



Between surveillance and self-surveillance: What institutionalised girls in Ciudad Juárez (reveal that they) know about sexuality

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Abstract

We describe how girls aged 7 to 12 from social care homes in Ciudad Juárez (Mexico) talk about sexuality in workshops that we led, focusing on how mechanisms of surveillance and self-surveillance operate in a context in which the research framework opens up new norms for socially acceptable ways of talking about sexuality. We analysed data emerging from 13 drawings that answered the question 'What is sexuality?'

KEYWORDS

Ciudad Juárez, girls, sexuality, social care, surveillance

INTRODUCTION

When the topic of children and sex arises in public discourse, it is usually oriented around protecting children from sexual abuse. Yet, the notion of 'abuse' (Moore & Reynolds, 2018, p. 11) is rarely problematised. When the focus is on abuse, the goal is to protect children from being used

Surveillance dance: what girls show to know about sexuality in Ciudad Juárez (Mexico).

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for others' sexual pleasures. While this is obviously an important human rights issue, when we exclusively use the lens of abuse, it is hard to conceptualise children as people who have sexual feelings and desires (Sandfort & Rademakers, 2000) that should be respected.

The lens of abuse is particularly relevant among our research participants, children in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico who lived and/or went to school at social care homes that serve vulnerable children. Mexico's social care homes can be private or public, residential or non-residential (Ángel Mejía & Castillo Viveros, 2016; Ibarra & Romero, 2017). Many of the girls in our study had experienced neglect and/or violence, including sexual abuse. The homes provided sexual education to protect the children from abuse and worked therapeutically with the ones that had been abused. And yet, protecting children from abuse is not the same as helping them to develop a full human sexuality. In our research, we conducted workshops with girls from the homes, using the perspective of comprehensive sex education, to explore their understanding of sexuality and to encourage them to view themselves not only as potential victims but also as agents, capable of experiencing curiosity, desire and pleasure. We asked them to draw pictures of 'what sexuality is' and used subsequent discussion groups to help them talk about their own sexuality and the societal norms surrounding it.

Internationally, there is little research that asks how children understand sexuality, and most of it is conducted at primary schools of the Global North. For example, in the United States, Thorne and Luria (1986) showed how children aged 9–11 learn sexual scripts of early adolescence by producing a gendered meaning of sexuality. In the United Kingdom Epstein and Johnson (1998) analysed the children's production of sexual cultures analysing how the school produced British nationality based on 'normal' heterosexual identities. Following this work, Renold (2005) analysed sexual cultures through ethnographic research in two English schools, showing how children negotiated and produced gender norms based on heterosexuality. In Australia, Blaise (2009) showed how (hetero) sexualities were produced by analysing the children's play in a preschool, and Davies and Robinson (2010) analysed how parents regulate information about sexuality for children according to moral panics. In Spain, Malgosa et al., (2022) have shown how knowledge about the body and sexuality is governed by gender and age, through ethnographic research in four primary schools in Barcelona province.

Of the few studies about sexual knowledge among children conducted in the Global South is the work of Bhana (2016) in South Africa that shows how children in four primary schools developed sexual cultures that reproduce class and race inequalities, through heterosexual games among peers. Also in a school setting, Piyali Sur (2021) analyses discipline mechanisms on female bodies at a middle school in Calcutta (India). Girls presented themselves as asexual, with no desire or passion and 'sexually unknowing' (Sur, 2021, p. 401). The aim of this asexuality was to not appear sexually available to avoid losing their reputation. Although sexuality was considered inappropriate knowledge for children, it circulated among boys and girls, but was only constructed as a risk for girls. Because of this, girls exercised self-surveillance, to hide their knowledge and say only what they were supposed to say. In this sense, norms about what sexual knowledge is permissible to display vary by gender.

In Mexico there is a lack of research about what children know about sexuality, with a few exceptions. Mauricio List Reyes has worked on gay adults' memories of their sexuality in their childhood (Reyes, 2022) and also on gay men's sexual relationships with young adults (Reyes, 2010). Amuchástegui (1998, 2001) has worked on the experiences of teens and young adults surrounding virginity and sexual initiation, showing the relationship between the value of virginity and gender. Her analysis reveals a view in which female sexuality is evil, something from which

people (of any gender) need protection. We found no research about young children's understanding of sexuality in Mexico.

Our field site is important, given the lack of studies about children's understanding of sexuality, especially that of children in the Global South. Working with institutionalised children is particularly relevant because of their construal as sexually vulnerable; under such conditions, it is particularly difficult for a child to develop an empowered human sexuality. This research was part of the SexAFIN project, 'Sexuality and childhood in educational communities', which started in Barcelona (Spain) in 2017 and in Ciudad Juárez (Mexico) in 2019. The project understands that children produce their own cultural worlds (Marre, 2014), including their own sexual cultures (Epstein & Johnson, 1998).

