

UNIVERSIDAD SAN FRANCISCO DE QUITO USFQ

Colegio de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades

**"Yes means yes" and "no means no," or does it?:
Adolescent perspectives of sexual consent.**

Andrea Pita Garcés

EDUCACIÓN PR

Trabajo de fin de carrera presentado como requisito
para la obtención del título de
Licenciada en Ciencias de la Educación

Quito, 17 de Diciembre de 2023

UNIVERSIDAD SAN FRANCISCO DE QUITO USFQ

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**HOJA DE CALIFICACIÓN
DE TRABAJO DE FIN DE CARRERA**

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Adolescent perspectives of sexual consent.**

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Quito, 17 de Diciembre de 2023

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RESUMEN

Este estudio tiene como objetivo comprender nociones y experiencias de consentimiento sexual en estudiantes de bachillerato para informar futuros programas educativos contra la violencia sexual. El proceso de investigación se realizó a través de un estudio de caso en una unidad educativa privada de El Carmen, Manabí, con estudiantes de bachillerato.

El consentimiento sexual se entiende como el acuerdo a participar en un acto sexual y en los últimos años ha sido socializado por movimientos sociales y campañas educativas como una herramienta para erradicar o aminorar la violencia sexual. Sin embargo, mediante el análisis de datos descubrí que los programas educativos que conceptualizan al consentimiento sexual como un proceso de comunicación individual fallan en reconocer las estructuras sociales que promueven la violencia sexual. Además, que los adolescentes lidian con aspectos complejos de su sexualidad sin el apoyo de entornos seguros y esto los deja más vulnerables ante guiones sexuales tradicionales en los cuales se promueve la violencia sexual. Por último, discuto qué consideraciones deben tomar en cuenta los programas educativos para abordar la violencia sexual de manera significativa.

Palabras clave: consentimiento sexual, violencia sexual, adolescencia, sexualidad, guiones sexuales, roles de género.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand notions and experiences of sexual consent in high school students to inform future educational programs against sexual violence. The research process was carried out through a case study in a private school in El Carmen, Manabí, with high school students.

Sexual consent is understood as the agreement to participate in a sexual act and in recent years it has been socialized by social movements and educational campaigns as a tool to eradicate or reduce sexual violence. However, through data analysis I discovered that educational programs that conceptualize sexual consent as a process of individual communication fail to recognize the social structures that promote sexual violence. Furthermore, adolescents deal with complex aspects of their sexuality without the support of safe environments, and this leaves them more vulnerable to traditional sexual scripts in which sexual violence is promoted. Finally, I discuss what considerations educational programs must take into account to meaningfully address sexual violence.

Key words: sexual consent, sexual violence, adolescence, sexuality, sexual scripts, gender roles.

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INTRODUCCIÓN

In 2021, Ecuador's *Corte Constitucional* added a new resolution to the *Código Orgánico Integral Penal* regarding teenage sexual encounters. The previous law indicated that sexual encounters between underaged individuals was constituted as a sex crime, regardless of whether consent was provided. Under the new resolution, however, individuals older than fourteen years of age are capable of consenting to a sexual act (Romero, 2021). Although this resolution was on par with new trends in sexual and reproductive rights, the *Corte Constitucional* faced considerable backlash and was accused of promoting pedophilia and underage sex. Many believed that the new resolution could further exacerbate the alarming rates of sexual violence that exist in the country. Indeed, according to the *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos* (2019) and the World Health Organization (2021), 32.7% of women and 21% of children have experienced sexual violence in Ecuador.

The issue of sexual violence in Ecuador and elsewhere is not new. Numerous scholars and practitioners have contemplated what may be the underlying causes that lead to these concerning statistics and what may be the best way to address it. Most ongoing efforts to address issues of sexual violence are guided and indebted to ideas and understandings that emerged through the American second wave feminist movement. Present in the 1970s, the American second wave feminist movement promoted a number of ideas, including the concept of "rape culture" to indicate that rape was a product of a society where sexual violence was conceived as inevitable and endorsed by social norms and practices (Prior, 2019). Therefore, if rape was a practice promoted by society, it could also be eradicated by it. More recently, there has been a growing focus on sexual consent as one of the keys to solving sexual violence. At its simplest, sexual consent is defined as agreeing to engage in a sexual activity. But, as indicated by Brady, et al., (2018) this agreement is not separated from the social context that shapes how decisions are made. Nevertheless, a growing interest in notions of sexual consent has directed attention to education programs and institutions as sites that can help remedy or at least attenuate the existing prevalence of sexual violence.

