

THE “NORTHEASTERN MALE” IN FORMATIVE YEARS: SEXUALITY AND GENDER RELATIONS AMONG TEENAGERS

O “macho nordestino” em formação: sexualidade e relações de gênero entre adolescentes

El “hombre del noreste” en formación: sexualidad y relaciones de género entre adolescentes

Original Article

ABSTRACT

Objective: To analyze sexuality and gender relations from the perspective of adolescents. **Methods:** Qualitative study carried out with ten teenagers from public schools of Fortaleza, CE. Data was collected from May to June 2012 with use of semi-structured interviews and was analyzed through Discourse Analysis. **Results:** The adolescents brought discursive elements that reflect the taboos that surround them about sexuality and the marked requirement of a stereotyped behavior in accordance with the regional standards. The need for male assertiveness, female submission before the male desires, the woman’s responsibility for the reproduction, and veiled prejudice towards homosexuality were common in the speeches of the participants, as an extension of their family and social realities. Such patterns reflect a hierarchical model of gender relations that exposes men and women to situations of vulnerability perpetuated by sociocultural factors and initiate their affirmation during adolescence. **Conclusion:** Thus, it is imperative to work on gender issues in this group, through the exposure to new perspectives, with the aim of changing attitudes and beliefs.

Descriptors: Adolescent; Sexuality; Gender Relations; Vulnerability.

RESUMO

Objetivo: Analisar a sexualidade e as relações de gênero sob a ótica de adolescentes. **Métodos:** Estudo qualitativo realizado com dez adolescentes de escolas públicas de Fortaleza, CE. Os dados foram coletados no período de maio a junho de 2012 usando entrevistas semiestruturadas e analisados através da Análise do Discurso. **Resultados:** Os adolescentes trouxeram elementos discursivos que refletem os tabus que os cercam sobre a sexualidade e a marcada exigência de um comportamento estereotipado segundo os padrões regionais. A necessidade de autoafirmação masculina, a submissão feminina ante os desejos masculinos, a responsabilidade da mulher pela reprodução e o preconceito velado em relação à homossexualidade foram comuns nos discursos dos participantes, como uma extensão de suas realidades familiar e social. Esses padrões espelham um modelo hierárquico de relação de gênero que expõe homens e mulheres a situações de vulnerabilidade eternizadas por fatores socioculturais e que iniciam sua afirmação no período da adolescência. **Conclusão:** Desse modo, torna-se imperioso trabalhar as questões de gênero com esse grupo, mediante a exposição de novas perspectivas, visando mudanças de atitudes e convicções.

Descritores: Adolescente; Sexualidade; Relações de Gênero; Vulnerabilidade em Saúde.

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RESUMEN

Objetivo: Analizar la sexualidad y las relaciones de género a partir de la opinión de los adolescentes. **Métodos:** Estudio cualitativo realizado con diez adolescentes de escuelas públicas de Fortaleza, CE. Los datos fueron recogidos en el período entre mayo y junio de 2012 con entrevistas semiestructuradas y analizados a través del Análisis del Discurso. **Resultados:** Los adolescentes trajeron elementos del discurso que reflejan los tabúes sexuales y la fuerte exigencia de una conducta estereotipada según los patrones regionales. La necesidad de la autoafirmación masculina, la sumisión femenina frente a los deseos masculinos, la responsabilidad de la mujer por la reproducción y el perjuicio respecto a la homosexualidad fueron comunes en los discursos de los participantes como una extensión de sus realidades familiar y social. Esos patrones reflejan un modelo jerárquico de la relación de género que expone a los hombres y a las mujeres a situaciones de vulnerabilidad eternizadas por factores socioculturales y que comienza su afirmación en la adolescencia. **Conclusión:** De esa manera, se hace importante trabajar las cuestiones de género con ese grupo mediante la exposición de nuevas perspectivas con el objetivo de cambios de actitudes y convicciones.

Descriptores: Adolescente; Sexualidad; Relaciones Interpersonales; Vulnerabilidad en Salud.

INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is a social elaboration that, throughout history, has always been object of moral concern and subject to the prevailing values and ideologies in society^(1,2). Many are the public health problems directly related to the study of sexuality, such as the expansion of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and the number of unintended teenage pregnancies. Not less severely, others are affected by its indirect, though striking, influence such as violence related to gender issues^(3,4).

Although these relations act at all life stages, it is in adolescence that the values regarded “normal” are internalized, including the modes of relation between genders⁽⁵⁾. These relations guide the establishment of hierarchies and conflicts that surpass biological requirements, producing vulnerabilities that are likely to persist beyond adolescence.