In Ciudad Juárez, researchers conducted conversations with girls from three social care homes (two of them only admitted girls, and at the third, groups of girls were selected) during group activities about sexuality. In these activities, the girls were asked 'What is sexuality?' and given the opportunity to make a collective drawing in response. Our request placed the girls at a crossroads. On the one hand, the researchers exercised symbolic power as adults (Johansson, 2012) who should be 'obeyed' within the institutional normative frame of the social care home. The researchers had at their disposal the power of authorised discourse (Bourdieu, 1982). However, sexuality is a topic that is intrusive, uncomfortable and socially undesirable (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). In this sense, the researchers were asking the girls to talk about something they were not supposed to talk about, as people who were both female and 'little', and the girls showed caution and self-surveillance (Simon, 2005; Vaz & Bruno, 2003). Several authors have analysed how sexuality is governed by gender and age, social class, ethnicity and capacity, among others (Bhana, 2007; Malgosa et al., 2022) and how self-surveillance mechanisms operate (Simon, 2005).

Current studies on surveillance often focus on how technologies are used to watch contemporary subjects (Lyon, 2001). But surveillance does not occur exclusively through technologies. Going beyond this frame, it is useful to understand care practices and protection as forms of surveillance, based on 'the cultural postulation that certain thoughts and actions are dangerous or unwholesome to the constitution of the individual as a subject' (Vaz & Bruno, 2003, p. 273). Moving one step further, we can then define self-surveillance as the attention one pays to one's behaviour. In choosing to participate in this research, the girls had to shift from one authorised discourse ('girls can only know and talk about sexuality as it relates to reproduction') to a new one ('girls can talk about sexuality in an empowered way that considers agency and pleasure'). This article emphasises the surveillance and self-surveillance mechanisms the girls used in shifting from the old frame to the new one (at least during their participation in the research).

The article is organised through three emerging responses to the question 'What is sexuality?'. The results show how the girls accepted, negotiated, and asked about the limits of the (un) authorised discourses in the new normative context produced by the research.

CHILDREN AND SEXUALITY IN MEXICO

Childhood is socially constructed, meaning that childhood is not a universal category. Rather, each culture produces different meanings of what a child is. Sexuality is also socially, historically and culturally constructed (Foucault, 1978). Therefore, different societies have different understandings of children's sexuality and children's knowledge about sexuality. Here we present the Mexican legal framework to show how Mexican culture understands the binomial children and sexuality.

Children in Western cultures have been excluded from sexuality since at least the 19th century (Foucault, 1978) when they were considered asexual and innocent (Montgomery, 2009), and consequently, needing protection. Sexuality was attributed only to the adult world (Moore & Reynolds, 2018). Therefore, the diverse international and national instruments for under-age persons' rights do not take into account sexuality as an important aspect to be cared for by State institutions (Reyes, 2022, p. 84). Mexico's curriculum has included sex education since 1972 as part of a political rationality that links sexuality with reproduction through social structures such as marriage and family (Ramírez-García, 2020). An emphasis on preventing teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases was introduced in the General Education Law of 1993. In 2011, comprehensive sex education was included in the elementary school curriculum from a perspective of promoting health, human rights and inclusion. However, there is fierce debate about whether the state or families should be responsible for sex education. As a result, there is controversy about whether issues related to sexuality—especially questions about gender diversity and sexual orientation—should be taught in schools (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2018). So far, the solution has been to limit sex education at school to discussions of pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and violence prevention. Nevertheless, the Public Education Board (SEP in Spanish) has embarked on an unprecedented shift towards comprehensive sex education to empower children to take control and make informed decisions about their sexuality and relationships freely and responsibly (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2017), especially since the last presidential election. SEP has analysed teaching materials about sexuality at the primary and secondary level that emphasise 'the complexity of human sexuality not reduced as an aspect of individual sex drive or desire, but defined according to a frame and composed of a set of norms, beliefs and social practices that have significant influence on self-conceptions, especially on attitudes manifested around other individuals' (SEP, 2020, p. 4). However, as has happened in other countries, children and youths have been excluded from these discussions (Moore, 2013). They have not been included in studies that analyse sexuality in Mexico (Parrini & Hernández, 2012), even ones about sex education (Amuchástegui, 2007; Chandra-Mouli et al., 2018).

Despite the long trajectory of sex education in Mexico, teen pregnancy rates remain among the highest of the OCDE, only behind Central America and sub-Saharan Africa (Guillén, 2022). A fertility paradox can be observed in Mexico. While in 2019 fertility rates dropped to 1.9 children per woman (for the first time below the replacement level of 2.1), and the age of first motherhood increased from 23.4 years in 1999 to 24.4 in 2019 (Gayet & Juárez, 2021), there has been a 30% increase in unwanted teenage pregnancies, especially between 2020 and 2021, as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic (Arvizu et al., 2022). In the state of Chihuahua, where Ciudad Juárez is located, teenage pregnancy, despite being above the national rate, decreased among girls aged 15–19 years but increased in those younger than 15 (Martínez, 2022). According to the National Health and Nutrition Survey (2022), 22.8% of people between 10 and 19 years of age had initiated penetrative heterosexual sex. Of these, 20.9% did not use any contraceptive method. Specifically, 30.5% of females and 12% of males did not use contraception, and 37% of the females reported having been pregnant. A recent study among adolescents in Querétaro reported that the most discussed topic in the sex education sessions was condom use, and the least discussed topic was pleasure (Gayou et al., 2020). Ana Amuchástegui (2001), analysing the use of contraception in young women, has pointed out that anticipating and planning a sexual encounter is not morally acceptable for women and, much less promoting the use of contraceptives, because it would denote their knowledge about sexuality and, therefore, pregnancy is less harmful than the loss of their social status by showing knowledge about sexuality.

