

**“Gender stereotypes, sexual relations, and adolescent pregnancy in the
lives of youngsters of different socio-cultural groups in Mexico”**

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Background and objective

A critical view of the assumptions commonly held in defining adolescent pregnancy as a social problem (Nathanson, 1991; Luker, 1996; Stern, 1997) led the senior author of this paper to propose that the meaning of adolescent pregnancy and the implications it has - for the individuals involved, their families, communities, and society in general- differ widely between social groups (Stern, 1995b). This, together with a critical perspective on research ongoing in the field in the mid 1990's, led him to propose a different research approach on this phenomenon (Stern and García, 1999).

In this context, Stern launched an ambitious project in 1998 on "The meaning and implications of adolescent pregnancy in different socio-cultural contexts in Mexico", with the main objective of improving our understanding of the interaction of economic, social, and cultural factors involved in early pregnancies, in order to contribute to the discussion of public policies relevant for improving existing conditions related to them¹.

This paper forms part of the mentioned and ongoing project, and addresses the question of the role played by gender stereotypes in the onset of sexual relations, in the use or non-use of contraception, and in adolescent pregnancy and early childbirth in different socio-cultural contexts in Mexico.

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Gender stereotypes, sexual encounters, and early pregnancies

Stereotypes can be defined as strongly held beliefs about the characteristics attributed to certain categories of people. To what extent these beliefs correspond to the actual characteristics of those people is of little importance, since stereotypes are uncsciously imprinted through the socialization process and are not arrived-at through experience and reason (Huici and Moya, 1997; Amorós, 1995). This notwithstanding, the influence of stereotypes in human social behaviour is very strong.

Part of the importance of stereotypes lies in the fact that, by predisposing the behaviour towards others, they tend to provoke the anticipated response by those others, thus contributing to reinforce the stereotype. The strong unconscious component of stereotypes, as well as the important function they have in normalizing behaviour, helps to explain why they are so difficult to change, even when the social conditions that can be seen as originating and maintaining them undergo important changes.

The relationship between stereotypes and behaviour, however, is complex; stereotypes tend to remain at the discourse level even when actual behaviour does not (anymore) correspond to it. Likewise, stereotypes can be seen as operating in behaviour while being denied at the discourse level.

Gender stereotypes and adolescent pregnancy

As Henriques-Mueler and Yunes, among others, have stated, "The gender image is the foundation of the way in which adolescents start to acquire their identity as men and women, because it leads them to interiorise expected behaviour patterns which determine what men and women are expected to be" (1993:47, our own translation).

Over the last decade, various studies in Latin-American countries have underscored the importance of gender stereotypes and relations in adolescent sexuality. (Among others, Pantelides, *et al.*, 1995; Castañeda, *et al.*, 1997; Amuchástegui, 1998, 2001; Mendieta, 1998; Arias and Aramburú, 1999; see also an overview of recent studies in Mexico in Szasz,1998).

These stereotypes tend to be very widely spread throughout specific cultures, since they form part of them, being more or less related to religious values and prescriptions.

(See Amuchástegui, 2001, Ch. VI). However, important, although sometimes subtle variations of these stereotypes can be found among different social groups within these cultures, and, more importantly, there tend to be important variations among different groups in terms both of the relative importance of the diverse stereotypes and of the correspondence between the norms derived from the stereotypes and actual social practices.

Some authors will tend to interpret these differences and tensions as an indication of social and cultural change, as an erosion of the normative power of traditional beliefs, and would perhaps expect their substitution in due time by other, more "modern", "progressive", "liberal", "non-patriarchal" values. As Mendieta (1998:74) mentions, "since a stereotype is a socio-cultural construct, it can be asserted that its transformation is within the power of human beings...". Many social policies nowadays are based implicitly or explicitly on such assumptions and are addressed at inducing cultural change (education for gender equality and for female empowerment, for instance).

Others would interpret these variations as resulting from the interaction between gender and class (economic and social conditions, unequal opportunities and life chances). According to this view, specific stereotypes or characteristics of them will predominate over others in sexual practices and their outcome, depending on social class conditions. For instance, the imperative of maternity might be overshadowed by the risk of putting in danger the class status of an upper middle-class adolescent, leading to the interruption of her pregnancy, while, in contrast, that same imperative might prevail in leading a youngster within a marginal urban context to childbirth and early union, since it would increase her social status and there are no other future plans that would be endangered. Social policies, in this case, would emphasize the need to change the social and economic conditions which are conducive to early unions and childbirth, in order to induce the demand for postponing them.

Probably both components -cultural change and socio-economic inequality- play a part and should be taken into account simultaneously. As Szasz (1998:81) suggests: "...incipient research and reflection on sexuality and gender suggest that the meanings and sexual practices of women constitute forms of adaptation or of resistance to cultural norms, but they also represent strategies related to their material life conditions and their social situation."