There are four elements related to the construction of gender identity: cultural symbols, normative concepts, organizations and institutions, and subjective identity, so that cultural identity is a construct product of a series of discourses circulating in the society⁽⁶⁾.

In the Northeast region of Brazil, the establishment of gender relations acquires a very unique aspect because of the characteristics attributed to the Northeastern individual

and introjected by them in the formation of their cultural identity. This region is marked by a scenario of gender violence against women, linked to power relations that result from the place culturally occupied by males. Northeastern women have suffered more physical aggression in the household when compared to those in other regions of the country⁽⁷⁾. Another study estimates that, between 2009 and 2011, Brazil recorded 16,900 female deaths caused by gender conflict, especially in cases of aggression perpetrated by intimate partners, and the Northeast ranks as the region with the worst rates (6.9 cases per 100,000 women)⁽⁸⁾. Such verifications reinforce the male hegemony within the gender relations and calls to ponder over the roles of female and male that are socially constituted in the studied context.

By emphasizing the role of power in the significations and cultural identities, this field makes room to recognizing that sexuality, far from being a natural phenomenon, is deeply susceptible to social and cultural influences. The history of the conception of body and sexuality is shaped in the history of the fundamental values systems in every society⁽⁹⁾.

In this perspective, it becomes important to study gender relations beyond their already established *modus operandi*. It is necessary to understand how they are built and consolidate in the personalities still in formative years, that is, during the adolescence. The relevance of this study is greater in a region where “being macho” is a must, and where these adolescents experience the binary conception “man versus woman”, which will form the basis for the constitution of male and female subjectivities, in their various forms.

In this context, the question is raised: what are the adolescent conceptions of sexuality and gender relations? Thus, this article aims to analyze sexuality and gender relations from the perspective of adolescents.

METHODS

Qualitative study conducted in two public schools in the VI Regional Executive Secretariat (SER VI) in Fortaleza, Ceará. Among the municipality’s administrative regions, this is the largest in population and supply of public health services.

The participants were ten adolescents aged between 14 and 18 years, properly enrolled in the aforesaid schools, whose parents signed the Informed Consent form. The adolescents were selected during preliminary visits for field recognition. The study attempted to select subjects with active voice among their peers or those exercising a leadership position in the groups. Thus, the choice of informants assumed an intentional and theoretical character, and those were chosen for their relevance to deepening

and exploring the research question, and not for statistical representativeness. Saturation was used for closing the theoretical sample⁽¹⁰⁾.

Data was collected from May to June 2012, using semi-structured interviews whose guiding questions dealt with sexuality, body changes during adolescence, and gender relations. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, respecting intonation, interjections and interruptions, and were coded with the letter A and numbered from 1 to 10, in order to preserve the anonymity of participants. Prior to the interview, each participant answered a questionnaire that addressed socio-demographic aspects, with the following variables: biological sex, age, grade level, religion, participation in religious activities, and first sexual intercourse.

Work on the transcripts was conducted by integration of the research objective, the theoretical and conceptual ideation, and prior knowledge of the empirical field. Analyses of the empirical material were based on the field of Cultural Studies and their post-structuralist strands⁽¹¹⁾.

In this study, sexuality, gender relations and adolescence are understood as cultural elaborations produced in the historical and cultural events. This theoretical field offers a favorable scenario for Discourse Analysis, an analytical method that explores the social processes that discourses (re)produce, as well as the relations of knowledge and power that traverse them. Bearing in mind that gender performances are directly related to the power and ideology that shape the social reality^(12,13), and that every social practice has cultural or discursive conditions of existence⁽¹⁴⁾, a focus on the speech was found as a process that occurs in the language, based on the encounter between the memory – interdiscourse – and an event – the very movement of material production of life⁽¹⁵⁻¹⁸⁾, bringing to light a panorama propitious for Discourse Analysis – herein applied according to the French school^(19,20) – which articulates linguistic, socio-historical and ideological dimensions, taking language to the relation with the forms of social production. From this analysis, the following categories have emerged: “*I’m a real macho man*”: sexuality for boys; Between demureness and malice: sexuality for girls; “*The man’s role is to run after and the woman’s is to resist*”: the establishment of social roles based on gender; Prejudice or tolerance: gender identity for the adolescents.

This research project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Fortaleza, under No. 435/2011.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The respondents’ identification data is presented next, followed by the categories of analysis that emerged from the study.