SURVEILLANCE AND SELF-SURVEILLANCE

Surveillance, language and resistance

According to Foucault (1978), sexuality is the mechanism that explains biopolitics—which he defines as the modern way of exercising power—and links the discipline of the body and the creation of subjectivities to governmentality, (that is, the regulation of the population). The surveillance concept is epitomised by the panopticon (Foucault, 1975), a structure that gives prisoners the sense of being constantly watched, even when no one is actually looking. With a metaphorical panopticon in place, the subject self-regulates in the presence of an invisible power. Even though the panopticon is a visual metaphor, it can also apply to hearing, with subjects fearing being overheard (Gallagher, 2010). In this sense, language is an important mechanism of self-surveillance (Leap, 2020). Following Bourdieu (1982), authorised language acts are symbolic representations of the power of the recognised and socially accepted discourses, producing pressure for individual self-surveillance (Koskela, 2012) to avoid saying the wrong thing in a given context. In the case of this research, there is a clash of authorised discourses about sexuality. On the one hand, there is an institutional discourse that entangles sexuality with risk in which educators and psychologists teach what they think children need to know to be protected. On the other, there is an empowering discourse promoted by the researchers, who consider children to be sexual beings who have knowledge about sexuality and should be able to express that knowledge. In the specific context produced by the research, surveillance is ‘a social practice: a way of seeing, understanding and engaging with the world around us’ (Finn, 2012, p. 73). In this respect, the possibility of being understood—and not merely heard—to say something inappropriate is also integral to the mechanism of self-surveillance (Vaz & Bruno, 2003). Another way of conceptualising linguistic self-surveillance is ‘communicative vigilance’ (Frekko et al., 2015), which has been applied to the governance of sexuality (Malgosa et al., 2023) by showing how information is monitored through a careful selection of what is said and what is left unsaid. Communicative vigilance can be compared to a form of ‘routine, auto-pilot, semi-conscious, non-strategic surveillance’ (Marx, 2012, p. xxv). Although most contemporary studies of surveillance refer to vigilance exercised through technologies—the Internet, cameras, or big data (Lyon, 2001)—the definition of surveillance ‘as a dynamic process involving emergent interaction and developments over time with respect to *anti-* and *pro-surveillance* actions’ (Marx, 2009, p. 296) allows the analysis of self-surveillance as a discontinuous and not total relation (Gallagher, 2010). This approach acknowledges the possibility of negotiations and resistance to the fact of being constantly watched, as well as internal dialogues in which self-surveillance is a dynamic search for the limits of the authorised.

Surveillance, childhood and sexuality

In Western society, to be a child is to be under surveillance (Steeves & Owain, 2010). While the exercise of power in the West was initially constructed as the enforcement of rules, the exercise of power is now construed as necessary for providing protection from risk. That is, surveillance is depicted as being in the best interest of the surveilled (Vaz & Bruno, 2003), especially children, who are perceived as vulnerable (Cornejo et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2018). In this sense, surveillance is a form of care (Valentine, 1997).

Practices for surveilling children have varied according to the gender of the child (Ball et al., 2009; Conrad, 2009; Koskela, 2012) since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

when compulsory schooling and the first nursery schools appeared. These institutions aimed at removing children from public spaces, separating them from adults, and providing them with a gender-differential upbringing through access to different toys: trucks and soldiers for boys and dolls for girls (Marre & Clememente-Martínez, 2023). Since then, the school has played an essential role in monitoring what can and can't be done and said, specifically in matters of sexuality. The school is the principal place where children are surveilled (Monahan & Torres, 2010). This is especially true for children in social care institutions (McIntosh et al., 2010).

Childhood is constructed in the West as a life stage with specific characteristics and needs linked to the condition of innocence (Davies & Robinson, 2010; Moore & Reynolds, 2018). Compulsory schooling became a way of ensuring children's innocence. In Europe during the 20th century the presence of children in the streets and their contact with adults became limited and their games came to occur in public spaces through playgrounds (Perrot, 2009). Along with this occurred a growing separation in how space was organised. Intimate space for living was separated from the public space for working, and a growing separation of adult spaces from children's spaces was also propitiated (Perrot, 2009). Within the house, the corridor, single rooms, and single beds were introduced to separate children from the spaces of marital and sexual intimacy (Malgosa et al., 2023), with a clear intention to hide sexuality from children (Jackson & Scott, 2004), because of their asexuality and innocence. Children's will to access knowledge about sexuality (Moore, 2013) was socially restricted through the surveillance exercised by the school. This surveillance was applied equally to all and was based on the need to provide knowledge about individual and social reproduction, thus focusing sexual education around reproductive issues (Frankham, 2006).