While resources have been directed to educational initiatives aimed at addressing sexual violence, existing efforts are often critiqued for failing to recognize the profound influence of the social environment in how sexual consent is understood. Fischel (2020) argues that rather than remedy sexual violence, the new takes on sexual consent are creating different issues. This critique often draws on popular campaigns with slogans such as “Yes means Yes, No means No” or “Consent is Everything”. He contends that these efforts do not address the values that create sexual inequality and thereby sexual violence. In the case of teenagers, their sexual experiences are way more influenced by their peers’ values and sex scripts portrayed in the media than by simple educational initiatives. Their construction of sexual consent is often unguided by professionals and their sexual experiences are usually ignored by adults who classify them as useless for discussion and even as sinful. This lack of attention or openness to discussion does not, however, stop teenagers from being sexually active. For instance, according to the INEC, the average age of first sexual intercourse in Ecuador was 16 years for boys and 18 years for girls, and in Manabí it ranged from 15,6 to 15,9 years for boys and 17,8 to 18,3 for girls (2019). Therefore, as suggested by Brown, Steele & Walsh (2008), if educational initiatives are truly to be effective in addressing issues of sexual violence, adolescent sexuality should not be feared, but understood with all its implications.

One of the limitations of these educational initiatives is that they fail to understand the nuances of teenage sexuality and often reduce these experiences to fit into an oversimplified narrative of sexuality that focuses solely on sexual intercourse and its risks. Therefore, these efforts often ignore the fact that teenagers’ sexual decision-making extend well beyond the act of whether or not to have sex and include issues of intimacy, body image, emotional dependency, and more (Brown, Steele & Walsh, 2008). Such issues are also ignored regarding issues of sexual consent. In Ecuador factors like gender roles, religion, class, and ethnicity influence directly and diversely how individuals consent and communicate consent. As stated by Bourke (2022), “any assumption that sexual violence is a universal experience insults the specificity of individual histories” (pp. 9). For this reason, it is crucial that young people’s personal experiences are understood and taken into consideration when creating educational

programs, policies, or healthcare initiatives that deal with sexual violence.

In response to these current limitations in sex education programs, this study strived to address the two guiding questions:

1. How do high school students create and understand notions of sexual consent?
2. Do these constructions differ between boys and girls?

Through these questions this study seeks to understand how high school students understand and practice consent, and how their perceptions might be relevant for creating effective educational programs against sexual violence. Drawing on a qualitative case study, I conducted interviews with high school students from a private school in El Carmen, Manabí to learn about their ideas and experiences with sexual consent.

Through the interviews and subsequent analysis, I found that adolescents do not usually have safe spaces to discuss their sexuality. And those who do, often experience a sex education that is not helpful for their personal experiences. Also, educational initiatives that present sexual consent as a direct communication process are not helpful towards the eradication of sexual violence because they do not acknowledge the social context that deeply influences sexual consent and its communication and enactment. In reality, teenage sexuality largely depends on rigid sexual scripts and traditional gender roles. These cultural factors further complicate sexual consent and are generally ignored in educational initiatives. Therefore, I argue that for educational programs to be effective, they need to consider seriously the nuances of teenage sexuality and their social context.

DESARROLLO DEL TEMA

Literature Review

Sexual violence is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting including but not limited to home and work” (n.d.). This phenomenon has been present throughout history, across all eras and regions. The WHO (n.d.) estimates that 6% of women older than fifteen years old have experienced sexual violence from a non-partner at least once in their lives. But as it is explained by Bourke (2022), statistics of sexual violence do not reflect the complete situation because they highly depend on the victim’s willingness to report the crime. The underreporting of sexual violence is largely predicated on existing social dynamics that position women in a risky position to denounce it and recognize themselves as victims. Despite the different ideas and beliefs around sexual violence, most social groups agree that it is a problem that should be solved. Therefore, it is not surprising that sexual violence is the subject of passionate discussions, policy reforms, myths, art, and more lately educational initiatives.