Few studies have addressed these questions specifically, although some have touched upon them (Amuchástegui, 2001; Mendieta 1998). We think our study can throw some light over this question, and this paper constitutes a first approximation towards that end.

Methodology

The project of which this paper forms part includes ethnographic work, group interviews and in-depth interviews -in the form of biographical narratives- with male and female youngsters, in five socio-cultural contexts. This paper is based mainly on results from the ethnographic work and of group interviews in three of the five socio-cultural contexts: a marginal (poor) urban sector in Mexico City, a "popular" (working class) sector in an industrial Northern border city (Matamoros, Tamaulipas), and an upper-middle class sector in Mexico City. (See more about the characteristics of these contexts, below, under Results).

Ethnographic work included visits to the communities during an extensive period, observation of daily life, collection and analysis of secondary data, interviews with key informants, informal conversations with youngsters and parents, and participation in some social events.

Group interviews were held with 5 to 10 youngsters between the ages of 15 to 21,² exploring the following themes: from childhood to adolescence and adulthood; relationships between men and women during adolescence; sexuality; sexual initiation; sexual abuse; adolescent pregnancies and their outcomes; expectations and life-plans. Interviews were videotaped and audio-taped, transcriptions were made, and content analysis of the texts was performed with the help of Ethnograph.

Analysis was aimed initially at discovering and describing the representations of the social norms prevailing in each context -both the more general or prevailing norms and their variations. A second step was to interpret the meaning and the possible function of these norms in the behaviour -expressed or assumed- of male and female youngsters. A

² Given the fact that we were interested in learning about what takes place during "adolescence", we decided to work with informants who had for the most part completed that period of their life. Considering that "adolescence", defined as "the period of life between childhood and adulthood", varies in different social

third step consisted of contrasting the norms in terms of gender-relations and their possible outcomes. A fourth and final step consisted in comparing the three sociocultural contexts in order to ascertain similarities and differences between them as well as their possible consequences in terms of adolescent pregnancy, its determinants and consequences, and the policy implications that can be derived.

Interviews with males and females were held separately. Interview sessions lasted between one-and-a-half and three hours and were led by different researchers in each social context.

The main purpose of the group interviews was to get at the **social norms** prevalent in each social context with regard to the various themes being explored. We wanted to get participants involved in describing when and how things happened in their social milieu. We told them that we were interested in learning how youngsters living in different social conditions lived and experienced their lives; that we were not going to judge about what they told us; that all opinions were valid and welcome; that the content of the interview was confidential and that no identification of participants would be made. We asked them to sign letters of informed consent, which all of them did.

An interview guide was prepared and tested with upper-middle class youngsters. Instructions were given to interviewers in the other social contexts to adapt the guide according to local conditions.³

Given the various backgrounds, training and experience of the interviewers who participated in the group interviews, as well as the particularities of the groups finally convened and of the communities involved, we cannot claim either that the interviews were standardized to any high degree, that the results are representative of the social sectors involved, or that they can be generalized to them.

groups, we decided to be flexible in determining the range of ages for participants in each social context, basing the definition on our previous knowledge gained throughout ethnographic field work.

³ The guide included a section in which participants were asked to elaborate a story about a boy and a girl who start to go out with each other, become boy and girlfriend, have sex, etc., in order to get at the social representations of what is supposed to take place in their respective social context. The results of using this technique were highly successful in eliciting what are thought to be the main courses of action as well as various options of alternative possibilities in each social context.

Results: Gender stereotypes, sexuality and adolescent pregnancy in the different socio-cultural contexts.

In what follows we will describe some of the main characteristics of each of the socio-cultural contexts analysed, followed by some of the main results in each of them in terms of the interplay between gender, sexuality, and pregnancy.

a) The urban-marginal sector

"Bricks",⁴ the marginal community included in our study, has approximately 8,500 inhabitants. It is located in the south of Mexico City, in the midst of now highly urbanized neighbourhoods and large public apartment buildings.

Its origins stem from the 1950's, when a number of families dedicated to the manufacture of bricks settled there and slowly obtained the rights of property of their lots. Since then, other waves of settlers, backed by political parties and fractions, have followed the same procedure of invading public land and then fighting for its property.

As most other urban-marginal communities in large cities, "Bricks" is characterized by the following traits: a) precarious sanitary infrastructure (few paved streets, precarious housing, few houses connected to sewage or with running water); unstable employment, mostly in the informal sector; low schooling (less than complete secondary school⁵); scarcity of public services (schools, health clinics, sports facilities); high visibility of youngsters in the streets; alcoholism, drugs as part of the public image; many "incomplete" families and women-headed households.

Children and youngsters spend most of their time in the streets of the community, which makes their behaviour highly visible to others. Most women are in their households most of the time. Men are in and out of the community depending on their having or not having payed work to do, which occurs mostly outside of the community. Youngsters who study and/or work outside the community are stigmatised and viewed as strangers by those who neither work nor study.