METHODS

The SexAFIN-Ciudad Juárez project started in 2019 when members of the SexAFIN-Barcelona group from the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain) travelled to the Mexican city to present their action-research project then underway in Catalonia (Spain). SexAFIN collected data about what children know about sexuality through participatory methods in primary schools in Catalonia (Spain). Researchers from Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez (UACJ) were interested in replicating the SexAFIN project in Ciudad Juárez. The work presented here is part of a broader study involving four institutions (UAB, UACJ, Universidad Pedagógica Nacional del Estado de Chihuahua and Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia), but in this article, we share only the results obtained by the UACJ team.

The UACJ team (composed of three psychologists, and one education and social science researcher from UACJ and one anthropologist from UAB) conducted fieldwork in three social care homes from Ciudad Juárez. Two were institutions affiliated with the Catholic Church and one was private and secular.

The first social care home (Casa Eloisa) was run by three Catholic nuns that lived at the institution, and during our fieldwork in 2019, they cared for 29 girls ages 7–21. The second one (Mare Nostrum), affiliated with the Catholic Church, was run by education and social intervention professionals. In 2020 they cared for 15 girls, ages 7–15. Both of these institutions were residential, with girls going home during the weekend if their families lived in Ciudad Juárez. The girls attended public schools in the area. The third institution (Casa Narcisa) was a social care home and school that served 89 children ages 4–12 in 2019. Most children in Casa Narcisa lived with their families and went to the institution for school, while there was a small group of

live-in students who visited their families on weekends if possible. Along with situations typical of institutionalised children—sexual abuse, other forms of violence, and/or neglect—many of the girls had single mothers working at the ‘maquilas’ [borderland factories] who did not have sufficient financial resources or family/social support to raise their children at home. Therefore, their children lived in the social care home from Monday to Friday.

The fieldwork at these three social care homes consisted of 2-h workshops with the children divided by age (see Table 1), in small groups of 5 or 6 children which were then combined into a focus group by age at the end of each workshop. Each small group was asked to create a drawing that responded to two prompts: ‘Changes in our bodies’ and ‘What is sexuality?’ except for the youngest age group (aged 4–6), which answered the question, ‘How are babies made?’ Each subgroup worked independently, and in the end, they shared their drawings in the age-based focus groups.

There was one researcher per age group. The researcher walked around recording different parts of conversations of each group while they were drawing and also recorded the focus group discussion that included all children from the age group. Although young people from 4 to 21 years old participated in this research, the results presented here are limited to five workshops with groups from age 7 to 12 years old, with 67 participants divided into 13 subgroups which were then combined to form five focus groups. The two focus groups in Casa Narcisa included boys and girls. In the focus groups, the small groups—which at Casa Narcisa had spontaneously arranged themselves into homogeneous groups by gender—joined together and each described its drawing to the other groups. Only the girls’ explanations are analysed for this paper.

The researchers recorded their reflections in audio field diaries. These diaries and the focus group recordings were subsequently transcribed by students of the Bachelor’s in Sociocultural Gender Studies at the UAB as part of their research training. The UAB students coded the recordings and drawings in collaboration with the UACJ team, using thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). After the main themes had been identified, the first author conducted a second round of coding to ensure that the codes had been applied uniformly.

Ethical concerns

Children and sexuality is a sensitive topic, especially in the case of institutionalised children, who may be particularly vulnerable. Therefore, we worked carefully with the professionals in

TABLE 1 Participants according to the residential care home, age and number of participants, number of subgroups and number of focus groups.

	Code	Institution	Years	Number of participants	Subgroups	Focus groups
Boys and girls	CN910	CN	9–11 years	25	4	1
Boys and girls	CN1112	CN	11–12 years	21	4	1
Girls	CE710	CE	7–10 years	6	2	1
Girls	CE1112	CE	11–12 years	7	2	1
Girls	MN811	MN	8–11 years	8	1	1
Total analysed				67	13	5

Note: Each code represents one focus group. Letters are initials of social care homes (CN, Casa Narcisa; CE, Casa Eloisa; MN, Mare Nostrum). The codes represent the institution acronym and the age group.

charge of the institutions to ensure that the research was conducted ethically and in alignment with the children's well-being.

Before our project began, researchers from UACJ were already working with the participating institutions, performing research and educational interventions. Their experience was fundamental in considering how to safeguard the participating children's welfare. We met individually with the head of each institution to explain the project in detail and to discuss with them how to look after the welfare of the children during fieldwork. Each institution head—as the person authorised to make decisions about the children's activities while in the institution—signed an informed consent document.

However, this informed consent process was not enough to ensure that the children's participation would be voluntary. We therefore agreed with the institution heads and the ethics committee of the UAB that in order to participate, children would sign an informed 'assent' document. Although it had no legal value, this document both emphasised the children's right not to participate and established the workshops as a safe space to talk about sexuality. Additionally, in signing the informed assent form, children agreed to maintain the confidentiality of their peers when they subsequently talked about the workshops. Our goal with this statement was to reinforce the idea that the children were free to talk about sexuality to anyone, while at the same time reminding them of the need to protect the privacy of others. The institution heads planned alternative activities in case some children did not want to participate.