In defiance of the common belief that sexual violence is an inherent part of humanity, American second wave radical feminists believe sexual violence is an institution that allows the perpetuation of patriarchy. It is believed to be caused by the inequality between sexes and harms not just the victims of sexual violence, but women as a group (Whisnant, 2021). Moreover, in the 1970s American feminists coined the term “rape culture” to show how in the United States of America, rape was the consequence of a society that presented sexual violence as unavoidable, and that on purpose or through negligence allowed women to become victims and men to become perpetrators. The underlying assumption was that although experienced as something “natural”, sexual violence is a social construction with historical roots. This was notable, as framing sexual violence as a social issue allows to study the problem in a different way because it implies that if it is a social problem, there must be a social solution.

Even though it was American feminists who conceptualized sexual violence as a social practice, this approach helps analyze sexual violence all around the world. In Ecuador, human rights movements have expressed their concern for the high levels of sexual violence and general violence against women and girls. The latest statistics provided by the State shows that 65% percent of women older than fifteen years old have experienced some kind of violence in their lives, 32,7% of these women reported having experienced sexual violence (INEC, 2019). Unfortunately, in recent years, Ecuador has not presented an updated report on sexual violence against women. Nevertheless, there is a strong indication that sexual violence is increasing. Indeed, 2022 was the year with the most reported femicides since this crime became embedded within Ecuador's penal code (Asociación Latinoamericana para el Desarrollo Alternativo, 2023).

This increase in sexual violence is not exclusive in Ecuador. Multiple organizations around the world denounce the numerous struggles women and girls face against their wellbeing. These organizations, most of them advocating for women's rights, have expanded and popularized discourses with different focuses to solve sexual violence. As a result, over the last years more attention has been put into sexual consent as a way to palliate sexual violence. While resources on sexual consent have been developed in Ecuador, there is still a large reliance on instructional material created abroad. Indeed, one of the most popular campaigns about sexual consent is the famous video "Tea and Consent" released by the Thames Valley Police in England. The video which has been adapted and translated into multiple languages including Spanish, has more than eleven million views on YouTube and has become an emblematic resource for learning about sexual consent. However, these kinds of resources, no matter how popular they become, have little impact in people's real sex lives, and they are especially useless for meaningful sex education. As Fischel (2020) points out "simply drilling into students that no means no or yes means yes does next to nothing to facilitate better sex and better sexual culture" (pp. 17). Therefore, educational initiatives that fail to consider profoundly all the nuances that incur in sex encounters will not help to solve sexual violence and create a holistic sexual culture.

The complexities of adolescent sexuality

Creating a holistic sexual culture is not an easy task because it involves changing profound social ideas that have been part of humanity since the beginning. However, as Bourke (2022) points out, the first step to eradicate sexual violence is to believe it is possible. To this end, she argues that every group of society should take responsibility for what is within their ability to do. For example, Lundgren and Amin (2014) identified that for young women their sexual abuser is usually an intimate partner and that there are risk factors for sexual violence such as gender inequality, childhood violence, alcohol and drugs consumption, lack of empowerment for girls and women and controlling male behavior. However, they also identified that adolescence is a valuable opportunity to educate about sexual and intimate partner violence because in these years gender roles intensify and teenagers learn new ways of socializing and understanding intimacy. After reviewing several programs targeting sexual and intimate partner violence, they found that school-based programs help to improve gender-equitable attitudes (Lundgren and Amin, 2014) which is essential to solving sexual violence.

Much of the existing literature asserts that for school-based programs to be effective, they need to consider the complexities of teenage sexuality. First, as Brown et. al, (2008) explain, adults usually simplify teenage sexuality as sexual intercourse, but adolescents are dealing with far more difficult topics. For example, in societies where there are no clear cultural norms about appropriate sexual behaviors for teenagers, they are left facing the paradox of being sexually mature but not permitted to be sexually active. Also, the prevalence of traditional gender roles puts pressure on girls because they fear social retaliation if they act on their sexual desires. On the other hand, boys receive constant messages that their masculinity depends on their seduction abilities and sexual intercourse. They also deal with issues of body image, intimacy, self-esteem, and more.

