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Gente Joven/Young People: A dialogue on sexuality with adolescents in Mexico

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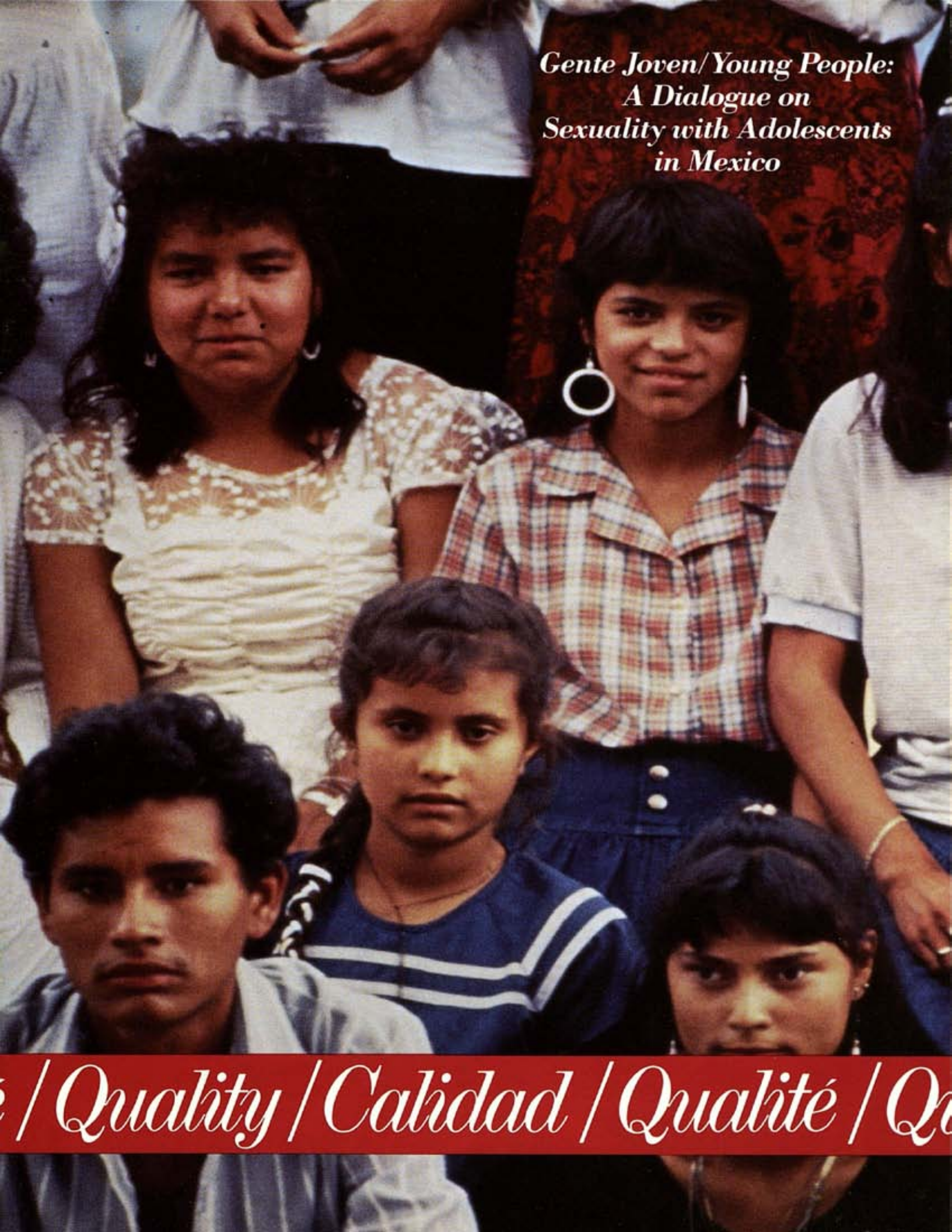
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*Gente Joven/Young People:
A Dialogue on
Sexuality with Adolescents
in Mexico*

Quality / Calidad / Qualité / Q

Quality/Calidad/Qualité, a publication of the Population Council, highlights examples of family planning and reproductive health programs that are providing unusually high quality care. This series is part of the Council's Robert H. Ebert Program on Critical Issues in Reproductive Health and Population which, through scientific and practical efforts, seeks to improve and expand the scope and quality of reproductive health care. The philosophical foundation of the program, and of this series, is that women and their partners have a fundamental right to respectful treatment, information, choice and follow-up from reproductive health care providers. The pamphlets reflect one of the four main thrusts of the program: enhancing the quality of family planning programs.