Dancing parties, which take place almost every week-end at the community, are one of the few places where male and female adolescents can openly socialize. Private

⁴ We have disguised the names of neighbourhoods and informants.

⁵ In Mexico schooling is divided into primary (6-11 years old), secondary (12-15), preparatory (16-18) and university (19 and beyond).

heterosexual encounters tend to take place in the darker corners of the limits between Bricks and some of the surrounding neighbourhoods.

The life-cycle is short: childhood ends approximately at 11, when many children are led into alcohol and drugs; “adolescence” (not named as such) ends at 15-16, when most kids have left school -considered by male youngsters a childish occupation-, boys work intermittently and become relatively independent of (or at least sever their emotional ties with) their families, though for the most part still live with them, and many girls get pregnant; most form a union -usually short-lived- and many end as head of their household. From there on, it is a matter of struggling to survive; for men, trying to find work and remain the breadwinner, which more often than not ends by not being possible and tends to lead to family violence, alcohol, and severing the ties with wife and children; for women, life is centered around nurturing their children and securing income for their survival. Life histories often tend to be dramatic. The insecurity, vulnerability and precariousness of life stand out in many life histories.

In this context we identified two recurrent ideas with regard to the construction of masculinity: a) the need to show oneself and be accepted publicly as a male by peers, adults, and women; b) the perception of sexuality as a natural instinct which confirms virility.

The biological interpretation of masculine sexuality links it with a blind need which unbalances the subject until it finds a way of being satisfied. The imperative of satiating the sexual impulse legitimates the search for pleasure which, at the same time, confirms manhood publicly. In this sense, the central features of the masculine stereotype present him as a bold, risk taking individual, ready to transgress controls not only in the realm of sexuality, but also in other practices such as the consumption of alcohol, drugs, and even in incurring in criminal acts; all for the sake of publicly confirming that he is a “true man”. For that reason, he does not contemplate the possibility of using preventive measures in his sexual practices, except, and very rarely, when he suspects of the risk of catching an STD. The risk of an unplanned and undesired pregnancy appears remote or totally absent from his worries. On the contrary, the force of the stereotype, stimulated by the social context, leads him to concentrate his worries on himself. The possibility of using contraceptive methods in his sexual relationships is very remote, not so much for lack of information on

contraceptive methods –though informants said such information is scarce and inadequate– but because the fact of getting a girl (the girlfriend, a friend, a casual relationship) pregnant, does not negatively affect his image. Moreover, when there is an affective link with the girl and paternity is contemplated, the stereotype of becoming a “real (adult) man” stimulates him to leave alcohol and drugs and look for a job in order to make himself responsible for the girl and the offspring.

With respect to the construction of the feminine stereotype, the expression “the man gets as far as the woman allows” underlines a central idea which confronts women with a double task: on the one hand, to keep at bay the “naturally” uncontrollable sexuality of males; on the other hand, to control their own sexuality in order to be publicly recognized as a respectable girl.

In this social context, respectability consists in showing herself indifferent when a young man starts to court her, particularly if she feels attracted by him. The clue resides in “making herself desirable” as a subtext of “making herself respectable”, an expression which appeared in the three social contexts analyzed. For whom is this game, which is strongly linked with courtship and seduction, put into play? In principle for the women themselves, inasmuch as it allows to confirm before one’s own family and before strangers the quality of being a respectable girl. In the second place, because it reinforces masculinity: being difficult to get, respectable, worthy, worth to get. And at the same time because it puts into play the skills of the hunter, who consolidates himself as a true man when he achieves his conquest. In this sense, the value of femininity is given by the “quality” of relationships, while that of masculinity is given by the quantity of experiences. Related to this is also the distinction between “good” and “bad” girls, which is linked with the success or failure to impose limits to the ungovernable sexual instinct of males. This distinction is retaken by women in order to price themselves in the marriage market. With this they confirm their respectability before themselves and others, contributing at the same time to another stereotype which crosses over gender relationships: “When women say no, they are really saying yes”.

Why is it important for young women of this social context to “make themselves respectable”? Because it may represent a better guarantee for the male to assume responsibility before a pregnancy. It is worth mentioning that young women in these

contexts receive strong social pressures when they reach a certain age –around eighteen- without a couple or without a child. Contrariwise, a pregnancy around fifteen or sixteen, the formation of a family, and maternity –events which tend to take place in that order- meet with the most important expectation of a young woman in this sector and, not infrequently they also mean the possibility of escaping from a disadvantageous position in the family of origin (domestic work, care of younger siblings, maltreatment and abuse).

This disadvantageous position coincides with the social devaluation of femininity which is summarized in the expression “women suffer more”. To counter the negative effects of being a woman, young women count with a powerful weapon: maternity, which is an expedite way of gaining acknowledgment and of guaranteeing a place in the family and the community. In fact, girls and young women seem confined to a limbo from which they can only get out when they acquire the status of motherhood. From that moment on, they earn respectability in and of themselves and can even contemplate the possibility that their marital relationship –usually a consensual union- is under test, and that they could, if needed, bring up the children without the support of their partner.