Therefore, teenagers have numerous variables to consider when exploring their sexuality. The context that surrounds them is often as complex as their inner world. In the last years, especially after the rise of the Me-Too movement, activists and celebrities have popularized the conversation about sexual consent in a way never seen before. This sudden

interest and involvement with sexual consent could be easily evaluated as a positive step towards creating a holistic sexual culture. However, there are some important critiques to the popular discourse around consent. For example, Fischel (2020) argues that the previous conceptual scarcity around consent has been replaced with increasingly detailed and sometimes absurd redefinitions of consent. A clear example of this new definitions would be Bradshaw's (2020) differentiation between basic consent and total consent. For her, basic consent includes age, power and family relationships, conscious capacity, and ability to consent. But that is not enough for total consent. Bradshaw (2020) adds that total consent needs to be honest, ongoing, talked-about, specific, present-moment, informed, changeable, and enthusiastic. Superficially, it is hard to disagree with Bradshaw's take on consent. However, Fischel (2020) explains that with these emerging new definitions "the unfortunate corollary is the cultural coding of nonenthusiastically desired sex as sexual assault, which generates conservative and sometime feminist backlash. And perhaps exacerbates one's sense of injury when sex goes awry" (pp. 4). Including characteristics that are not intrinsically related to how sexual consent is commonly defined, does not assure an equitable and safe sexual culture. Rather, it complicates how sexual assault is identified. Therefore, as Fischel (2020) suggests, what would appear as a useful solution is creating new complexities to this issue.

Another important critique is that with these new definitions, sexual consent has been delegated to solve problems that do not correspond to it. Popular campaigns might mislead teenagers to think that consent is what makes sexual encounters pleasurable or that asking for consent is enough to create a holistic sexual culture. On the contrary, Fischel (2020) thinks that "if we wish to facilitate a feminist, more democratically hedonic, better-informed sexual culture of mutuality, respect, and women's self-advocacy, then let's focus on ways to facilitate mutuality, respect, and women's self-advocacy, rather than simply renaming those values consent" (pp. 18). Based on these critiques, initiatives such as the "Consent is Sexy" (New, 2014) poster campaign or the "Yes Means Yes" campaign are not meaningful to solve sexual violence or to guide teenagers in the exploration of their sexuality because they present sexual violence and wanted sexual encounters as opposite poles that can easily be crossed with a yes or

a no.

While debates about consent have been present in many countries, these conversations have only recently emerged in Ecuador; a country where progressive views on sexuality have largely been absent in popular discourse. One watershed moment on issues of sexual consent occurred recently when that country's *Corte Constitucional* added a new resolution to the 175th article of the *Código Integral Penal* regarding sexual encounters of minors. Before the new resolution, the article stated that in sexual crimes the sexual consent given by the victim under eighteen years old was irrelevant. However, the new resolution added that minors older than fourteen years old are able to give sexual consent (Romero, 2021). Despite the ruling of the *Corte Constitucional* being on par with the recommendations of international human rights and health organizations, it was not well received by the general public. The first newspaper reports were not accurate and deepened people's discomfort. There were accusations of promoting pedophilia, underage sex, and promiscuity. But as the Terre des hommes (2022) organization points out, this resolution does not decriminalize sexual relationships between adolescents and adults or legalizes pedophilia. On the other hand, it recognizes adolescents' rights to decide when, how and with whom they choose to engage in a sexual encounter. The reaction of Ecuador's society to this event is a demonstration of the profound ignorance regarding sexual consent and teenage sexuality. And it also shows that this lack of knowledge cannot be solved by simplistic poster campaigns or inaccurate interpretations of legal reforms. On the contrary, appropriate enactment of sexual consent is a fundamental part of a holistic sexual culture that can be achieved through holistic sexual education.

While there are many studies that examine theoretical definitions of sexual consent, few consider the lived experiences and ideas of teenagers themselves. Understanding teenagers' perspectives is fundamental to create sex education programs that truly reflect adolescent sexuality and help them healthily navigate this aspect of their lives at this important stage. Teenager's ideas explained by themselves give important insights that simply cannot be imagined or assumed by adults.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to understand notions and experiences of sexual consent in high school students to inform future educational programs against sexual violence. To address this goal, I conducted a qualitative case study in Freeland School, a private school in El Carmen, Manabí. This school opened in 2010 with an innovative educational proposal that differed from the rest of the schools in the city because of its holistic approach. The campus is comprised of five hectares of natural space and is divided into preschool, elementary, middle school, and high school. Some of the characteristics that differentiate this institution are daily reading time for all students, daily mindfulness practice, daily physical education classes, a transversal focus on environmental care, and sex education classes in high school years. In the present school year, the school has 515 students and 28 teachers. Most students are from middle or upper middle class and live in El Carmen or nearby places. The students from Freeland School were selected because most of them have experienced some kind of formal sexual education, and because the school is the only one in the city that has included sexual education as a subject in the last three years of high school. Nevertheless, as stated by Brown, Steele and Walsh (2008) it is necessary for educators to acknowledge adolescents' perceptions and enactment of sexual consent to create meaningful educational initiatives to prevent and ultimately eradicate sexual violence. Therefore, it is important for the success of the Freeland School's sex education program to know about students' conceptions and experiences in the effort to understand whether they cohere with intent and content of the school-based program.