Of the participants, four were men and six, women; six Catholics, four of which have declared to participate in church activities, and other four were evangelical, all practicing; three were dating at the time (two men and a woman), and six had already had some sexual intercourse (three men and three women).

The first two thematic categories deal with the boys’ and girls’ perceptions of sexuality.

“*I’m a real macho man*”: the sexuality for boys

Among the boys, a shift in behavior in the course of the speech was observed, in this category. Initially acting cautiously, they demonstrated greater spontaneity by the end of the interviews. Adolescents who reported previous sexual intercourse mentioned doubts about the beginning of their sex life.

“It’s hard to ask, it’s shameful. We can’t ask our mothers or she’ll kills us. If it were up to my mom, I’d become a priest. She hates my girlfriend because she says that a decent girl doesn’t hang out at night alone with a boyfriend. My father only tells me to go all out. Then it’s bad. Lucky me that I take after my father. That fella was naughty when he was young.” (A4)

“My first time was complex. Because the girl thought I already had experience, but I didn’t. I even saw some videos on the internet not to put on a bad show. Luckily for me, she was a virgin. But I did all right. “I’m a real macho man.” (A7)

Gender relations permeate the entire society^(21,22), being critical for the understanding of the power relations established between men and women in society and the vulnerabilities that genders are exposed to. The concept of gender consolidated in this expression can be understood as the process through which society classifies and assigns values and standards, thus establishing the sexual differences and hierarchies, defining what would the roles of male and female be. It represents the acceptance that masculinity and femininity transcend the anatomy issues, referring to the permanent interdependence between the biological and the psychosocial domains in each specific culture⁽²³⁾.

Focusing specifically on the adolescents, it is known that they form a select age group that undergoes intense changes in the biological, psychological and social domains. It is a stage full of personal and interpersonal conflicts, in which adolescents incorporate cultural influences that will reflect directly on their behaviors and attitudes toward gender relations. Indeed, understanding the phenomenon of sexuality in this group, with gender relations as basis, allows

to place them in the social context, which implies going beyond the biological and epidemiological issues.

One thing that is not said in the speeches, but is related to these, is the recognition of the vicious circle that perpetuates the hierarchical gender relations. If, however, on the one hand, this hierarchical construction of sexuality places the girls in a vulnerable situation, it also poses a difficulty for the boys to establish themselves. “*That fella (father) was naughty*”, and the child wants to be like his father. That expression reflects how the male role is socially demanded in regard to their sexuality – the role of domineering, “macho man”, which is not just socially expected, but imposed by their environment. The father does not elucidate the adolescent’s doubts and advises them instead to “*go it all out*”, a sentence that cannot be translated into the establishment of an active sex life, but into bringing their prowess to the appreciation by their peers, in order to legitimize their masculinity, characterized by the violence of their impulses and their virility. Therefore, the young man needs to have a good sexual performance in front of his partner. Being a virgin is a source of shame. They have been culturally demanded that their power be demonstrated and acknowledged, for them to suit the epithet “macho”.

Explanations about the differences between the onset of sexual activity of men and women are based on the fact that social norms and expectations regarding the age and appropriate circumstances to the first sexual practices vary according to sex. If, for the girl, the desire to become unveiled and the demand for self-preservation are simultaneously present⁽³⁾, for the boy, there is a social request for the early start of active sex life⁽²⁴⁾. This attitude, which begins in the adolescence, is likely to persist for the remaining stages of life, placing the boys and men in a state of vulnerability as regards the health care and the greater exposure to violence⁽²⁵⁾.

One of the adolescents’ speech evidences that the gender patterns stereotypes are incorporated by the women themselves. After all, macho men are created by women. On the one hand, it is difficult for the mother to accept the child’s sexual initiation. On the other, she redeems him from the responsibility for any negative consequences of sex life – the “*blame*” is on the girlfriend. In a hierarchical gender relation, the woman is inculcated by the very women comprised in the system. The male hegemony is sustained by a large segment of men who enjoy its benefits, but also by women who grant that.

If, on the one hand, the sexual performance is seen as an advantage on the male sexual experience, thus supportive of the power of masculinity, on the other hand, the attitude can be decidedly romantic, in which case the man seeks to surrender and devote himself to the right partner at the right time⁽³⁾.