In view of these stereotypical features which cross the narrations of the youngsters interviewed, one can ask oneself why they should take any precautions in view of the possibility of a pregnancy, if the consequences of such an event seem more favorable than negative. In effect, for the girl it means, more often than not, escaping from a disadvantageous situation at home and/or to begin her own life following a path for which there seem to be no more attractive options. For the male, paternity is the best proof of manhood, of potency, of virility. The time to accept or not to accept that paternity will come later, but the fact that he has impregnated a woman already gives him social recognition. If he decides to accept the young woman and the child, the option constitutes itself usually as a stimulus to look for work and leave alcohol and drugs behind. If such is not the case, the young girl, after a first moment of reprimand, will receive the support of her own family and will continue her life under the new position gained as a mother. Thus, an early pregnancy in the marginal sector constitutes a means to satisfy –differentially by gender- certain needs of the couple involved, satisfying at the same time the expectations of the community.

The case in point offers, we think, important clues to deepen our understanding of the links between the social context, life options, sexuality, and the obstacles to adopt “safe sex” practices.

b) The urban-popular sector

In contrast with marginal communities in large urban centres, popular sector settlements, which in Mexican large cities encompass the greatest percentage of the population, count with most urban and sanitary services (electricity, sewage, running water, schools, health clinics, police, parks and sports grounds); houses are more solid; households tend to have various appliances such as vacuum cleaners, laundry machines; some families own an automobile; the nuclear family is probably the most common type and strong value tends to be placed in the family; parents often finished secondary school and children attend preparatory school and oftentimes carry on to the university; many girls work before marriage and most marry after they are 20.

The "Colonia Venustiano Carranza" in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, which we chose as the urban-popular social context to be taken for this paper, has approximately 5,000 inhabitants. It was built mostly in the 1960's, for the resettlement of families who inhabited illegal property in the vicinity. Later on, many lots were sold through the teacher's union to primary and secondary school teachers. The Colonia has its own park, community center and sports grounds. Employment, particularly for women, expanded significantly in the 1970's through the "maquiladoras" (assembly factories). There is also some employment for both men and women across the border. Most youngsters remain in school, attending "preparatorias" outside of the Colonia, and try to stay out of wedlock until their third decade of life. Many young men aspire to study a technical career and then work in a manufacturing industry. Young girls aspire to work in a "maquiladora" for some years, in order to have their own money for buying clothes and beauty products, and then marry and have children. Some aspire to study a career such as pedagogy, paediatrics, etc.

The main diversion of youngsters is to go to the movies and to "disco's" on weekends in order to socialize with the opposite sex and have fun. Engagements (“noviazgos”) often start within these groups of friends. Heterosexual encounters in the “disco's” are called “frees”; in them relationships are without commitment on either part and serve as informal sexual socialization practices.

Masculinity appears in this social context to be constructed around the stereotype of the strong male, responsible, who takes the initiative, particularly in his relationships with the opposite sex. An unequivocal sign of manhood is to have been sexually initiated. This responds to an exigency which males have to satisfy: to initiate their partner sexually when the time comes.

Since the traits of the male stereotype reinforce the image of assertivity and reserve the initiative to him, the initiation of sexual practices with the partner responds to a ritual which combines the insistence of the male with the resistance of the young girl during a relatively prolonged period –which can last two or more years, time by which the girl is usually around 18 or 19 years old. It is doubtful that he will take precautions that would put his manhood and the girls' trust in him into doubt. He will only take care of STD's when going to prostitutes. The couple may start to take precautions once their engagement becomes public and accepted, but usually only after the first sexual encounters.

In presence of an unexpected pregnancy, the male will usually face the consequences, but only when the girl is "serious". This constitutes a reinforcement of the stereotype: to take charge, to face the responsibility for one's acts. If there are doubts about the reputation of the young girl, her abandonment is justified and represents a proof of the scarce value and social prestige of the girl.

The feminine stereotype in this social context can be synthesized with two common sense maxims: "It is not enough to be (chaste), one also has to appear to be (chaste)"; and "A good husband is made by a good wife". The first is directly linked with the respectability of the young girls, who have to affirm it and confirm it publicly. Therefore, to be a woman is not directly associated with certain practices, qualities or other aspects strictly imputable to "the feminine", but with the fact of building and maintaining an image for the eyes of others.

¿Why is it important to be respectable and to demonstrate it publicly? Because it is the only way of marrying, having children and forming a respectable family. This can be reached through the acceptance of controls and prohibitions such as not to leave the house without permission, maintain a certain distance with neighbors, avoid interacting with young girls with a doubtful reputation, abstain to relate to males except in socially accepted places and under family supervision, not changing boyfriends frequently, not using a

coarse or vulgar language, not taking initiative in her relationship with partners, etc. So, the feminine stereotype is built around a series of restrictions which in the plane of sexuality aim at the denial of the body and of desire and which have implications on the way in which girls accept to have sexual relationships and in their consequences.