Data collection began with semi-structured interviews with eleven participants. Students' ages ranged from 15-18 years of age and included an almost equal distribution of boys and girls. Interview participants were selected because of the age range identified by the *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticos y Censos* of age of first sexual intercourse. Interviews lasted between forty-five minutes to an hour, and questions focused on notions of sexual consent, media influence in teenage sexuality, first sexual experiences, and experiences of sexual violence. Once data collection was completed, I began the analysis process. Data analysis consisted of two complementary approaches. The first step was inductive and consisted of identifying emerging insights which were later formally written as analytical memos. The ideas

emerging from the analytical memos were used to create a coding scheme. This allowed for the second step, which was largely deductive and entailed using the coding scheme to formally code the entirety of the data set. Through the coding process, I was able to identify a series of themes such as girls understanding sex as a romantic act and therefore being reluctant to deny it to their partners, a profound influence of media in adolescent sexuality, a basic understanding of sexual consent that is not reflected in teenagers' sexual experiences, the predominance of traditional gender roles in teenagers' ideas and behaviors and a general inconformity with how adults discuss adolescent sexuality. Once themes were established, I examined their relationship in the effort to write assertions. After assertions were written, I returned to the data set in the effort to identify any disconfirming evidence.

Findings

Freeland School prides itself as a regional pioneer in addressing issues of sexual violence. Since 2019, it has offered its students a robust sexual education program that foregrounds issues of consent. This program has a holistic approach to sexual education, focusing on gender equality, sexual rights, medical accurate biological information, and a safe exploration of sexuality. The program was implemented through a mandatory course for the last three years of high school. Each grade has two classes of sexual education each week which is complemented with additional homework and occasional workshops or talks with experts on the subject.

Most participants of the study have undergone the schools' sex education program. During interviews, they demonstrated strong conceptual understandings of notions of consent and even acknowledged some benefits of the program in their own experience. Reflecting on her own experience, María, a vivacious 17-year-old girl, noted that before the program she was not aware of her agency regarding sexual encounters. Discussing her previous experiences, she explained “But I do not know, back then I did not know about consent, I did not think about myself, in what I can do and that I can say “I don’t want to””. Maria's experience, like others in the study, provides credence to existing arguments about the importance of teaching consent and emphasizing individual choice during sexual encounters.

Another reason students value the schools' sex education program is that they often lack the opportunity to talk about issues of sexuality outside of the school. When the students were asked if they had open conversations with their families regarding sexuality, most of them said “no” or that their conversations were limited to basic warning about teenage pregnancies. Amelia, who is in her last year of high school, said “My mother had me as a teenager and her biggest fear is that I would go through the same thing. So, when we talk about that topic she literally tells me not to have sex”. Amelia's experience reflects what most adolescents in El Carmen experience in their teenage years, a lack of open conversations about sexuality with reliable adults. Frequently, adults reduce adolescent sexuality to sexual intercourse or

prevention of pregnancies, and ignore other pressing issues like self-esteem, partner pressure or sexual scripts.

However, even though Freeland School implements a holistic sex education program, that does not seem to guarantee that every student will talk openly in those spaces. For example, when Marco, who is also in his last year of high school, was asked if he found the program helpful for real life experiences, he seemed doubtful “I think it would be awkward to talk in class about what actually happens in the act”. As suggested in Marco's quote, some teenagers find it difficult to open up about their personal experiences in an academic environment. Part of this difficulty might be explained by the negative ideas that teenagers receive about sex. Girls in particular experience a lot of guilt and shame if they act or even talk about their sexual desires (Muehlenhard and Peterson, 2005). For example, Joshua, a shy fifteen-year-old, explained “I find it wrong that you talk about a girl you had sex with. Because it's like damaging her reputation. I feel like the reputation of that girl is damaged”. These attitudes towards adolescent sexuality are not uncommon, and they are a clear reflection of society's idea of adolescent sexuality as something forbidden or sinful. In a context where so many variables are influencing teenagers' beliefs and experiences, school programs cannot be viewed as an immediate solution to such complex topics.