Projects are selected for documentation in the *Quality/Calidad/Qualité* series by an Advisory Committee made up of individuals who have a broad range of experience within the field of reproductive health and are committed to improving the quality of services. These projects are making important strides in one or more of the following ways: broadening the choice of contraceptive methods and technologies available; providing the information clients need to make informed choices and better manage their own health care; strengthening the quality of client/provider interaction and encouraging continued contact between providers and clients; making innovative efforts to increase the management capacity and broaden the skills of service providers at all levels; expanding the constellation of services and information provided beyond those conventionally defined as "family planning;" and reaching underserved and disadvantaged groups with reproductive health care services.

None of the projects documented in the series is being offered as a model for replication. Rather, each is presented as an unusually creative example of values, objectives and implementation. These are "learning experiences" that demonstrate the self-critical attitude required to anticipate clients' needs and find affordable means to meet them. This reflective posture is exemplified by a willingness to respond to changes in clients' needs as well as to the broader social and economic transformations affecting societies. Documenting the critical choices these programs have made should help to reinforce, in practical terms, the belief that an individual's satisfaction with reproductive health care services is strongly related to the achievement of broader health and population goals.

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Gente Joven/Young People: A Dialogue on Sexuality with Adolescents in Mexico

by Magaly Marques

Introduction by John M. Paxman

Afterword by Judith Bruce

Introduction

The subtitle of this issue, "A Dialogue on Sexuality *with* Adolescents in Mexico," is intended to underscore the reality that most sex education programs for youth have been developed by adults who have tended to ignore the reality of adolescence as it is perceived by young people themselves. In fact, the way in which most societies deal with adolescent sexuality recalls Hans Christian Andersen's beguiling fairy tale, "The Emperor's New Clothes." The tale involves a self-indulgent emperor and some crafty tailors. The tailors persuade the emperor and then his subjects that his elegant new robes are made of a magic, invisible weave, when in fact he is attired in nothing at all. The populace, denying what common sense and their eyes tell them, dutifully participate in the deception until one small boy, seeing the truth as the ruler parades before them, blurts out that "the emperor has no clothes!" Only then does everyone admit to what their eyes have been telling them all along.

In the area of adolescent sexuality, we have similarly chosen to overlook a reality that frightens us. For too long, parents, policymakers, program managers and even some young people themselves have dealt with the subject in the same unrealistic way. They have tried to deny, among other things, that the world over, a substantial proportion of teenagers, both married and unmarried, are sexually active. Yet research reveals a different picture: there are currently more than one billion young people between 10 and 19 years of age in the world today; the majority of females in developing countries are having a child or an abortion before these years are over; and males tend to start their sexual activity even earlier than females.

Yet even when we agree to see that adolescents are having sex, the questions before us are formidable. Is it appropriate? What are the consequences? What factors shape early sexual and contraceptive activity? And what kinds of programs are most effective in teaching young people about human sexuality and contraception? These are but a few of the thought-provoking questions that continue to challenge parents, families and communities, as well as health and education professionals, in most societies.

Factors Influencing Adolescent Sexual Activity and Contraceptive Use

In developing programs for adolescents, it is important to determine the characteristics of adolescent sexual behavior and contraceptive use within a particular society. One of the most critical factors to examine is the stage of economic and social development of that society.

Traditionally, in most societies, adolescent female sexuality was the norm, but it was both mandated and regulated by early marriage. The economic and social benefits of high fertility in traditional rural societies led not only to early marriage but to frequent childbearing. In settings where traditional systems remain strong, early marriage still serves as the agency for most adolescent sexual activity, abortion is generally illegal, and desired family size remains relatively high.

As societies tend toward urbanization and modernization, expanded economic and educational opportunities and changes in women's roles result in delays in marriage and an increase in the age of the mother at the time of her first birth. Ties to the extended family and adherence to traditional cultural norms tend to erode and, at the same time, the use of contraception rises. Adolescent sexual activity, no longer regulated primarily by marriage, therefore becomes more sporadic; but at the same time, it becomes less controllable as the power of sanctions against premarital sex diminish when applied later into adolescence.