In this respect, it ought to be indicated that for girls sexual initiation implies the breaking of a norm, reason for which it has to be justified with a powerful argument which can allow to maintain the distance between a “good”, “serious” girl and the “bad” and “easy” ones, even though the young girl will have lost a valuable attribute when in need of confirming her respectability. This role is played by the discourse of love which, as we shall see, appears both as an expiation and as a trap. Let us see how it operates.

The breaking of the norm that prescribes sexual abstinence, based on the subtext of the absence of feminine desire, can only be justified through love. But only if it responds to an emotion so intense and overwhelming that it leads the girl to literally lose her head to the point of acceding to the passion of the moment. If the sexual behavior of the girl does not confirm this idea –the excess of love as a justification of sexual impulse- the image of respectability would remain seriously questioned. This notwithstanding, her lack of control does not authorize the girl to take initiatives or to externalize a passionate behavior. The stereotype of the young asexual woman: modest, timid, unknowledgeable, constitutes a proof which reinforces the previously mentioned requisite. Therefore, even when the couple relationship has a certain stability and continuity, and even if the youngsters talk about sexuality, it is difficult to think that she would propose exigencies linked with the use of contraceptive methods. It seems also difficult that males would take this decision, since a sign of virility consists in the satisfaction of sexual desire which, in order to be accomplished without impediments, assumes a free, unregulated and uncontrolled exercise. Also, why use protection or a contraceptive when the relationship is based on mutual trust? Trust in mutual fidelity, and also about the male taking responsibility if anything (a pregnancy) would happen.

The aforementioned situation obviously leaves the couple in a situation of risk of an unplanned pregnancy (and of STD's), because this game of appearances and realities makes it difficult to have full communication with the other and to recognize one's own desires and needs related to sexuality. To this can be added the silence and concealment in which

affective relationships tend to take place. In spite of the existence of places to cultivate heterosexual friendships supervised by the look of adults as a step previous to the concretion of engagement relationships, the latter generate a conflict between the young girls and their families. For that reason, the relationship is kept concealed from the parents, at least at the beginning. On the other hand, however, pressure is exerted for the young girl to have a boyfriend after her fifteenth birthday. This apparently contradictory situation reinforces the image of that duality between being and appearing around which the stereotype of femininity is constructed in this social context. It can be added that even when the girls question this paternal behavior, they expect that the family will exert a relatively strict control which, to some degree, contributes to reinforce their image of respectability.

The second maxim: “The good husband is made by the good wife”, allows to understand the ritual which leads to sexual initiation between sweethearts. Women delay sexual initiation for a relatively long period (say a couple of years), a period during which the boyfriend has probably insisted repeatedly. This delay would have at least two effects: firstly, it allows to confirm, in the eyes of the gallant, that the respectability of the girl is a true fact. Secondly, the young girls would have sufficient time to choose among the best candidates. One can surmise that, in that course of time, the members of the couple will know each other sufficiently so as to assure themselves that both meet with the conditions to consolidate a relationship with some probabilities of success.

c) The upper middle-class sector

Upper-middle class sectors in Mexico constitute a small proportion (probably less than 10%) of the population. The contrasts between their living standards and those of the rest of the population are dramatic. In large cities such as Mexico City they tend to live in well protected neighbourhoods, with security guards at the entrance and various servants - chauffeur, maids, gardener- who make it practically impossible for an unknown to reach the family.⁶ They tend to live in large houses or mansions with large gardens, and usually own other houses on the beach and/or in Europe or the U:S:A., where they travel for holidays. They own several luxury recent-model automobiles -lately at least one SUV- and obviously

⁶ We had planned to work in a territorially defined and delimited upper-middle class neighbourhood in the south of Mexico City, but had to renounce and work through contacting adolescents from this type of families in schools known to belong to this population sector.

most recent technological gadgets for every member of the family. Male adults own business enterprises or work in the high echelons of large corporations or in high posts in the government. Many adult women also work, most of them part-time. Children have little contact with their parents and are tended by third persons in the household.

The period of adolescence, encompassing the teen-age years, is clearly recognized by this population. Practically all youngsters are in school during this period and most go on into university studies well beyond their twenties. They spend little time at home. After school, many take artistic, cultural and/or sports lessons. Socialization takes place mostly in school and in large commercial or other centres with all kinds of facilities –cinemas, cafés, restaurants, boutiques, to which adolescents are specifically drawn by consumer-industry artifices. On week-ends most go to expensive “disco’s”. Many go in groups organized by schools or by commercial travel agencies on vacation trips to beach resorts, without parental supervision, which facilitates alcohol consumption and often casual sexual encounters. Consumption of alcohol and drugs -oftentimes starting at early ages of 13-15- is an increasing worry of parents and teachers.