Finally, we discussed with the institution heads the need for mechanisms to support children in case the research activity opened wounds of past experiences related to sexual abuse. Caregivers and social educators who stayed with children most of the time were aware of the activity. Additionally, each institution had a specialised psychologist on sexual abuse who visited the centre once a month. These professionals were also aware that we used the focus group technique, in which some children might express opinions or describe experiences that could be traumatic to their peers. In this sense, the caregivers, social educators and psychologists were aware of the nature of the activity and prepared to provide support if necessary. During the workshop, the researchers were attentive to the well-being of the children, observing any discomfort that might appear. We are not aware of any child needing special support after participating in our workshops.

At Casa Eloisa and Mare Nostrum the institution heads told the children ahead of our visit that some researchers would come to talk about sexuality but did not provide detailed information. When we arrived at each of the institutions, we explained the research to the children, offered them the chance to participate, and asked them to sign the assent form. Then we agreed on some ground rules, such as not shouting, taking turns speaking and keeping confidential any information shared in the activity. One girl from Casa Eloisa chose not to participate and went with the nuns to do the alternative activity.

After the workshop, the participating children were presented with a certificate of participation in recognition and gratitude. One said, 'It's the first time somebody says thank you to us'. The markers used to make the drawings were donated to the institutions.

The material produced—audio and drawings—was kept completely confidential. All identifying information was removed from drawings and transcripts. The UACJ stored the drawings, and the audio and transcripts were stored in OneDrive, the software recommended by the UAB for storing ethnographic material, and where researchers from UACJ had access, following a double identification sign-in. The UAB students signed a confidentiality agreement before accessing the focus group audio recordings. These did not contain any information about the institution where

they had been recorded, meaning that UAB students did not have identifying information for the participants.

WHAT IS SEXUALITY?

Of all the data from the fieldwork conducted in the three social care homes, this article shows only those emerging from the comments to the question ‘What is sexuality?’ by girls between 7 and 12 years of age, which was the age group for which we had the best coverage across the three institutions. We describe three kinds of response, which all reflect mechanisms of surveillance and self-surveillance: (1) engaging in discourses of sexuality authorised in the frame of risk and protection; (2) using euphemisms to bridge the two frames; and (3) reluctantly engaging in the discourse of sexuality authorised by the research context, but only after displaying their adherence to the previous frame.

Surveillance and the authorised discourse: The dirtiness of sexuality and the sacredness of motherhood

In the first type of response, girls enacted the traditionally authorised discourse surrounding children (especially girls) and sexuality. Answering the question ‘What is sexuality?’ a 9-year-old girl from the social care home Casa Eloisa answered, ‘I don’t remember what it is’. A classmate said, ‘Don’t be a pig’ (CE710) when she heard the word sexuality. In response, the researcher clarified that they should explain ‘what they had heard about what sexuality is’, that is, that it was no longer necessary for them to show ‘what they knew’ about sexuality but to repeat what they had heard. Despite this clarification, the conversation continued with another girl complaining that the question was too difficult. And another reprimand from her classmate: ‘Don’t be filthy’. Finally, they decided ‘to draw a pregnant woman’ (CE710). On the one hand, this decision showed the result of negotiation among the girls about what to show and what they knew about sexuality. On the other hand, the word sexuality in one girl’s mouth led another in the group to regulate the infraction of mentioning the word by accusing her of ‘being a pig’ and ‘filthy.’ They had already stated ‘that the question is very difficult’, which handily avoided committing an infraction. Not authorised to talk about other aspects of sexuality, they settled on drawing ‘a pregnant woman’, which fits into the traditional authorised discourse of sexuality. As Amuchástegui (2001) has pointed out, in Mexico, female virginity, a symbol of purity, is corrupted by the penetration of the penis. The woman redeems herself from this evil through pregnancy and birth, which lead her to the sacred place of maternity and love for her husband.

When this group of girls explained their drawing to the other groups, the researcher asked them ‘to explain what you understand by sexuality’. Again, upon hearing the word ‘sexuality’, one girl in the room shouted ‘disgusting!’, while the girl in charge of describing the drawing pointed out, ‘Here is a pregnant woman’ (Figure 1) and responded affirmatively when the researcher asked, ‘Sexuality is related to being pregnant?’ (CE710).

A group of slightly older girls from Casa Narcisa (CN1112) had a similar conversation. To the question of what sexuality is, they also answered, ‘It’s reproduction’. However, when asked by the researcher, ‘Is it only reproduction?’ the girls answered with deep silence, suggesting that socially they were not allowed to show that they knew more (see a parallel case in India described by Sur, 2021).



FIGURE 1 Pregnant woman with probably the child's father (CE1112).

In another group at the same social care home, one of the researchers explained to a group of 11- and 12-year-old girls (CE1112) that the middle days of the menstrual cycle is when ovulation occurs, making it possible to get pregnant if heterosexual intercourse occurs. One of the girls responded, 'My sister is 14 years old, and she's pregnant... she's 6 or 7 months pregnant'. Another referred to a similar experience, 'My sister-in-law had him [her son] at 13 or 12'. Another girl confirmed, 'My sister at 13'. Half of a group of five or six girls had friends or family members who had become pregnant as young teens. While the girls entangled sexuality with reproduction without being able to say anything more, they were surrounded by pregnant teens. By the time of this writing, some of our participants have probably already become pregnant teens themselves.