Consequences of Adolescent Sexual Activity

Although we all hope our children will grow into adults with positive, comfortable and responsible attitudes toward sexuality and intimacy, when and under what circumstances sexual activity is appropriate is largely a question of values. But regardless of our own values, early sexual activity often has critical consequences. While significant for young people of both sexes, these consequences, both social and medical, tend to be much more serious for girls than for boys.

For example, when adolescent sexual activity results in pregnancy, disparate consequences face males and females: boys are less likely to be ostracized as immoral, are not forced to leave school, are less likely to suffer the shame and cost of seeking a clandestine abortion and often bear little or no economic or social responsibility for childrearing. Therefore, from an early age, males take less responsibility for contraception, sometimes even blocking use by their female partners. In addition to these gender-based burdens, women suffer the physical risks of pregnancy and early childbirth. Further, when children beget children, rates of illness and mortality are significantly higher for both mothers and their infants than for most older mothers, especially where prenatal care is lacking. Girls also face the risks of unsafe abortion and the consequences of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) which, in females, are more likely to go untreated, thus affecting their future health and fertility.

In addition, the AIDS pandemic has added another—potentially lethal—dimension to early sexual activity. Today nearly one-quarter of HIV-infected people worldwide are in their twenties, leading to the conclusion that most contracted the HIV virus while still in their teens. Particularly disturbing is the emerging trend in some countries with high-HIV-prevalence for men (many undoubtedly HIV-positive) to seek younger and younger sexual partners in a misguided effort to protect themselves from exposure to HIV without having to modify their sexual behavior. Helping young people protect themselves against AIDS is, therefore, a new and particularly urgent challenge.

Elements of Effective Programs

Even when we agree that adolescents are sexual beings, that many are sexually active, and that our job is to help them with knowledge and access to services, we are still left with a myriad of questions about how best to accomplish the task. Just what do young women and men need to know? When, where and by whom should young people be taught about human sexuality? Should those who are sexually active, whether married or not, be provided with access to contraception to prevent early, unintended pregnancy and childbearing as well as the transmission of STDs? Where, how and by whom should this be done? Should parents be consulted before their daughters are given contraceptives? And what about young men? What responsibilities should young people themselves assume? Should those young women who experience unwanted pregnancy have access to safe abortion?

Experience is beginning to reveal some elements that seem to be indicative of successful efforts to work with adolescents. For example, successful programs provide young people with sexuality-related information in a forthright manner that moves beyond mere facts, providing teenagers with the basis for making intelligent, informed decisions. Many sex education efforts tend to treat adolescents as if they are *only* sexual creatures. Rather, information needs to be presented as part of the broader human experience and not as something merely biological, clinical or unrelated to everyday life.

Successful programs also reach out to young people on their own turf—at schools, recreational centers, work sites and on the street. In many developing countries, less than one-tenth of all adolescents go on to secondary school. This underscores the importance of reaching out-of-school youth who are often the most elusive but also may have the greatest need.