In this social sector, masculinity is constructed around the appropriation of objects, material or symbolical, which ostentation publicly confirms virility. Cars, watches and clothes of a certain make, etc. In this case, masculinity not only appeals to a direct demonstration through the body itself or of sexual practices; it appears mediated by objects.

With respect to sexuality, the idea that men need to satisfy their impulses, be it through sexual relationships or through masturbation, prevails. They might change couples or maintain a stable relationship even when being at the same time involved in sexual encounters (“frees”), which do not imply an affective compromise, with other young girls.

At the same time, young men prepare themselves to comply with the stereotype of the responsible breadwinner, which they manifest by studying and, occasionally, working in some family enterprise, which also allows them to exert their masculinity in the public sphere. The idea of masculinity is constructed around successful youngsters, who know what they want, sure of themselves, assertive, competitive, with the world in their hands, ready to catch it, dynamic, active, enterprising. However, the stereotype of the successful young man has to confront a number of pressures derived from the expectation of others with regard to his future, not only to guarantee a proper place for himself, but also to

maintain the social class position achieved by his parents, be it through the family enterprise, the parental profession, or a career in the high echelons of business or the government.

The expectations and life projects of the young man and of his parents allow to visualize the conflict which an unexpected pregnancy would arouse if it takes place before the anticipated age to form a family (the late 20's or early 30's). In this connection, it is worth noting that these youngsters go through what could be defined as a very prolonged adolescence, staying with their family of origin and depending financially from their parents usually until they marry.

This notwithstanding, the risk of pregnancy, of which the youngsters are well aware in view of the information they receive from their parents and in school, does not guarantee the use of preventive methods in their sexual practices. Neither does the male contemplate using protection from STD's, since he habitually gets initiated with his girlfriend, or within a non-compromised relationship (a free), but in any case with a young girl who belongs to the same social sector and usually forms part of his group of friends. Since they are girls whom he knows or are like him, he does not consider it necessary to take precautions, a fact that increments the risks.

This successful young man also has to show himself sexually experimented. His partners demand from him a pleasurable relationship and a satisfactory sexual performance. This would mark a difference with respect to the other social sectors, because if the girls demand ability and skilfulness in order to enjoy the relationship, it means that women in this context perceive themselves as desiring subjects. In this way, the traditional stereotype which takes as given the greater experience of the male, is put into the service of the sexual satisfaction of women, through their own demand. But this has its counterpart: the young girl expects that the male will know about and use contraceptive methods, a fact which, as the research undertaken tends to show, often does not happen, since the information he has is most of the time only bookish and ineffective. In the course of courtship, the first sexual relation happens after a number of conversations on the topic, but it takes place in response to the impulse of the moment. It depends on the opportunity and availability of an adequate place. Use of preventive methods is more frequent and systematic when the couple has had a more prolonged relationship.

Feminine identity seems to be constructed in a struggle between a traditional model and a developing one which young girls perceive as an option, based on the opportunities which access to studies, thinking of taking up a university career and the exercise of a profession, etc., imply. Their projects also include, however, although for later in life, the formation of a family, to be mothers and to maintain a stable marital relationship.

The presence of these two models would also explain the coexistence of various stereotypes which appear to confront themselves. On the one hand, the traditional image of the asexual woman: romantic, dreamer, sentimental, tender, affectionate, sweet and with maternal instincts, in opposition, on the other hand, to the young assertive, self-assured girl, with future plans and projects, and with the capacity to choose and decide which are required by the availability of existing options.

This would explain some of the contradictory behaviour of these girls. While on the one hand they manifest favourable attitudes towards pre-marital sex, on the other they only legitimate them through the discourse of love, and they question the sexual initiation of girls who they think they are too young (14 to 16 years old). Also, in some cases, they resort to the argument of drunkenness as the cause of an un-imputable sexual encounter where they literally lost their head –an argument comparable to the discourse of love.

Moreover, these girls maintain the division between “good” and “bad” girls, a feature which puts into evidence another contradiction: the girl who initiates an active sexual life awakens an ungovernable impulse which she will try to satiate with different partners, a behaviour which is valued as undesirable. Also, if it transcends publicly that a girl has had sexual relations in a “free”, she can be catalogued as a “fox” (“zorrra”), “easy”, “crazy” (“loca”) girl. If this occurs, it is thought that males will try to get into un-compromised sexual relations with her. This explains why in this sector sexual openness has its limits: girls should not have many sexual partners. A girl who has sexual relationships does not receive generalized censure if and when she concretises them with one or a few successive boyfriends with whom she has a steady relationship.

In sum, to be a woman results to be conflictive in this sector, because women have more options and greater opportunities to concretise them; therefore, the traditional models are questioned even though they continue operating, a fact which distances them from the

adult world and at the same time leaves them deprived of patterns through which to construct their own identity.

