6 per cent).

## WHAT IS COERCION: THE ADOLESCENTS' PERSPECTIVE

The majority of the adolescents interviewed are able to spontaneously mention or describe behaviors that constitute different kinds of sexual coercion by men. These range from psychological pressure to the crude use of physical force<sup>19</sup>. The overwhelming majority of responses fit into a few forms of sexual coercion: verbal insistence or "talking all the time about the same thing to convince"; petting, kissing or touching to produce arousal even after the woman's refusal; threat of desertion or of finding another woman, and physical force or potential use of physical force (rape or beating).

While physical coercion is an extreme situation that seldom elicited further comments on the part of adolescents, the descriptions of psychological pressure were frequently nuanced and helped us to make sense of the male's behaviours and female's responses involved. For instance, the importance attributed to "insistence" as a kind of psychological coercion seems to be related to the explicit difference that several interviewees established between the man's requesting for sex once and waiting for the woman to feel prepared or to decide at her own pace without further requests ("no pressure"), and the man's insisting and/or setting a deadline for the woman to accept -which is generally accompanied with the explicit or embedded threat of desertion ("pressure")- on the other hand.

Several adolescents attributed the man's threat of desertion to his intention of taking advantage of the girl's love for him. According to this view, the majority of the responses to the question of why female adolescents are unable to refuse unwanted intercourse (even when physical force is not an issue) pointed to the vulnerability of women due to their loving the man and their fear of losing him.

It is very interesting to notice that, when referring to the threat of desertion, many adolescents used the word "obligar" (to compel, to force, to coerce) and thus attributed to the men's words an overwhelming power that, in fact, resides in the women's own belief or feeling

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<sup>19</sup> This analysis refers to a question in which the interviewees were asked to speak "in general" an not necessarily in relation to their own experiences.

that losing their boyfriends is unbearable:

"Obligándola [forcing her] with or without violence"

The real persuasive power of the threat of desertion may be at least partially explained by the fact that it threatens the still main life project available to many female adolescents living under poverty conditions: to become a wife and a mother. On the other hand, whether in a specific situation the female adolescent's fear of abandonment is elicited by an explicit threat or by the young woman's beliefs or expectations about young men's behavior (Holland *et al.*, 1992) it is supported by the knowledge that indeed young men frequently do abandon their girlfriends after first intercourse (as shown in the present research).

The perception of the persistency of gender asymmetry in intimate relationships underlies the young women's responses, while almost all of them clearly recognized that gender relations in other dimensions of the private as well as public spheres are presently more egalitarian than they used to be. The latter is probably due to the decreasing opportunities available to men as breadwinners and the increasing frequency of two-earners couples.

Less frequently -though not of less importance- there is a cluster of responses that refer to the man's reproaching the woman her lack of love and appealing to her feelings, asking her to take into account his indomitable sexual needs. In short, different versions of the famous request for the "proof of love", appeal to the stereotype of the women as the loving and caring human beings or to what has been referred to as the "feminine altruist ideal" (Burín, 1989):

"Eh ... I think that [there is pressure] when ... for instance he tells you `yeah, I want to have sexual relationships with you, because if I haven't it is because you don't love me', that is, always bringing the feelings to bear... the feelings one feels" (127)

"(...) also with words. And there are words that hurt. Because many [men] say `because you don't love me'(...) and he pressures whith that and it hurts the other person, because if one loves somebody and the other person says one doesn't love him ... [one] feels badly" (063)

It might be interpreted that this masculine script has a coercive power because it denies the woman who refuses to comply with her boyfriend's needs, a feminine social identity.

From the responses to the survey and the in-depth interview, it becomes clear that sexual coercion as defined by the adolescents is indeed -as we propound- a continuum. Moreover, our categories and theirs overlap significantly. However, it is not always easy, when faced with an account of the "real life" (i.e. the ones adolescents make of their first sexual intercourse) to determine if coercion was present or not. Moreover, it is not easy neither for us researchers nor for the actors. Thus we were able to analyze clear cases of coercion -in one extreme- and of non-coerced, wanted relationships on the other. But there still remains a "grey area" where pleasure,

love, gradual persuasion, and lack of contact by the women with their own feelings and desires lead to an outcome which is difficult to classify.