Genitalia: Using euphemisms to say without saying

In a second type of response, girls moved closer to the sex-positive authorised discourse introduced by the researchers. In these responses, they drew and named genitals, but they did so using euphemisms and other strategies that displayed their discomfort. When a group of 9-year-old girls from the Casa Eloisa (CE710) began to draw what sexuality meant to them, another girl said, 'She's filthy! Look at what she drew!' pointing to her classmate's half-drawn penis. The researcher replied that it is just a body part, like any other, like a hand or a foot. When she confirmed that a penis is just another part of the body, she was 'authorising' the drawing of genitals in this new normative context produced by the research. The girls responded with drawings of bodies, mostly without faces or heads—that is, without eyes that look—and with penises, vaginas, Fallopian tubes and ovaries. That is, they drew the parts that are indispensable for reproduction (no vulva or clitoris appeared) (Figures 2–4).

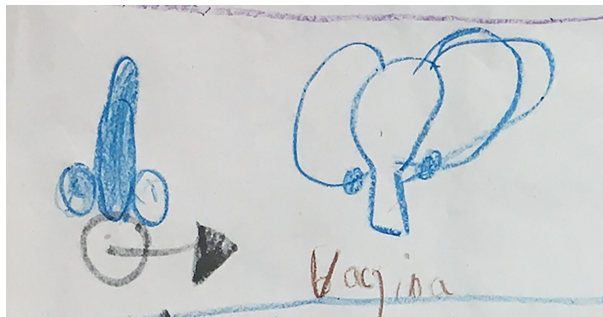


FIGURE 2 A penis and a vagina (CE710).

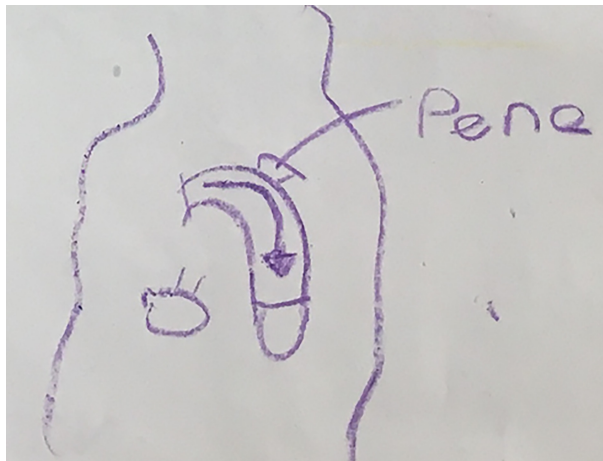


FIGURE 3 A penis (CE710).

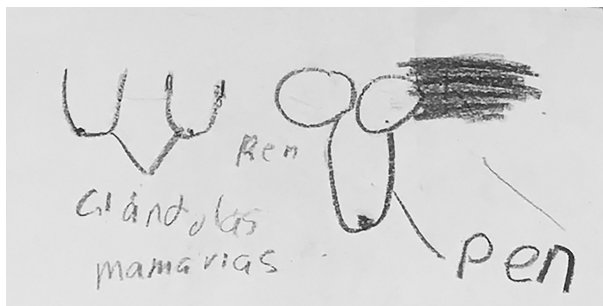


FIGURE 4 A penis and a vagina (CE710)

When asked to explain the drawing, one of the girls said, ‘This is the woman’s part, and this is the man’s part,’ pointing to a penis and a vagina with Fallopian tubes. She gave the names of these parts when asked by the researcher, revealing that she knew them. She also responded affirmatively to the question of whether ‘When you hear the word sexuality, do you relate it to these body parts?’, confirming that once ‘authorised’ through a new normative framework, the penis and the vagina can be named.

Another group of girls from the same social care home expressed their feelings at the mention of genitalia: ‘It makes me feel gross to talk about penises’. ‘It makes me laugh’ (CE710). A study

(Kelley et al., 1999) on sexuality, childhood, and television conducted in the United Kingdom shows how laughter can reflect the inappropriateness, and even subversiveness, of being seen to cross into adult territory when a girl should not know about sexuality.

Other groups negotiated to be able to name genitalia, alluding to names that facilitated circumvention of the taboo. One mixed group in Casa Narcisa asked, 'Can we draw a "nepe"?' to which the researcher responded, 'A penis? Yes, you can draw anything you want' (CN910). To another mixed group talking about 'panocha' [corn cob], the researcher asked, 'It's not called "panocha", what is it called?' to which they all responded, 'Vagina!' (CN1112), confirming that social taboos 'authorise' and 'popularise' euphemisms to name the unnameable.

Most groups named the 'vagina', usually the drawing of the uterus, Fallopian tubes and ovaries. In the 13 drawings analysed, only two vulvas—understood as the external part of the genitals—appeared. One was drawn by a group of boys showing two bodies in sexual intercourse. The other vulva was drawn by a mixed group (CN910) (Figure 5) to illustrate words associated with sexuality: 'a man and a woman', 'bum' [nalgas], 'behind' [popas] (both euphemisms for buttocks), 'breasts', 'penis', 'pectorals' and 'vulva' [misspelled as 'bulba'], each accompanied by a schematic drawing.