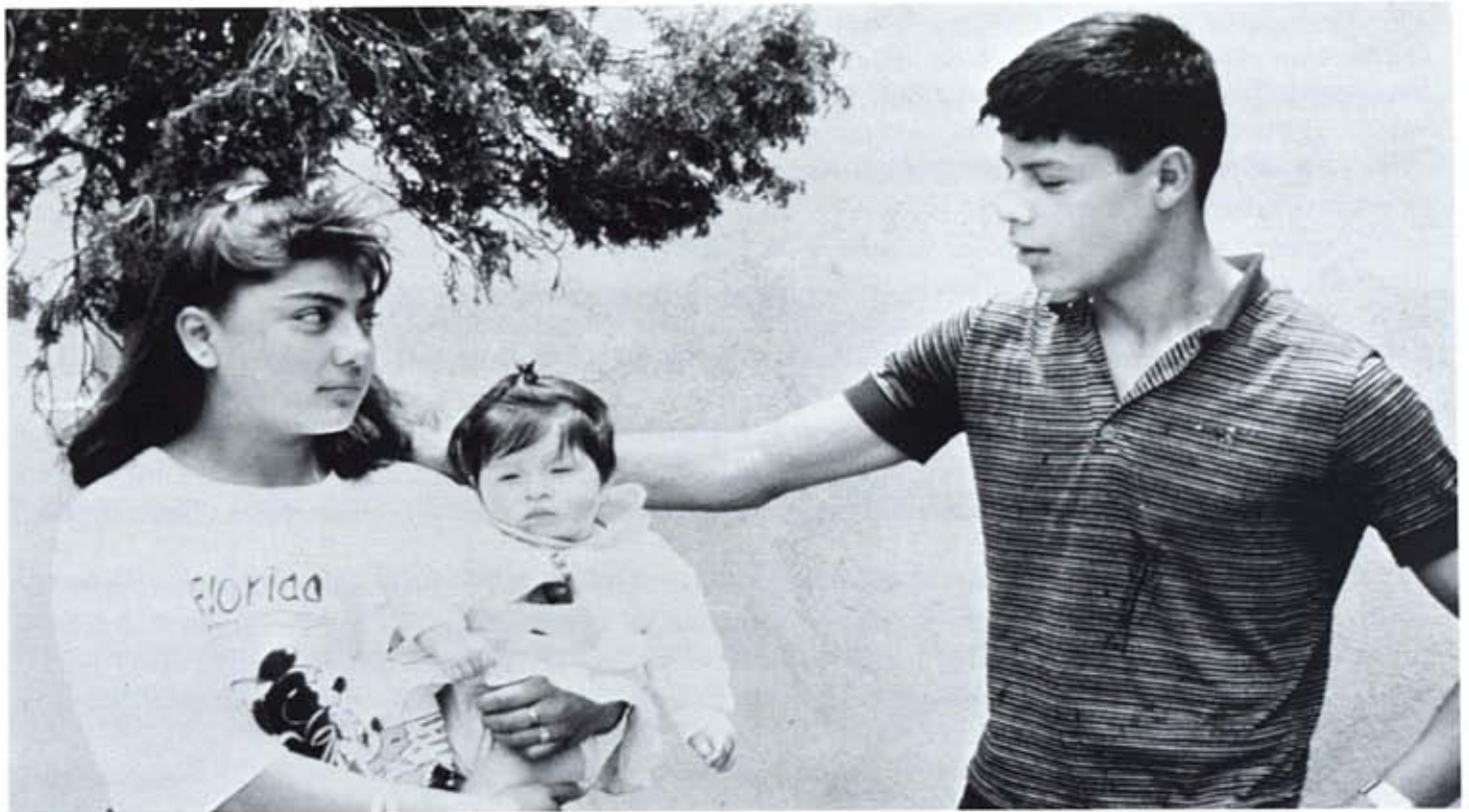
One of the most contentious debates surrounding programs for adolescents concerns provision of contraceptive services. Young people find themselves caught between conflicting messages: media images urge them to promote their sensuality while parents, educators and religious authorities tell them to “just say no!” Research has made it quite clear that young people become sexually active well before they think of contraception—much to the chagrin of those who work in this field! But neither pregnancy nor childbearing need be the price teenagers must pay for sexual activity. Contraception is common sense, and access to information, methods and services is a component of successful programs for young people. As United States Supreme Court Justice Stevens wrote in a response to a legal case seeking to ban the sale and distribution of condoms to young people, “It is as though to demonstrate their dislike for motorcycles, they have chosen to ban the use of safety helmets!”

Another fundamental factor influencing sexual activity and contraceptive use that must be addressed is gender. The cultural messages young men receive from the media, peers and sometimes even parents, tell them they ought to be sexually active. Young women, on the other hand, tend to receive very mixed messages: female premarital sexual activity—and even desire—is deemed immoral while, at the same time, the media and peers give girls powerful messages to be sexually attractive. And young girls must not be seen as being “prepared” for intercourse as this could stigmatize them as being promiscuous!

As a result, many teens (particularly girls) do not want to accept the fact that they are sexually active, especially when the nature of their sexual activity may be sporadic. Further, they tend to believe that using contraception will take the romance out of spontaneous sex: being prepared makes you “fast”; whereas being “swept away” is not your fault. No wonder just making information and services available to teenagers does not necessarily guarantee that contraceptives will be used.