Sexual education programs are thus difficult to implement in a meaningful way, given prevailing understandings of adolescent sexuality as being forbidden and therefore something difficult to discuss publicly. Nevertheless, the value of such programs is further compromised by their lack of applicability for real-life situations. During interviews, participants discussed the complexities of their experiences that included tensions between the conceptual understandings they acquired from the school and the unspoken norms and social expectations that often informed their behavior. Brady, et al., (2018) discuss these unspoken norms and expectation through the concepts of “sexual scripts”, which is defined as, “a narrative setting out participant behaviors and setting of sexual encounters” (pp. 38) to encompass the variety of elements that impact how individuals enact their sexuality.

Within the traditional sexual scripts, girls deal with the dichotomy of sex as a means to

establishing meaningful relationships, but also as the reason for not being considered suitable for meaningful relationships. One of the female students, Sofía who is new to the school but that has adapted wonderfully, exemplified this point when she told the story of a girlfriend,

She did not want to; she was already getting dressed to go back home. And the guy said “No, this is proof that you love me, otherwise you do not”. And it was bad because she did not want to, and in the end, she slept with him, but only for him to stop bothering her.

As worrying as it is, this experience is common for teenage girls and came up in most of the female interviews. When asked about her previous relationship, María explained:

María: My first relationship was very sexual. It was just about that.

Interviewer: It was very sexual because of you or because of him?

María: Of him, I just went along with it, because I was like “okay”. I felt uncomfortable saying that I did not want to have sex with him. So, he was like “lets meet and go to a motel” And, I was like okay, but it was not something I wanted.

Interviewer: And why did you go along with it?

María: I don't know, maybe because I liked him, because I was in love, because he was my first boyfriend.

Both of these experiences reflect the dangers of socializing sex as romantic gesture for girls. As Brady, et al., (2018). point out, if sex is portrayed as an act of love it is more difficult for girls to refuse it. Framing sex as a romantic gesture also blurs even more the division between wanted sex and sexual assault.

Similarly, boys also experience pressure to follow the rigid sex script presented by the media. In the traditional discourse, men have an uncontrollable sexual desire, and their masculinity depends on sexual conquests. This idea inevitably puts great pressure on boys and their sexual experiences. For example, when asked how he felt in his first sexual encounters, Oliver who is sixteen, explained “The truth is, it was like an exam. I had to do things too well to make the other person feel good. And I kind of had to resort to certain videos to know what to do”. This anxiety towards sexual performance is not exclusive to Oliver. Another sixteen-year-

old student admitted “I didn't want to tell my girlfriend that I didn't know about sex because I was afraid that she would think I was a little boy and leave me”. These quotes reflect how teenagers deal with far more than prevention of pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases, which often are the only focuses of sex education programs. Also, they show how gender roles define how boys and girls live their sexuality, confining boys to always take the lead in sex and girls to follow boys’ desires and ignoring their own.

Furthermore, rigid gender roles and sexual scripts have great repercussions in how teenagers understand and enact sexual consent. One of the reasons for the failure of simplistic consent campaigns is that they portray sexual consent as the process of determining whether a sexual encounter is wanted, and subsequently responding with either yes or no. These binary approaches are useless for a meaningful sex education because in reality sexual encounters are way more nuanced and innumerable variables influence the decision-making process. In the interviews, most students could provide a clear definition of sexual consent and recognized the value of learning the concept in the school’s sexual education program. However, when asked about their sexual experiences, these conceptual understandings were not reflected in their practices. For example, when Oliver was asked to provide a definition of sexual consent, he stated “It is that both people must completely agree to have the sexual act”. But when asked what this process of coming to terms with your sexual partner was like, he said “So what conversation, there was no conversation. Because something that is planned is boring, something that just happens is better”. This idea of “just happening” was one that was repeated the most in interviews and exhibits what Brady, et al., (2018), argue as the indirect model of communication of sexual consent.