## THE ACTUAL EXPERIENCE OF COERCION

Who belonged to each category (coerced and non-coerced) was initially defined by the subject's answer to a question in the survey. When doing the in-depth interviews none of the non-coerced ("wanted at that moment") changed their discourse. However, some of those that initially said that they "accepted but did not want at that moment" (a response mainly chosen by those who experienced psychological coercion), later described a situation that was clearly one of coercion by physical force, while a few others maintained that they were not "pressured" by their male partners. Thus, the results we comment hereafter come from 13 cases of coerced and 17 of non-coerced sexual initiation.

Although "sexual initiation under coercion" gives the image of a single, isolated episode, the analysis of the in-depth interviews makes it clear that we generally are in the presence of a process of variable stages and timing, that includes some kind of negotiation, even in the cases of use of physical force.

Some paths we found to coerced sexual initiation are:

- \* First request of SR-waiting time-reiteration of request-threat of abandonment-acceptance by the woman-sexual intercourse.
- \* First request-no waiting time, continuous insistence-setting of a deadline-if woman does not accept: violently forced sexual intercourse.
- \* Petting-sexual intercourse.

In the first two cases typically the perpetrator is a steady partner ("novio legal"). The third case is characteristic of relationships where the woman defines the partner as boyfriend but the interview shows that he was not. For instance, in the case from which we drawn the following testimony, the adolescent told us she had first met her "fiancé" a week before coercion occurred and she was very much in love with him:

"I don't know what happened to me, I told him 'no, no, no,...' but he didn't set me free (...) Moreover, he locked the door (...) so nobody could see us ... and then ...we started petting, so, everything, and well, until... he told me, and I: 'no, no, no'. And, well, he insisted more and more. And I didn't know what to do, I wasn't able to go out of the room. (...) He undress me (...) He was stronger than me"

That the first sexual intercourse appears as coerced does not mean that the processes described above took place in a short period of time. The process may take from a few days to over a year, depending on the degree of the man's commitment.

During the negotiation certain "goods" are -explicitly or implicitly- exchanged. He nourishes her dreams of marriage and children. So she promises to surrender her virginity some day and he promises that he will not leave her. In the meantime, he threatens with leaving her if



she does not accept and she worries that he will tire of waiting. But she also is afraid that if she accepts intercourse he will abandon her afterwards. Thus the threat of desertion plays both ways and in both the woman is the loser.

Other elements sometimes present in the negotiation process are the fear of pregnancy or contagion and the offer by men "I will take care".

Interestingly, the majority of women that have been coerced consider their partner as "legal" although they are aware of the instability of the relationship and of the fact that -given his characteristics- their partner was not likely to honor his promise. In fact not a few of the partners were described as unfaithful, lazy, chronically unemployed, drug users. In some cases also as "machistas", aggressive and violent.

## COERCED AND NON-COERCED ADOLESCENTS

By the time of the in-depth interview -their ages in almost all the cases being 17 or 18- very few of the **coerced** adolescents were still residing with their intact biological family. Approximately half were living in a consensual union and some of them already had a child. The remaining were either living in a single-parent family headed by the mother, in a step-family, or with other relatives. Uncles, grandmothers, older brothers and sisters or employers sheltered the young women who had migrated alone from their province of origin or whose families of orientation were disrupted due to separation or death of the biological parents. Some of the adolescents were daughters of an unmarried mother, but in the majority of the cases their present family situation is the outcome of processes of family disintegration. In many cases they were not only witnesses but also the victims of the father's -and sometimes also the mother's- violence. Male failure in the fulfillment of the breadwinner's role and alcoholism of the father or step-father were the "normal" experiences in their childhood. Verbal and physical maltreatment, and even extreme cases of child neglect or abandonment were suffered by a number of the interviewees -especially by those who had early lost their biological mothers. The lack of due care by the custodial adults might be the explanation why half of the coerced interviewees report some episode of child sexual abuse. These abuse ranged from a seemingly innocent touch by an older cousin or neighbor to a rape attempt by the step-father. As it frequently happens, either the girl felt guilty and did not tell about it, or her parents did not believe her or blamed her for the occurrence. These devaluing experiences often generated lack of self-esteem and led them to mistrust these and other adults that could guide them.