While adults, including parents, have an important role to play in developing programs for adolescents, few would deny that young people speak their own language and have a unique view of the world—one that can change drastically from one year to the next as they pass through this intense and emotional period of their lives. Not surprisingly, programs based solely on adult perceptions of sexuality, sometimes a generation or more removed from the reality of today’s teenagers, are often ineffective. Adolescents are the ones who are most at risk and they are the ones who suffer the consequences. Program managers need to view young people not as a group for whom something must be done but instead as part of the solution. Experience has shown that the involvement of youth, not as mere recipients but as active participants, even as planners and managers, is a key ingredient of success.

This issue of *Quality/Calidad/Qualité* describes the experience of one adolescent sexuality program, *Gente Joven* in Mexico. *Gente Joven* began—like the boy who saw the emperor—by acknowledging reality: that the problems related to teenage sexuality will not go away simply by denying their existence. Along the way *Gente Joven* learned, and is continuing to learn, many lessons about how to build a successful program for adolescents. Here they share their experiences with us. In the Afterword, we explore in greater depth one particular issue that *Gente Joven* has identified as its next major challenge: re-examining their work with young people from a gender perspective.



The Context

It is one thing to have ideas about offering education and services on sexuality and reproductive health to adolescents and another to organize a program that can truly meet their needs. Five main difficulties loom before any organization attempting to develop a program for young people:

- Adolescents are different from adults
- Girls are different from boys
- Adolescent programs do not generate income
- Adults may oppose the program
- Sex education programs are difficult to evaluate and donors want to see quantitative results

When Mexfam (the Mexican Family Planning Foundation), an affiliate of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), began working with young people, the organization embarked on a journey that has forced it to confront each of these issues. In addition, it has had to redefine the premises of its family planning program and reshape its activities in order to respond to the needs of adolescents. Starting with an improvised approach towards sex education and contraceptive services, Mexfam has

gradually learned what kind of program works with young people. Today, its *Gente Joven* ("Young People") program continues to evolve in response to the program's direct experience with young people.

Founded in 1965, Mexfam offers family planning and primary health care services to low-income populations of Mexico not being reached by government programs. Mexfam also serves as a training resource for other family planning and related organizations. In 1986, based on an analysis of demographic data and survey results, Mexfam decided to create a program for young people, within the context of its overall services and activities, because:

- Young people aged 10 to 19 account for 25% of Mexico's population¹;
- The average age for initiating sexual activity is 15.7 for boys and 17.0 for girls²;
- No sex education was being offered in the schools; and
- A common complaint among young people is the lack of communication between teenagers and adults.

The data also showed a great many unwanted pregnancies among adolescents (59.7% of all pregnancies among adolescents in Mexico³) as well as an increase in cases of sexu-

ally transmitted diseases. Since young people constitute almost half of the population of Mexico today, Mexfam realized the importance of paying careful attention to this group that will play a key role in defining the country's future.

Adolescents are Different from Adults

The *Gente Joven* program was intended to bring information on sex education and family planning to young people living in the marginal urban areas of Mexico. However, Mexfam soon realized it could not automatically translate its considerable experience in working with adults into a special program for adolescents. It quickly became apparent to Mexfam's staff that, in order to establish an exchange of information on sexuality-related matters, they needed to break through young people's lack of trust in adult counseling and the traditionally poor communication patterns between young people and adults. Today's parents often complain about adolescents' "impossible" behavior, and adolescents commonly bemoan their parents' lack of understanding, while frustrated teachers report that students have become increasingly skeptical, showing little trust in their instructors.

In the beginning, *Gente Joven* employed a strategy similar to one used by many other agencies working with teenagers. Mexfam opened three special centers for adolescents (in Colima, Contreras and Mexico City) that offered a variety of organized activities attractive to young people as well as talks on sex education and family planning. Medical consultations (including contraception) were also available and specifically designed services and activities were offered at each site in response to individual community needs. Mexfam's strategy was based on the hope that, after it gained their trust, adolescents would show an interest in learning about how to prevent unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

From 1986 to 1988, a total of 13 adolescent centers were established (some connected to other Mexfam family planning centers, some completely independent), and Mexfam's staff and *Gente Joven* promoters (young people from the community selected by the staff) worked on motivating teenagers to visit the centers.