Contrary to the recommendations of the most popular sexual consent campaigns, this is rarely discussed explicitly. Brady, et al., (2018) present what numerous research studies confirm, that sexual consent often happens through indirect communication. Young people differentiate between three ways of indirect communication: “just knowing” by the other person’s behavior; assessment of “willingness” by the other person’s body language; and noticing “active participation” from the other person. All of these forms of indirect

communication were alluded to in the interviews of this study. For example, when asked about how he knew he was going to have sex the first time it happened, Marco explained “The moment was right. I mean, it wasn't like we were both there and said, “Oh, let's go.” No, it was like the moment was right”. Likewise, Francisco, another senior, convincingly declared “It is never spoken. It's not like you say you know what, let's do this. It just happens”. Both of these quotes showcase what is frequently presented in the literature about how young people resort to hints to communicate sexual consent. Subsequently, body language was another common form for communicating sexual consent. When the participants were asked about how they would know if someone wanted to have sex with them, they responded “I don't know, I think if he starts touching me, hugging me a lot, kissing me and so on”. And “If she starts kissing me or touching me or something, I'd think she wanted to have sex”. Both girls and boys in the interviews agreed that physical touch and intense kissing in an intimate setting is a signal that sex will occur, as pointed out by Brady, et al., (2018) there is a common misconception about a communicational gap between sexes, however empirical evidence and research deny this idea.

Another element that needs to be considered in sexual education regarding sexual consent is that in the absence of direct communication, sexual encounters are not understood as wanted sex or sexual violence, but rather a spectrum that encompasses wanted sex, unwanted but consensual sex, non-consensual sex that is not sexual assault, sexual assault, and more categories. As indicated by Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005) there is an ambivalence between agreeing and disagreeing to a sexual encounter. For women, the differentiation between sex and sexual assault is not crystal clear. There were two common scenarios that demonstrated how subjective is this differentiation: the first is token resistance, a practice that consists of “indicating to a partner that one does not want to have sex when in fact one does want to” (Muehlenhard and Peterson, 2005). This was denominated in the interviews as girls playing hard to get. Josephine, a smart fifteen-year-old who is the first of her class, explained,

It is to prevent rumors, or your reputation being tarnished, because reputation is very delicate. So, one tends to play hard to get or like that, because it is always instilled that if you play hard to get or if you ignore the boy, you are going to make him value you

more.

Practicing token resistance might present benefits for girls regarding their reputation, but it is also dangerous because it makes them more vulnerable to sexual assault. As Fantasia (2011) indicates, nonconsensual sex is often normalized, and girls do not label it as sexual violence. For example, when Amelia was asked if she had suffered any violent sexual experience, she denied it, but later on in the interview narrated the following experience: “So I wanted to say no, and I was telling him “No” and he kept going and I was like “no no”. And well, in the end it happened because there was a moment where I just let myself go”. Unfortunately, this was not the only experience that reflected how girls do not think that a lack of consent means the experience is violent. When narrating her first sexual experience, María said

He started touching me and I was like, okay. I was super dizzy, and I said to myself *bueno, se dio esta vaina aquí*, that's it. I mean, I knew what it was because my friends had already done it before me and so I thought, *aquí fue esta vaina*, okay.

Compared to the boys, girls showed a significant lack of agency in their first sexual encounters. Both of these experiences align with Abma, Driscoll, and Moore (1997) study where “one fourth of women aged 15 to 24 who described their first intercourse as voluntary still gave it low ratings on a scale of how much they wanted it to happen”. The disposition that girls show to accept sexual proposals from boys can be explained by the general discourse that ignores female sexual desire as normal and prompts them to follow the rigid sexual scripts that surround them. However, girls’ resistance to sex is not unknown for boys. In his interview, Oliver expressed “I think most men don't understand. There are people who say no, and the other person goes on and on and on and the person says “no, get away” and there you have like a kind of rape”. Again, the situation described is not explicitly conceived as rape, even when clear signs of denial are being ignored.

In this context, simplistic binary educational approaches to sexual consent are incongruent with youth experiences and create more confusion than certainty. As exemplified with these assertions, teenagers deal with complex situations with little to no guidance from

reliable adults or experts. Multiple variables like gender roles, peer pressure, sexual scripts have a greater influence in their behavior because they present consistent messages in a society where sex is not discussed openly and attitudes towards sex are contradictory. Therefore, for educational initiatives to be effective they need to consider adolescents' context and social dynamics seriously, recognizing how complicated is the process of negotiating consent, and acknowledging the blurry spectrum of sexual violence and sexual activity. As will be subsequently discussed, a lack of acknowledgement of the complexities of youth experiences may not only lead to inefficient educational programs but may even confuse teenagers further in their exploration of sexuality.