As shown by their discourses during the interview, they have the need to be socially accepted, the need to be wanted, loved and needed by somebody. In the absence of a loving family environment, these women rely on a male partner to fulfill their needs which are sometimes expressed under the guise of a traditional life project of marriage and motherhood<sup>20</sup>:

"What was going on is that the boy seemed to understand me, I lost my mom when I was

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<sup>20</sup> It should be recalled that for these young women personal achievement through study and a professional career is seldom available.

10 and I never had [a good relationship with my father]... on the contrary (...) And it was like I found a backing. And I enjoyed being with him and all that stuff (...) I used to think intercourse is something one does after getting married, or something like that (...) But it happens. Initially I didn't want it, [he] like ... convinced me, (...) and it just happened (...) That is, the only feeling I had towards him was the fear of losing him (...) I don't know if I ever loved him, that is the problem. Because after I got pregnant it didn't hurt me at all neither letting him go nor his desercion"

On the other hand, their low self esteem is likely to make them believe they do not deserve to keep the interest of a man in a social context where feminine gender is undervalued and female identity depends largely upon the males' "sight" and desire (Olivier, 1991).

"(...) when he followed me to the bus he told me 'would you like to be my girlfriend?' and I told him 'I can't answer that because I don't know you (...) well, I answered 'yes', I thought, 'if he likes me ...' What all us women think 'yes, he likes me because he always waits for me'".

The above described personal characteristics and experiences clearly seem to have played an important role in making those young women vulnerable to coerced sexual initiation.

The obvious thing to say is that non-coerced women differ from those initiated under coercion in the quality of the relationship they establish: their ability to select their partners, their own possibilities of postponing initiation, and the quality of the first sexual intercourse itself. In this case, the typical relationship at time of initiation is "legal"<sup>21</sup>. Although there seldom is talk about future plans of life together, these relationships generally last well beyond the occurrence of first sexual intercourse. This is unlike what happens with the coerced women, who do not continue with the same partner. In some cases the breakup was immediate after first intercourse, either because the woman did not want to continue or -more often- because the man deserted her on the spot.

The partners in the non coerced relationships are generally egalitarian-minded: decisions are taken by consensus between the members of the couple. Although they generally ask for sexual intercourse, the woman's negative is respected and new requests are delayed, sometimes for long periods. When intercourse eventually "happens" they generally use condoms by their own initiative (a less likely occurrence among the partners of coerced women). Some of them ask their partners until the last minute if they are sure about losing their virginity. None of these men are not alcohol or drug users and neither alcohol nor drugs are present at first intercourse.

What makes non-coerced women able to establish relationships of mutual respect is difficult to say. It is true that they have -in average- higher educational level than the coerced women, but other factors we expected to be clearly differential are not. The home environment

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<sup>21</sup> The adolescents call "legal fiancé" to those that enter a more formal relationship, generally known as acknowledged as such by the families on both sides.

does not seem to be the explanation, since -as is the case with coerced women- many have disorganized households, alcoholic and/or violent fathers. However, while some describe harmonious family environments including cases in which parents give their children a say in important decisions, this is seldom the situation in the homes of the coerced women. Conversely, there are no cases of extreme disorganization (abandonments, mother's prostitution) or maltreatment as those reported by coerced women.

Both coerced and non-coerced women sometimes report that they do not talk with any member of the family about sexual matters, while some have good communication with the mother and/or brothers/sisters about them. In general the mother knows they are having sexual relations.

A clear difference with the coerced women -an one that may provide some explanation of their different experiences- is that there is practically no case of sexual abuse among these women and among their female friends and relatives.

## FINAL WORDS

Sexual coercion is a phenomenon that crosses the boundaries of social classes. However, our previous research has shown that the young women in the lower classes are the most frequent victims of coercion, especially the one involving physical force. Thus, the results of the present study have an added importance in that they are relevant to the women in our society most vulnerable to coercion.