According to Mario Zárate, a 29-year-old psychologist and Mexfam's coordinator for Cuajimalpa, a poor metropolitan area on the outskirts of Mexico City: "The centers opened their doors to the new generation. They scheduled activities of interest to young people and created a welcoming atmosphere to make adolescents feel comfortable." However, it soon became apparent that the program was not meeting its goals. For the limited number of young people the centers reached, the initiative proved useful, but the numbers were small and the cost per teenager very high.

In 1988, Mexfam carried out its first evaluation of the *Gente Joven* program. First, it revealed that the program's activities benefitted a limited number of adolescents, and those who did come were already highly motivated, not the ones most in need of information and services. The evaluation also revealed that information being passed along to young people was not well organized but improvised according to the circumstances. And lastly, it was clear that in order to expand the program to reach more adolescents, additional centers would be needed and the cost of maintaining the physical facilities (plus equipment, staff, etc.) would be enormous.

Perhaps the most remarkable outcome of this first evaluation, however, was that it presented a realistic profile of Mexican adolescents. The evaluation showed that the majority of the adolescents who are sexually active have sex only sporadically and, therefore, do not feel the need to use contraceptive methods other than barrier methods. This information was useful because Mexfam's staff was still not clear about whether contraceptives should be distributed to adolescents, let alone how it should be done. Mexfam concluded that barrier methods should definitely be offered to young people, and those adolescents who have sex regularly and wish to use other contraceptives could easily be referred to Mexfam's network of community clinics. Another important finding was that when adolescents are involved in a program, they enjoy playing an active role. Therefore, it seemed logical that young people would become more involved if they felt they were a part of the process.

The concept for the current *Gente Joven* program originated with Gabriela Rodríguez,

Mexfam's Director of Technical Support. A psychologist with 14 years' experience in sex education, Gabriela came to Mexfam in 1984 from CONAPO, the Mexican government's National Council for Population, where she had designed the educational component of the National Sex Education Program. Within the context of CONAPO's programs, "Family planning was viewed as sex education and reproductive health services, both of which were a little removed from medical services and contraceptive distribution," says Gabriela. At Mexfam, instead of working on materials for teachers, physicians and technicians, Gabriela started working directly with Mexfam's target audience: Mexico's poorest communities. For the first time, she became involved with the delivery of family planning services.

Gabriela remembers that she was surprised to see that at Mexfam, "Family planning was placed more in a context of medical services and contraceptive distribution and very much addressed women who didn't want to have more children." Through her sex education lens, she immediately observed that young people were not benefitting much from existing family planning programs. "That's how I became interested in developing a strategy for adolescents," says Gabriela. "To me, family planning is a whole set of sex education and reproductive health services that go beyond medical services." To be an effective family planning program for young people, *Gente Joven* would first need to address the issue of sexuality straight on, seriously and candidly.

Gente Joven also benefits from the expertise of José Aguilar, a physician and psychoanalyst with Mexfam who was actively involved in developing the new strategy and is currently the Program Coordinator. José Aguilar previously worked for CORA (the nonprofit organization *Centro de Orientación para Adolescentes*, or Adolescent Orientation Center), where he was involved in the design of adolescent programs. A multi-service program for young people in Mexico City, CORA runs adolescent centers offering health services, educational and training programs and a community contraceptive distribution program.

Gabriela Rodríguez and José Aguilar spent four months analyzing the results of the

first program evaluation, assessing the pros and cons, and preparing a new approach to reaching adolescents that would respond to these challenges.

The first step had been to open centers for young people offering activities in education and cultural areas, theater, exercise and dance classes, in addition to sex education and clinical services. It was very beautiful, because about 20 young people would go to the centers every day; they helped with the work, played ping-pong and knew all the topics related to sexuality. But somehow the centers didn't grow. For a year or so, the adolescents coming to the centers were always the same ones. We began to think about having them go to schools with the program's coordinators to promote discussion. But then we noticed that these adolescents had stopped coming to the centers. They weren't there because they no longer had a reason to come—they had their friends, boyfriends, girlfriends, and they'd rather be around those people than in the centers. [In this way we realized that] sex education work doesn't require a center, so we decided to bring the program to the young people.