CONCLUSIONES

Findings from this study are specific to a particular context and its social and cultural nuances. Nevertheless, its lessons might be illustrative for other contexts where education has been tasked with providing solutions to ongoing surges in sexual violence. Throughout the interview process in this qualitative study, most teenagers noted that they do not have safe spaces to openly discuss their sexuality. Therefore, sex education programs are very important to learn accurate information. However, these programs have limitations that prevent teenagers from engaging in meaningful learning experiences that may apply to their real lives. One of the most important limitations is that these programs often ignore the complexity of teenage sexuality and reduce it to sexual intercourse and prevention of pregnancies and diseases. Adolescents experience far more pressing issues such as partner pressure to sex, unconformity with traditional gender roles, and lack of self-esteem. Therefore, every aspect of sexuality, including sexual consent is also intertwined with these environmental and personal elements. For example, for girls, negotiating sexual consent is a difficult process because they have been socialized to understand sexual intercourse as a romantic gesture, therefore denying it to romantic partners is a challenging task. On the other hand, boys have been socialized to base their masculinity on sexual conquest, which causes them to ignore negative responses and continue the sexual act. In this context, sexual consent becomes more confusing because contrary to what popular educational campaigns present, people often do not clearly differentiate between sexual assault and sex. As discussed in the literature, there is a wide spectrum of wanted and unwanted sex. Therefore, for educational initiatives to be meaningful in the eradication of sexual violence, they need to address the nuances of sexuality and the structural factors that determine the negotiation and communication of sexual consent.

When educational initiatives focus on placing responsibility on individuals for consenting and communicating consent, they ignore the structural reasons that permit sexual violence. Centering on individual processes of communication reinforces the idea that women are responsible for giving or taking away consent (Brady, et al., 2018). As girls often

experience the burden of policing their sexual behavior, this focus on individual behavior harms them further because it makes them more vulnerable to being blamed for suffering sexual violence. Considering sexual consent as direct communication process in which is only needed to say “yes” or “no” to accept or deny a sexual encounter implies that the efficacy of communication depends only on the communicator itself, and not on the social context that surrounds the process. Therefore, despite the good intentions of campaigns such as “Consent is sexy” or “Yes is yes”, they can have an unintended harmful effect of reinforcing the idea that sexual assault occurs because women do not clearly communicate their intentions or desires.

On the other hand, if educational programs wish to be effective towards the eradication of sexual violence, they need to seriously acknowledge some considerations. First, sexual consent is largely determined by the social context in which occurs. Therefore, sexual violence does not depend on yeses or noes, but in social constructs and practices that enable or even promote sexual inequality. It is necessary for sexual education programs to be aware of the harmful sexual culture that adolescents experience, in which they are taught to eroticize resistance and not take no for an answer, to act as if men were hypersexual beings who cannot control themselves and women beings devoid of sexual desire. And in which they cannot openly discuss their sexuality. As sexual violence is so ingrained in society, the work toward its eradication should be global and profound, but that work cannot limit itself to the narrow area of sexual consent. Indeed, Fischel (2020) argues that if sexual violence is originated by sex inequality, this needs to be addressed “through social transformation: political debate, public health initiatives, educational interventions, artistic productions, and creative collaboration across student groups and community organizations” (pp. 16), rather than focusing solely on sexual consent. Because as exemplified in the interviews, if context and broader structural forces are ignored, initiatives that present sexual consent as a direct communication process in which one must say “yes” or “no” would not have a real impact on the problem of sexual violence.

The evidence of this qualitative study suggest that educators and policymakers should acknowledge adolescents’ perspectives and experiences with sexual consent to create

meaningful learning opportunities. Under current programs, adolescents often feel alienated from the initiatives that are supposedly designed for them. It is important to bring their personal narratives into serious consideration for them to purposefully engage with the programs.

Student-centered sex education programs are a step in the right direction to understand the complexities of adolescent sexuality and to create a better sexual culture where teenagers can safely explore their sexuality. As the world increasingly recognizes the importance of education in solving social problems, educators need to fully believe that a world free of sexual violence is possible and need to contribute by teaching that teenage sexuality needs to be understood and accompanied rather than feared or ignored.

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