Considering that the names of female genitalia 'encode ideas about women's bodies, women's place in the world and women's place in sex' (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001, p. 147), the new normative framework created by the research based in dialogue with the children created a social space in which it was possible to name the genitalia, and thus the place in the world of people with a 'bulba'.

From 'being seduced' to 'wanting': Passivity, agency and pleasure

In a third type of response, after expressing the traditional authorised discourse and after coaxing from the researchers, some of the girls revealed knowledge about women's sexual agency and pleasure. A group of 11 and 12-year-old girls (CE1112) made an explicit, if subtle, reference to

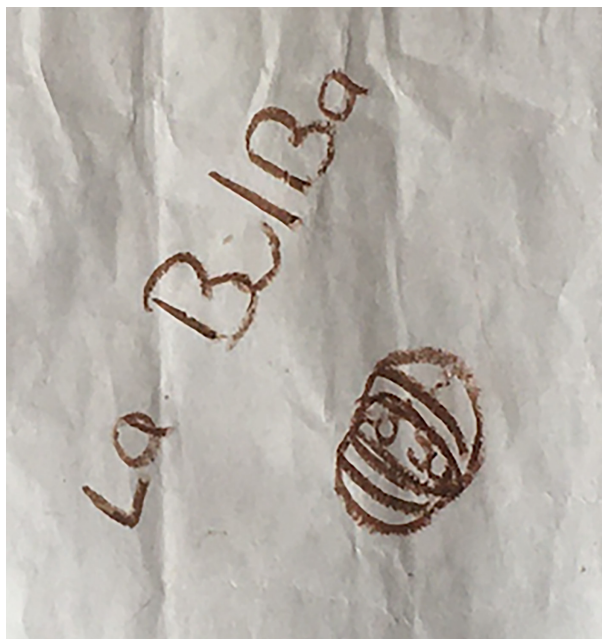


FIGURE 5 A vulva -exterior genitalia- (CN910).

the moment after coitus between a woman and a man (Figure 6). They explained it, 'We drew them without clothes... we drew them after having sexual intercourse... In a bed...'. Moreover, the researcher asked, 'What happens in sexual intercourse?'. Immediately afterwards, the girls shouted, 'You get pregnant!', 'Or there can be an infection, like the transmission of AIDS', replied another girl.

This group of girls linked coitus with reproduction (pregnancy) and sexually transmitted diseases. This association aligns with the sex education that Mexican boys and girls receive in school, which is focused on preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (Reyes, 2014). In other words, they voiced the authorised discourse of pregnancy and risk.

At the researcher's insistence, they eventually described a sexual relationship, recounting:

The boyfriend asked her to dinner, and then... 'so, let's go home...' [laughter]... and then right there he hugs her, and starts kissing and seducing her, then strips her and... strips her clothes off and then... [all girls talking at once] and they hug a lot... and then in bed...

Then all the girls shouted, 'In bed!', while one of them made a moaning sound and all the girls laughed. The researcher repeated the moaning sound and asked them why the couple made that sound in bed. 'Because they're moving', one girl replied, and the girls laughed again (CE1112). This