“I don’t know if I’ll marry a virgin. I think not. But I don’t want to go around having sex. I think I’ll end up finding a good girl. Mom says she must be from the church. But I think one can wait for the right girl, I’m no such animal that I can’t hold fast to it.” (A6)

At the first moment, the boy seems detached from the social demands regarding sexuality. A careful analysis, however, demonstrates that he is as subjugated as his colleagues, only the dominant ideology is different. This adolescent demonstrates a great control on the part of his mother over his sex life. The mother is the one who determines his possible partner. It is the church attended by the mother that assures her the necessary attributes. Again, the hierarchical gender relations perpetuated by women themselves are noticed.

Between demureness and malice: sexuality for girls

Unlike the boys, this category shows that the female adolescents were stressed, using subterfuges, and only pronouncing the word “sex” if the answer required so, demonstrating an attitude of submission before their own sexuality.

“I think people should be taught how to distinguish a person’s behavior during the act. To understand it by experience and know how to practice it, not looking only on the malicious side. Because there are the good sides [...]. One has to know the true meaning of it, which is not only malice.” (A9)

This 15-year-old evangelical associated the term “malice” as opposed to “goodness”. Sexuality is the product of social and historical forces⁽¹⁾. Society and culture are the ones that designate whether certain sexual practices are appropriate or not, moral or immoral, healthy or unhealthy. Especially due to the expansion of Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries, sex became something that was necessary to examine, watch and confess. Thus, any caresses that do not lead to sex in its “legitimate” form – for reproductive purposes – stand as sins⁽¹⁾.

Thus, the participant in question has incorporated all conceptions about sex as a sin that were conveyed to her by her family. The sexual behavior standards require demureness, relegating the “*malicious*” conducts to a pejorative and socially unacceptable character.

While some girls value demureness, others demonstrate that there is a pressure to the start of the sex life and into adapting the behavior of a consumer society, in which the sensual and the sexual are just another product.

“Nobody can force anyone to anything just because everyone else does it. If everyone jumps from the apartment, I’ll not jump. But people think they know

everything. I think you should have sex education class for us to discuss it and everybody get the opportunity to express themselves.” (A8)

The adolescent proved to be in conflict with their peers for having taken a jarring decision about the beginning of her sex life. In order “not to be”, something has, first of all, to “be”. Therefore, when the young girl reiterates not being ashamed, she reveals that virginity is judged negatively by her peers. Her behavior differs from her social group and it afflicts her, makes her desire a place to express herself, without judgement, under the protection of a tutor, here represented by the sex education teacher. Generally, adolescents have a strong tendency to want to assert themselves within the group of friends, because of the insecurity typical to the age and the need for acceptance⁽⁵⁾. This student in particular wants to be accepted, but do not want to be pushed to compromise principles she has internalized, in return for that acceptance. Hence the “unspoken”, but rather exposed anguish in her speech.

Human being, nevertheless, is a social being, so that the perception of the adolescents about their sexuality pervades and is traversed by their preconceived ideas about the social roles of genders.

“The man’s role is to run after and the woman’s is to resist”: the establishment of social roles based on gender

In this category, a contradiction is perceived in the speeches already exposed. While some adolescents demonstrate that, even in contemporary times, female demureness is part of the expected behavior of a “good girl”, other discourses show a reality in which the first sexual intercourse is required by peers for acceptance in the group. How to explain these diametrically opposed female behaviors in view of the sociocultural aspects that influence them? Would it be a female achievement? A release from centuries of silence regarding sexual desires and longings?

The requirements of the current consumer society give rise to values that are produced and reproduced at high speed, allowing for a reference system with detached, fragmented and therefore disposable signs, which appear in the adolescents’ discourse.

“I do love my girlfriend. But she’s full of things, and I am a man. My dad says that man’s role is to run after, and the woman’s is to resist. While she stands, there are many good-time girls to meet my needs.” (A4)

“To be honest, I’d want a girlfriend. But while I don’t get myself one, I’m just hooking up. There are lots of hotties.” (A5)

“She wears a pair of shorts like that and puts on airs, queening it over me like a virgin. I’m a real macho man! If she weakens, I bang.” (A7)

The adolescents “make out”, establish fleeting relationships based on physical form of a disposable partner that just needs to be “*hottie*”. The cult of the body and beauty emerges as new defining values of gender relations. In the media, one can daily observe the overexposure of sensuality and eroticism of the body, which, at first, could be accepted as women’s advance or achievement. It is seen, however, that society appropriates this achievement, impoverishing and vulgarizing the female image.

In a globalized world, the production of the female being and the northeastern male being responds to a current consumer society project of global values. This globalized man, however, has not abandoned the awareness of the “Northeastern being”, the virile and “macho man”. After all, a real “*macho man*” “*bangs*”. The “*respectful woman*” should “*resist*” her boyfriend’s attempts.