Finally, youngsters of both sexes in this sector have ample possibilities to interact thanks to having economic resources and a variety of places designed especially for them. This notwithstanding, the family exerts controls over the young women, although these tend to be relaxed as they grow up. (The idea of greater permissiveness for males persists among parents). In sum, the way in which youngsters of both sexes tend to relate would seem to imply a considerable openness to approach themes and preoccupations related to sexuality, but, at the same time, it presents the risk of having spontaneous, free, sexual relationships -which therefore take place without protection, at least during their first encounters.

If early pregnancies are less visible than those in other social sectors it is probably because most of them end up as abortions, given the pressures to fulfil the life-options of both youngsters. Abortions usually take place during the first weeks of pregnancy and are carefully concealed, not only from public knowledge but even oftentimes from the parents themselves.

Conclusion and discussion

Although further analysis and interpretation are required, we consider that the analysis here presented clearly illustrates not only the importance of the interplay of gender stereotypes in influencing the sexual behavior of adolescents and its possible consequences in terms of pregnancy, childbirth, marital status, and family formation, but, more importantly for our purposes, the high diversity of meanings, patterns, and trajectories which stand out when comparing how that interplay concretely manifests itself in the different socio-cultural settings studied.

The analysis undertaken so far also highlights the importance of material and social conditions, on the one hand, as well as of life-options and aspirations, on the other, in determining not only the timing and conditions under which adolescent sexuality takes place, but also the course taken by individuals, couples, and families when an early pregnancy occurs.

To sum up some of the results:

In the **marginal sector** the stereotype of the male as being bold, risk-taking, a transgressor, contrasts with that of the woman as a suffering, submissive, care-taking, continually struggling being. He has to play the skills of the hunter in order to satiate his sexual impulse, which will confirm his manhood publicly. She has to prove her respectability by making herself desirable but keeping men at bay, since being respectable is a better guarantee for the male to assume responsibility before a pregnancy.

This play takes place in an environment where disintegrated families are common, where there are poor conditions and few incentives to remain in school, where conditions for parental supervision and communication with youngsters are scarce. Boys wonder in the streets with their gang; girls, once out of school –by the time they are 13-14 years old, are secluded in their homes and more often than not exploited, maltreated and abused, with few opportunities to socialize with peers of either sex.

To find a way to subsist sums up existing life-options. For males, sporadic and informal work in construction or public service and, more often than not, getting some cash from illegal activities. For women, maternity and sporadic work as maids in private houses, hospitals, business enterprises.

Aspirations, for males, to leave behind alcohol and drugs through assuming responsibilities as breadwinners. For girls, to escape their unbearable family situation, through getting involved with someone who “loves” them (shows affection towards them), getting pregnant and becoming mothers in order to be respected and to gain status as women.

The outcomes from the interplay between gender stereotypes, social conditions, and life-options and aspirations are: early sexual initiation, total absence of protection, early pregnancies (leading mostly to consensual unions but sometimes also to unwed motherhood), and early childbirth. Abortions (clandestine, unsafe), occur probably mostly in cases of sexual abuse.

Given existing conditions, social policies geared to improving information, sexuality education, access to contraception, etc., do not seem to make too much sense or, at least, would be totally insufficient, since they do not correspond to any felt needs. Improving economic and social conditions to open greater life-options and thus promote aspirations to delay childhood would be necessary.

Moving now to the **popular sector**, we found that the stereotype of the male corresponds to being strong, taking the initiative in his relationships with girls, being responsible of his acts, while those of the female stem from being and appearing to be respectable: modest, timid, unknowledgeable, asexual, chaste. For men, sexual initiation is a sign of attaining manhood, and it often takes place with prostitutes, since peers are not sexually available.

Strong value is placed on the family and most families tend to be integrated. There is close control and supervision of youngsters, particularly of girls. There are strong incentives to study and prepare themselves; many male youngsters study and work. All aspire to postpone marriage until the third decade of life. Girls grow under crossed pressures between the expectation of heterosexual socialization –girls ought to have a sweetheart once they are beyond fifteen- and restrictions imposed by parents. Thus, engagements tend to be concealed from parents until greater maturation of the relationship.

Once a more stable relationship is established, trust plays a central role: trust in each other (the male will take responsibility if anything happens); trust by parents (she is a good girl and he is a responsible, hard working gallant). Under these conditions, the girl might consent to having sexual relations, but only through the elixir of love, which is the only argument that will excuse transgression from the strong moral norms of chastity and virginity. The girl will repress her sexual needs and desires and continue to play the game of appearances. There will be little communication about sex among the partners. Contraception might be envisaged but will be difficult to put into practice, particularly during the first encounters, because of the interplay of stereotypes.

Life options and aspirations in this sector include, for girls, finishing preparatory studies or a short career; work to help the family and particularly to have some money of their own (there are employment opportunities), and then marry and have children. For males, study an administrative or technical career, work in intermediate positions in commercial or manufacturing enterprises, and reach a position where they can form and maintain a family.