The high frequencies of coerced sexual initiation that we found, significantly higher than those registered in previous research in Argentina reflect in part the use of a more encompassing definition of coercion and in part the possibility the subjects had of making sense of their experiences through a sequence of questions with multiple alternatives of response.

Our findings largely coincide with those of research conducted in the USA concerning the different kinds of perceived physical as well as psychological coercion. They confirm our assumption about the existence of a coercion continuum, which is constructed both from the real, objective experiences which adolescents have gone through, and from their ability to perceive them as coercive and to attribute them a specific position on the latent coercion continuum.

As already found by previous research in Argentina and elsewhere, younger adolescents are more vulnerable to coerced sexual initiation -especially when large age differences between them and their sexual partners exist. Our data also show that attending school prevents female adolescents from both early and unwanted sexual initiation. Both factors point to the likelihood of different degrees of empowerment that the adolescents could have acquired which affect their ability to exert some kind of control over the timing of first sexual intercourse. Age as an independent factor could be easily related to the concept of "experiential empowerment" (Holland, J. *et al.*, 1992) and thus to the different capacities of the adolescents to discriminate the risks involved in sexual intercourse and to manage the negotiation process. The role of schooling in preventing coercion is far more complex and elicits no simple interpretation. The acquisition of cognitive and relational resources needed to develop preventive behavior (like postponing sexual initiation or objectively assessing the quality of a given heterosexual relationship) are indeed direct effects of high school schooling. But attending high school is also a good predictor

of the adolescents' having -and wanting to protect- personal life projects, alternative to the traditional ones of marriage and motherhood that make them prone to early and unplanned sexual intercourse.

The likelihood that a poor family makes economic efforts to put an adolescent daughter through high school could be seen as indicative of other "preventive" family characteristics. Among them, the level of family organization in daily life, the capacity to give children affective contention and due care, and the importance parents attribute to children in the allocation of the households' resources. All of them are likely to foster the young woman's self-esteem -which she needs to be able to refuse unwanted sexual initiation even when she is in love and risks losing a significant relationship. Quantitative methods are not as adequate as qualitative methods for uncovering the real role that the quality of the intra-family dynamics and relationships have in preventing unwanted sexual initiation even in the absence of an intact family.

Generally speaking<sup>22</sup>, the less educated, the immigrant poor adolescents that hold traditional gender images and/or have traditional life projects, and/or lack of a safe and affectionate family environment, are most vulnerable to early sexual initiation and to coerced sexual initiation.

Looking into some characteristics of the women and their sexual partners, into the kind and quality of the relationship, into the motivations of the victims to choose (or to accept) a specific male partner, to continue the relationship and to refuse or accept sexual intercourse, we were able to uncover the existence of a nuanced phenomenon of coercion. This refers not only to psychological coercion (from insistence through threat), but also to the hardest ways of physical force, which could be exerted by a complete stranger as well as by a loving boyfriend. Trying to explain coercion -even in its more extreme forms- just in terms of a violent, "machista" and perhaps sex-seeking man on the one hand, and a totally "innocent" or casual victim on the other, would be oversimplifying a very complex social (relational) event that is the outcome of the combined effects of multidimensional socioeconomic, cultural and psychological factors.

Low frequencies of answers that imply women's autonomous decision making which responds to their own sexual desire and needs; silence concerning female sexual pleasure; explicit or implicit manifestation of the will to comply with the beloved other's sexual needs; fear of the negative consequences of refusing; waiting time to initiation set by the partner and ultimately accepted by the woman point to the persistent gender asymmetries in the context of intimate relationships. This happens in spite of the spread of a "modern" discourse concerning perceived changes in gender power relations and roles -mostly related to the division of labor in productive and reproductive work.

Thus far it is difficult to assess to what extent the alleged lack of sexual drive on the part of women interviewed reflects real feelings and -perhaps- real differences (either biologically or socially based) between the ways in which young men and women experience sexuality, and to what extent it is driven by the women's need to conform to the -still alive- social values that prescribe that women must be passive in sex and must not show their sexual appetite. Further empirical, interdisciplinary research is still needed on sexuality -both feminine and masculine.

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<sup>22</sup> We mean that at least one of these correlates -and almost all of them, in a couple of paradigmatic cases- were present where coercion occurred.

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