The adolescents’ speeches showed a bipolarity expressed by two opposing female behavior profiles, reflecting the classic dichotomy between the main female stereotypes – “Mary the mother of Jesus” and “the prostitute Mary Magdalene”.

“Some girls really tease, they run after the boys. I find this ugly. The boys don’t even respect them, and it couldn’t be different. To earn respect, one must show self-respect.” (A3).

Once more, one can note that women themselves absolve men of the sexual “sins”, considered natural given the virility that is expected from males. The adolescent, in her speech, even uses gestures and childish expressions, in an attempt to cover her own sexuality – she “*finds ugly*” the behavior of her colleagues.

Previous speeches, however, have demonstrated that the environment may require the girl/woman to expose her sensuality. When the woman, however, appropriates their sexuality, she is inculpated for her behavior, for not showing self-respect. How can these discordant social requirements be explained?

In a consumer society in which sex is exposed as one of its objects, it is important to understand that exposing sexuality does not mean appropriating it. Overexposure of the body and valorization of the sexual hide, behind a façade of liberalism, a feminine submission to the satisfaction of male desire, disregarding the women’s actual wishes and desires.

“I’ve hooked up, once. To be honest, it’s weird. But everybody was having a good time at the party and the boy was in the mood. He invested strong. And everyone was egging on. And so it happened.” (A1)

“The girls want to do it all, because if she don’t (sic), the boyfriend leaves. But they’re careless, forget about the

pills, many times they miss taking them [...]. Just like a friend of mine, who hides this from her mother and has no money to buy them.” (A8)

The first adolescent gave in to the environmental pressures into satisfying the desire of the young man who “invested strong”, accepting that such “investment” is sufficient to justify her malaise and “strangeness”. This situation is not uncommon, since gender issues are shown fundamental in guiding the reproductive choices of adolescents, particularly at the time of the first sexual intercourse⁽³⁾. As exemplified by the eighth interviewed, when she declares that her colleagues give in to pressure in order to maintain their relationships, the boys are the ones who impose the onset of sexual activity, with support from a favorable context in which the girls themselves exclude those who do not submit to the system. Such level of submission in adolescents in the formative stage of personality is very dangerous and does not bode well for their future relationships.

Thus, it is evidenced that, if the so-called conservative model maintains the woman in a state of submission in relation to the “dominant male”, the apparently progressive behavior also hides, behind the liberalism veil, the female submission in relation to male desires, thus perpetuating the hierarchical gender relations and the vulnerabilities resulting from those.

Again, the family enters the circuit of gender issues, contributing to the establishment of vulnerabilities. By declaring to have a friend who hides information from the mother and has no money to buy the contraceptive pills, the interviewee reveals that, despite the start of the girl’s sex life being required by their peers, it is not tolerated by parents, contrary to what occurs with the boys. The family abstains from talking about this issues with the girl, often because she is not perceived as a woman that might initiate her sex life, and that leaves her in a vulnerable situation^(26,27). The family exerts influence on behavior, reproducing the proviso that the boys must be sexually skilled and powerful, and the girl must be passive, dependent and sensitive.

As regards the birth control pills, women can choose the occasion to get pregnant. On the other hand, that increased the women’s responsibility for reproductive events. As stated by a male adolescent, “*despite all the information, we still see people who make a blunder, that is, who get pregnant too young. They quit school, lose everything*” (A4), reflecting how the responsibility for reproduction is culturally and socially ascribed to the women. This is an update of the social roles determinism based on gender, which contributes to the perpetuation of the vulnerabilities related to these issues.

Another female adolescent, realizing the differences established between genders, asked: “*The girl, I know she suffers. I wonder if the boys don’t suffer anything. I wonder if everything is easy.*” (A8). Such questioning transcends the physiological dimension. Unequal relations are seen in different contexts of people and the community, including in the sexuality and vulnerability that genders are exposed to⁽⁵⁾. It is during adolescence that this relation with the phenomenon of the difference is elaborated, and the way this is established will be crucial to determine how the gender relations will affect the rest of their lives⁽²⁸⁾.

Understanding the phenomenon of sexuality in adolescents from the gender relations allows placing them in the social context, which means going beyond the biological and epidemiological issues⁽²⁹⁾. If female adolescents are submissive at the beginning of their sex lives, there is great possibility of being so in their future relationships. And it is due to the current uneven model of gender relations that women are in a very vulnerable situation concerning the various expressions of violence and STIs⁽²¹⁾.