In terms of outcomes, sexual initiation of girls seems to become delayed beyond 17-18 years old and often later, when marriage takes place. When unexpected pregnancies occur, they tend to happen in the context of longstanding engagements, with the effect of

precipitating marriage and cutting short the conclusion of expected studies. Parents tend to have strong and longstanding negative reactions. Males accept the responsibility for parenthood. There is a strong opposition to abortion given deeply held catholic moral values. The role of maternity will prevail.

Given the aspiration to delay marriage and childbirth, sexuality education (education for life) might contribute to the prevention of unwanted pregnancies, but it would have to include strong ingredients directed to adults who are in direct contact with adolescents, particularly parents and teachers, stimulating change of the prevailing cultural values about gender roles and adolescent sexuality. How can adults help and support adolescents if they deny their sexuality and therefore cannot talk to them directly about what takes place and about what **might** take place in their heterosexual relationships?

Moving now to the **upper-middle class**, we saw that male stereotypes stress self-assurance, activity, competitiveness, enterprise, while female identity moves around the contradiction between traditional stereotypes of the romantic, sentimental, tender woman, and modern aspirations of being self-assured, assertive, with independent plans for the future. Virginity is less valuable than in other sectors, although it remains as important at the discourse level.

Adolescence in this social sector is protracted and extends for many years. There is little direct supervision by parents, who are too busy for that. Adolescents have extended means and varied places for heterosexual socialization; they tend to form groups with those who are like them and both friendships and engagements tend to take place within these groups. Occasional sexual encounters take place either with the sweetheart or with a friend. Though adolescents have much information about contraception and they often talk about sex with their partners, first encounters tend to take place spontaneously, on the occasion, and without protection, often under the influence of alcohol and drugs.

Life options are manifold. Both males and females aspire to finish a university career and follow their interests and vocations. Family formation is included in their plans, but for much later in life.

In terms of outcomes, it appears that sexual initiation is taking place earlier than in previous generations. There is probably a considerable number of pregnancies, but most remain concealed and get interrupted, given the weight assigned to finishing a university

career and fulfilling social class aspirations . Access to clean abortions is relatively easy given the social and economic means available, even though abortion is illegal. More conservative families will choose to go on with the pregnancy and, depending on the “quality” of the partner, to press for an early marriage (in which case studies might have to be interrupted), or to keep the child and rear it within the family. Whatever the course chosen, there will tend to be family support to carry it out.

Having summarized the results, we would like to highlight some aspects which deserve further reflection and discussion.

Important for policy considerations is the finding that first intercourse apparently takes place, in the three social sectors and despite differential access to information and to contraceptives, without any preventive measures. Following Gogna and Ramos who paraphrase Paiva (1993:100), “we could say that ‘safer sex’ confronts the most basic notions of masculinity and femininity” (Gogna and Ramos, 1996:16). Or, as Szasz has expressed it: “...the values which represent the greatest social and health risks are derived from the divergence in sexual morals for males and for females.” (Szasz 1998:87).

There is a further finding which can apparently be derived from our study and which deserves further analysis and reflection: most sexual encounters leading to pregnancies seem to take place, in the three social sectors studied, within more or less stable sweetheart relationships, and not through “occasional” encounters or acquaintances.⁷ There appears to be a strong element of “trust” in these relationships; this “trust” includes various dimensions which might operate diversely in the different sectors. Trust that “nothing will happen” (many youngsters believe or make themselves believe that “only one or a few sexual encounters will not lead to a pregnancy”); trust that “the partner will take care of the situation” (either preventing a pregnancy or “taking care” if it occurs).

A third aspect which deserves further analysis and discussion is the apparent fact that, despite some similarities in stereotypes and the way they operate in the three sectors – such as the ones mentioned in the previous paragraphs), the outcomes in terms of when –at what age and in which stage of life- pregnancies tend to occur, their relative frequency, whether or not they lead to childbirth and to union or marriage, etc., are apparently quite

⁷ See the interesting study by Rosario Román (2000), who describes in detail the processes involved in these “sweetheart” relationships in a popular sector of Hermosillo, Mexico.

different in the various sectors. Following Nathanson and Becker (n.d.), we would propose that what they call “opportunity structures” (what we have called “life options”) –both “objective” and, we would add, subjective in the form of aspirations- have a substantial weight in explaining these differences.

Finally, although there is still some distance to traverse in our study and analysis, it appears that many of our results will tend to confirm our view (Stern, 1995a, 1998) that most existing social policies addressed to preventing adolescent pregnancies in Mexico lack an adequate understanding of the problem and of the needs of adolescents in different social contexts. We have pointed to some aspects related to this, but further analysis is needed in order to substantiate the limitations of existing policies given the realities of each social sector, and to be able to derive some more realistic policy recommendations.

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