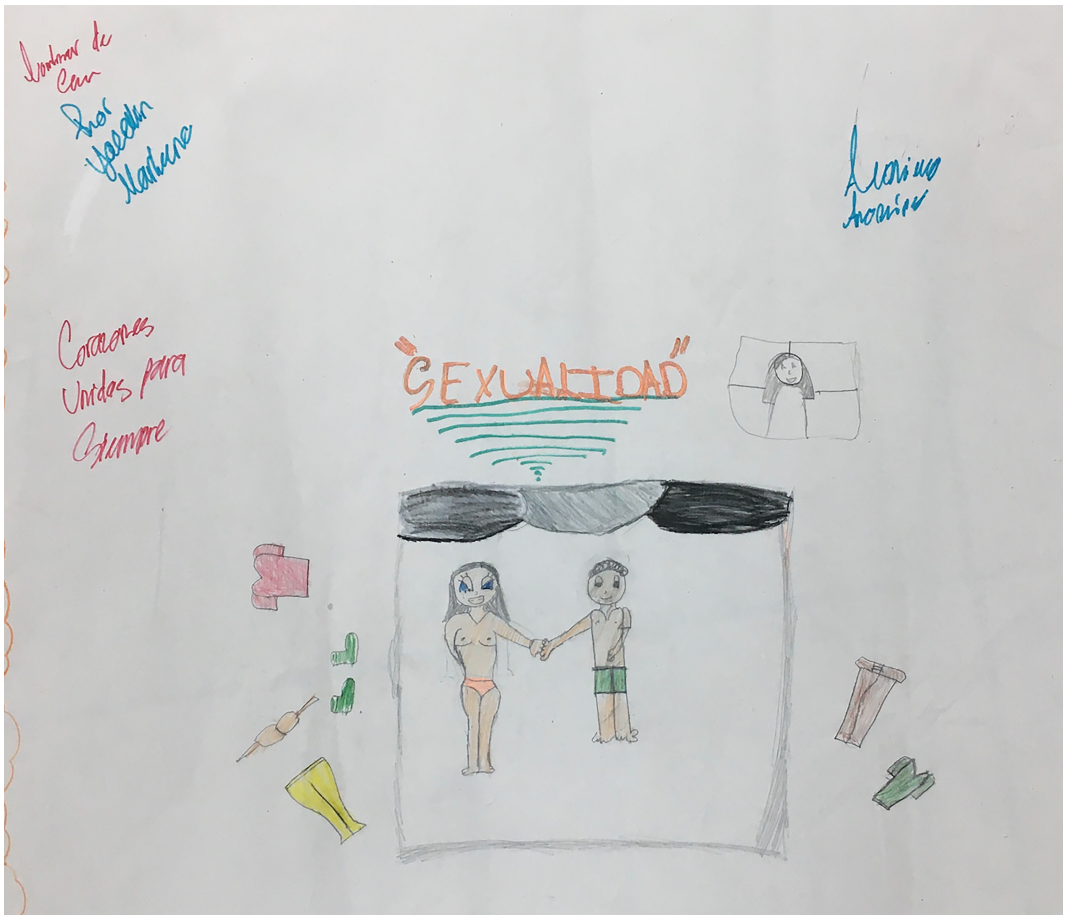


FIGURE 6 A couple after coitus (CE1112).

scene took place in one of the Catholic social care homes, Casa Eloisa. Although they did not mention pleasure, they suggested it through laughter and the imitation of certain sounds, producing a space of resistance to the traditionally authorised discourse, in which the girls talked about sexuality and pleasure in confidence with the researcher.

OK, all that you are saying could be true, but here is something very important, that I believe is very important, that you mentioned... he invites her to dinner, you said 'he takes her', 'he seduces her', 'he takes her to dinner'.

One of the girls replied, 'He wins her over little by little; he manipulates her'. The researcher continued:

And then he holds her hand... he manipulates her, she said... you said that he takes off her clothes and all that, but at what moment...? Shht [asking for silence]. But at what moment does she decide yes or no? Is there a moment for her to decide?

One of the girls' answered 'Ah, in the moment she is raped'. Then the conversation turned to consent, and one of the girls said she would agree to have sex to keep her boyfriend from feeling bad, as a 'proof of her love'. While they were discussing the concept of proving one's love, one of the girls returned to the beginning of the conversation and, referring to the sex act:

Girl: ...it could also be that... they're both horny and....

Researcher: What is horniness?

Girl: The horniness heats up...

Researcher: Yes, but what is it that heats up?

Girl: Ah, that they both want to do it...

Here, after activating a traditional authorised discourse in which the woman is passive—she is manipulated into having intercourse—the girl, with encouragement from the researcher, voiced a more empowering discourse in which a woman chooses to have intercourse out of desire.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have described three responses to the question of what sexuality is, asked of several groups of girls in three social care homes in Ciudad Juárez (Mexico). Sexuality is a sensitive and unnamed topic (Alvarez et al., 2022) because it calls into question children's innocence (Montgomery, 2009), which has to be protected. Specifically, child protection is the aim of social care homes, which by definition serve vulnerable children. In this context, it may be more difficult to perceive children as people with sexual feelings and desires, because they need to be protected from risks related to sexual abuse. The researchers' questions introduced a new authorised discourse (Bourdieu, 1982), in which children can have thoughts and feelings about sexuality. However, the girls—at least initially—masked any knowledge they had about sexuality beyond the authorised discourse of pregnancy and risk. First, girls appealed to surveillance, redirecting conversations about sexuality towards the social appropriate frame of reproduction. Second, girls used euphemisms to refer to genitalia, which also allowed them to ask the researchers what could and could not be named. Finally, when girls did talk about women

as sexual agents, they did so only after presenting women as passive and manipulable and after encouragement by the researcher. Ironically, it seems that this way of understanding female sexuality could contribute to teen pregnancies. On the one hand these girls feel they can't even talk about sexuality. On the other hand, they are surrounded by pregnant teens and have a high chance of becoming one themselves, an issue that should be taken up in longitudinal research.

Although the perspective of risk and security was predominant in the surveillance and self-surveillance mechanisms used by girls, there have also been analyses of forms of resistance, in which the surveilled can use the technologies of surveillance themselves to observe (Weiss, 2010) and resist authority (Hope, 2010). Technologies, people and organisations are connected to construct 'surveillance assemblages' (Ball, 2005) to the point that everyone can be 'caught up both in being surveyed and in surveying' (Gallagher, 2010, p. 265). In this sense, our analysis has included girls' resistance to feeling constantly watched. We have shown that the girls tested the surveillance to which they were subjected, trying to discern what they could (or should) reveal that they knew. Despite the difficulty of encouraging sexual empowerment among these institutionalised girls, the research context seems to have provided reassurance—at least to some of the participants—that it is acceptable, and even desirable, for girls to be agents of their own sexuality.

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