Similarly, the adolescents’ perceptions of gender roles unveil another social vulnerability: the homophobia.

Prejudice or tolerance: gender identity for the adolescents

With regard to this category, gender identity appears in the boys’ speeches incorporating discourses that perpetuate prejudices and vulnerabilities.

“Sexuality, I think it has to do with being homosexual or being heterosexual. But, with so many ‘marmots’ around nowadays, it’s even hard to tell.” (A4)

“Though there’s a lot of people who have prejudice, I, for example, I’m a man, a macho man, but I’m not even slightly mad at anyone who is not. It’s his life, that’s his problem, I don’t meddle in.” (A7)

“In my view, ‘sexuality’ is a term that distinguishes one person from another, whether that being is male or female, effeminate.” (A10)

Even though the adolescents deny prejudice, acceptance is not clear in the speeches, but tolerance instead. The regional term “*marmot*”, meaning something out of order or messy, was used as pejorative reference to sexual identities different from those regarded normal by the adolescent. When one of the participants emphasizes that “*that’s his problem*” (the other’s), he demonstrates recognizing homoaffectivity as a problem to be solved. When stressing that he is a man, he reproduces patterns of behavior that society has incorporated as normality. When the other adolescent classifies people between

“male” and “effeminate”, it shows he has incorporated the classic stereotypes related to male sexuality that perpetuate prejudice and violence.

It is interesting to observe that references to homoaffectivity were spontaneously brought to light in the boys’ speeches but didn’t appear in the speeches of the girls. Why does it occur? In adolescence, a critical period of development of sexuality, there is usually the first sexual contact with genital involvement. This physical and emotional intimacy happens most commonly with the opposite sex. It is possible, however, that sexual expressions occur between people of the same sex who are discovering themselves, experiencing what it is to be a man and/or a woman. These are girls who exchange confidences, cuddles with her friends, and boys who are seeking partners to games and experiences. This is a trial phase that contributes to the formation of future sexual identity⁽³⁰⁾.

The boys, however, are early affected by demands for affirmation of his masculinity⁽⁵⁾. Thus, the issues related to the choice of sexual object represent a cause of anguish for them. In spite of a gradual increase in the positive perception of homosexuality, negative perceptions are still prevailing. The dominant discourse associates it to sin, crime, perversion, disease, abnormality. In the health area, the thematic in relief regards the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and the vulnerability to the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) related to male homosexuality⁽⁴⁾.

This fact is demonstrated in the adolescent’s speeches, which reflect the veiled prejudice, quite common nowadays. The adolescents’ need to establish themselves as “men” – virile, strong, “macho” – is clearly observed. Despite the cultural changes, the stereotype of the “northeastern male” still persists, being merely updated by a new look of apparent tolerance towards the “effeminate”, but continuing the cycle of prejudice and violence that characterizes it.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The adolescents conveyed discursive elements that reflect the taboos surrounding them about sexuality and the marked requirement of a stereotypic behavior in line with the regional standards, even though these models have been brought up to date given the context of the consumer society of the globalized world. The need for male self-assertion, female submission in the face of male desires, the responsibility for reproduction assigned to the woman, and veiled prejudice towards homosexuality were common to the participants’ speeches. These patterns reflect a hierarchical model of gender relations that exposes men and women to situations of vulnerability perpetuated by

sociocultural factors, whose assertion is initiated statement during adolescence.

If, however, the woman is placed in a situation of vulnerability due to the hierarchy of gender relations, the man also becomes vulnerable as he assumes the role of “dominant male” and cannot socially demonstrate their weaknesses, what leads them to postpone the use of health services and induces health policies to neglect men’s health.

To overcome the vulnerabilities to which men and women are exposed, it becomes increasingly necessary to overcome the vision of a male “omnipotence”. But how can such culturally established perception be transcended, especially in a region where being “macho” is a social requirement? It is a fact that male stereotypes associated with strength, power, aggression and dominance capacity emerge in the adolescents’ discourse as an extension of the speeches that preceded them.

These adolescents reproduce the reality they know, that unfolds daily before their eyes, in their family and social reality. Working on the gender issues and their relations to this group, through the exposure to new perspectives, can be crucial for a change of attitudes and beliefs, taking this new generation out of the vicious circle established in predefined stereotypes of roles of male and female.

Finally, it is worth pointing out a limitation of this study, due to its qualitative approach, which prevents its results from being generalizable to the whole of the adolescents of the investigated context, despite the fact that the data presented is consistent with the literature.

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