

“Sexuality? A million things come to mind”: reflections on gender and sexuality by Chilean adolescents

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Abstract: *Although Chile is a traditionally conservative country, considerable legal advances in sexual and reproductive rights over the past decade have brought discourses on sexuality into mainstream political, social and media agendas. In light of these changes it is important to explore how adolescents conceptualize sexuality, which in turn influences their understanding of sexual rights. This study is based on four focus group discussions and 20 semi-structured interviews with adolescents, and seven interviews with key informants in Santiago, Chile. Findings indicate that adolescent conceptualizations of sexuality are diverse, often expressed as attitudes or observations of their social context, and primarily shaped by peers, parents and teachers. Attitudes towards individuals with non-heterosexual orientations ranged from support to rejection, and conceptualizations of sexual diversity were also influenced by media, medicalization and biological explanations. Gender differences in sexual expression were described through gendered language and behaviour, in particular observations of gender stereotypes, censored female sexuality and discourses highlighting female risk. Many adolescents described social change towards greater equality regarding gender and sexuality. To optimize this change and help bridge the gap between legal and social recognition of sexual rights, adolescents should be encouraged to reflect critically on issues of gender equality and sexual diversity in Chile. © 2015 Reproductive Health Matters. Published by Elsevier BV. All rights reserved.*

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Background

Sexuality is a central component of human life.¹ Definitions of sexuality tend to be broad and include “sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction”¹ and “ideals, desires, practices, preferences and identities”.² Sexuality is regulated by sociocultural norms, beliefs, morals and taboos, and “policed by a large range of religious, medical, legal and social institutions”.³ In most societies religion is the central agent in sex regulation³ and in the Latin American context, the Catholic Church remains the central opponent to full recognition of sexual and reproductive rights.⁴ The influence of religion is most visible in countries with policies surrounding the criminalization of abortion, denial of reproductive services to unmarried

adolescents, restrictions on provision of comprehensive sex education, and discrimination against individuals with non-heterosexual orientations.

Globalization of sex, sexual identities and sexual rights contribute towards dissolving the distinction between public and private behaviours, often creating tensions between global and local discourses on sexuality and sexual rights.³ In Chile, these global-local tensions are visible in reports published by international human rights organizations criticizing inadequate protection of sexual and reproductive rights by the Chilean State.⁵ Although important, global pressure alone is not enough to accomplish lasting change on the local level without support from civil society networks and organizations within a country.⁶ In Chile, local non-governmental organizations such as *Fundación Iguales* (Equality

Foundation) and *Movimiento para la Integración y Liberación Homosexual* (Movement for Homosexual Integration and Liberation) are examples of civil society organizations promoting sexual rights.

Sexual rights are intrinsically linked to sexual politics. In Chile, the years immediately following the return to democracy in 1990 were characterized by cautious coalition governing.⁷ During this period there was strong opposition to discussing sexual and reproductive rights issues seen to pose a risk to the fragile political power balance.^{7,8} This opposition has also been linked to key positions of power held by conservative religious politicians and political supporters in the post-dictatorship period.^{4,7,8}

The mid 2000s brought a significant shift in political will to tackle issues of gender and sexual rights in Chile. These include: legalization of divorce in 2004; a legal decree in 2005 that explicitly stipulates the educational rights of pregnant and mothering students;⁹ passing of a law in 2010 guaranteeing access to emergency contraception and sex education; inclusion of sexual orientation in the 2012 anti-discrimination law and passing of a civil union bill in 2015.* Although these advances are highly significant, issues still remain, with decriminalization of abortion perhaps the most controversial. Casas and Vivaldi¹⁰ state that Chile is currently at a crossroads regarding abortion law reform, with the most recent attempt plausibly ending 24 years of criminalization and failed efforts at reform.

Although Chile is experiencing considerable political and legal change in relation to gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights, questions remain as to the extent legal and political changes reflect a substantial shift in cultural and social conceptualizations of gender and sexuality. In light of these political and legal changes, it is interesting to investigate social change through an exploration of how adolescents conceptualize sexuality, which in turn has implications for their understanding of sexual rights.

Adolescence is a period of considerable development, characterised by exploration, experimentation and discovery.¹ During this time, numerous socializing agents play a part in shaping individual sexuality, including family, peers, education, religion, media and medicine.^{11,12} Youth must negotiate information about sexuality that they receive from a multitude of sources, from parents, teachers and friends, to pornography and commercial marketing. Thus, what

they understand as good or bad, healthy or unhealthy, acceptable or unacceptable sexuality will be shaped by their unique social context.

This paper reports on findings from a wider study with the main objective of exploring sources of information and adolescent learning about sexual health and sexuality in Santiago, Chile. The word “information” is understood in a wide sense to include seemingly objective information presented in the form of facts and organized sex education curricula, as well as the more subjective information presented through attitudes, opinions and observable behaviours. “Learning” is understood broadly as a process that is formal and informal, active and passive, and both an individual and group process guiding development of attitudes, opinions and behaviours.

Methods

Data was collected from September to December 2013 and included focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The first author conducted all interviews and discussions in Spanish. However, as she is not a native Spanish speaker, an interview team was created with a local research assistant. The assistant was present during all adolescent interviews and discussions, taking notes, keeping time, clearing up language misunderstandings and explaining culturally specific concepts or terminology. All discussions and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. For a more detailed description of research methods see Macintyre, Montero Vega and Sagbakken.¹³

Initial pilot interviews with two university students and two focus group discussions in a public high school provided opportunities to practice interview techniques and tailor interview guides to the Chilean context. After completion of the individual interviews, a further two focus group discussions were held with anthropology students at a public university to discuss the preliminary findings and emerging themes. These discussions also provided valuable opportunities to observe the way in which adolescents discussed the topic of sexuality in a peer group setting. A total of 24 adolescents 18-19 years old participated in the four gender-separated focus group discussions: seven females and seven males in the high school focus groups and five females and five males in the university focus groups. Participants were sampled using homogenous sampling to limit variation and promote open communication in a safe environment, and opportunistic sampling in response to poor

*The first same-sex civil unions were performed in Chile on the 22nd October 2015.

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