

'What goes unspoken, goes unnoticed'

Uncovering the complex meanings of young motherhood in Morelos, Mexico

CONTEXT



Adolescent sexual and reproductive health (**ASRH**) in Mexico is multifaceted.



Despite ASRH campaigns, adolescent fertility rates decline more slowly than overall fertility rates for all age groups.



Young mothers and their babies face higher mortality rates and disease risks.

KEY FACTS FOR MORELOS

- Most teenage pregnancies occur in **lower socio-economic groups**, but the difference between these groups and others is smaller in Morelos compared to the national trend.
- **91.6% of young mothers in Morelos leave school before becoming pregnant** (INEGI, 2018).
- Knowledge gaps in contraception remain prevalent: **one in three had not heard of emergency contraceptive pills** (Menkes Bancet and Sosa-Sánchez, 2016).

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

- The project brings a **qualitative view** of young motherhood, adding depth to the typically statistics-driven research in this field.
- We used **drawing and bodymapping methods** to draw out the complexity of ASRH and the meanings participants attach to motherhood followed by **one-on-one interviews** to expand on their reproductive trajectories.
- We repeated this methodology with two further groups of 8–10 young mothers in Granma (Cuba) and Bogotá (Colombia).
- Given the strong link between teenage pregnancy and school dropout in Morelos, the school-attending participants in our study represent a minority.

FINDINGS

Participants said the workshop was 'cathartic', 'rewarding' and allowed self-reflection and healing:

'One does not think about this process all the time, but simply lives it. We hardly have time or space where we can reflect on everything that comes with being a mother.'

The following findings were consistent across our workshops in Cuba, Mexico and Colombia.

Violence limits reproductive agency

Young mothers in Morelos face different forms of violence – structural, symbolic and sexual. These adolescents also encounter institutional barriers like restricted access to contraception, which means their ability to make decisions about pregnancy is often beyond their control.



Further research on partners is needed

The differing goals, maturity and mobility of young mothers' older partners influence reproductive trajectories. We need to involve fathers in research on how age-gap relationships affect reproductive rights and health.



'When I first found out, I was thinking [about having an abortion], because I was 15 years old. And then I said, I'm a girl, I'm at school, I don't want to. That man is much older than me.'

Motherhood has different meanings

Our findings revealed the resilience and dedication of participants, and the different meanings they attach to motherhood – joy, duty, responsibility, destiny. Their 'life-project narratives' contrast with political discourses of individual reproductive responsibility.



'My baby is my strength to keep going.'

Support networks are inconsistent

Families are the main source of support to participants, while partners' support is often unreliable. Participants had limited knowledge of government support.



Recommendations for improving ASRH programmes

- ✓ Address cultural norms which impact young people's relationships, reproductive trajectories and expectations of parenthood, such as shame around contraception and pregnancy stigma.
- ✓ Increase awareness amongst ASRH professionals, such as teachers and healthcare providers, of the high incidence of violence associated with teenage pregnancy.
- ✓ Continue to invest in community awareness campaigns to challenge violence and harmful gendered norms within age-gap relationships.
- ✓ Prioritise emotional and financial support for young mothers in ASRH programmes, not just pregnancy prevention.
- ✓ Acknowledge the role of structural and sexual violence in limiting reproductive agency in young people.
- ✓ Incorporate **bodymapping** and other arts-based methods in ASRH education. For toolkits visit: shorturl.at/mrvlk

For the full report and project website, visit tinyurl.com/5n8vn7b6.

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