The most important thing was to see, approach and treat young people not as adults, but as adolescents and to acknowledge the gender differences between girls and boys. They also sought to develop the most inexpensive approach possible and to keep in mind the need for qualitative and quantitative indicators that could permit some evaluation of the program. The first major change that the evaluation led to was a decision to close down the adolescent centers.

The Gente Joven Program Today

Today the *Gente Joven* program reaches out to adolescents where they are—in schools and colleges, at sports and recreational centers, at work, on the streets and in other gathering places. The program has shifted its perspective from trying to make young people approach Mexfam to taking the program to places where adolescents get together—places of their choice, that reflect who they are and what they

want to be. This new focus is based on an understanding that adolescence is, as Gabriela says, "the time in life when you define who you want to be." Mexfam also recognized the need to tailor different approaches to meet the needs of specific groups of young people: students, workers and those on the streets.

The *Gente Joven* program is carried out by coordinators and promoters trained in the special skills needed to communicate sex education information to young people, with the support of visual and print materials produced specifically for the program. Whereas the coordinators are Mexfam employees, the promoters are volunteers. Currently Mexfam has 17 coordinators exclusively dedicated to the *Gente Joven* program. These coordinators not only organize and conduct courses and seminars but also supervise the entire program including 1,573 promoters as well as the participation of 248 of Mexfam's community doctors.

According to a *Gente Joven* operational manual, the coordinators must be over 21 years of age, have completed high school and have demonstrated an interest in young people's problems and issues related to sexuality, teenage pregnancy and communication within the family. They must also exhibit an openness

toward diversity of sexual and reproductive expressions of young people. The coordinators should possess skills such as the ability to communicate with others, lead and direct group discussions, empathize with young people and the community, be creative, and show initiative in attracting young people to *Gente Joven* activities. In addition to the 17 *Gente Joven* coordinators, Mexfam's local coordinators (who supervise all Mexfam's activities in a given community) also receive training so that they can incorporate adolescents' needs into their other activities.

Gente Joven promoters are all volunteers between 16 and 20 years of age. They are high school students who donate their time to the program. Promoters are selected according to the following profile: they must be able to establish good relations within a group, be enthusiastic and respectful, demonstrate interest in helping their peers, have an interest in young people's sexual and reproductive concerns, show commitment and responsibility, have the ability to work at the community level and know how to interpret and communicate scientific information correctly.

Promoters receive basic training in all the topics offered to young people. In addition,



leaders are identified and selected from among the promoters to participate in a more in-depth training program. This second training is based on the course "Planning Your Life" developed by Mexfam and IMIFAP (Instituto Mexicano de Investigación en Familia y Población)¹. It is an adaptation of the Life Planning Education Program, developed by the Center for Population Options to reflect the Mexican reality. It also incorporates materials developed by Planned Parenthood of Bergen County, New Jersey, the Family Planning and Genetic Services of Texas and techniques developed by Mexfam's *Gente Joven* staff.

The complete training consists of 14 sessions. Promoters who attend this course are entrusted to provide both information and condoms to young people. *Gente Joven* promoters also assist the coordinators when they present their sex education talks; in this way they receive on-the-job reinforcement of what they learned during the training period.

Usually, the promoters have a demonstrated interest in the topics covered by the program and remain involved for a period of about six months, after which most of them begin to detach from the program to follow their own paths—going to college, getting a full-time job or becoming involved in another activity.

Communicating with Young People

Besides involving young people as promoters, Gabriela Rodríguez and José Aguilar recognized early on the need for special means of communication that appeal to adolescents. The communication techniques normally used in Mexfam's family planning activities were not necessarily the most appropriate ones for reaching an adolescent audience.

At first, their concern was to ensure that *Gente Joven* transmitted accurate and appropriate information to young people. However, they soon realized that the emphasis needed to shift from "what" is communicated to "how" it is communicated. Many communities throughout Mexico lack information on sexuality, contraceptive methods, sexually transmitted diseases, etc. There is also a real gap between knowledge and practice among young people. When asked about a specific contraceptive method or safe sex, many adolescents demonstrate adequate

knowledge on the subject but admit that they do not practice what they know.

Some studies suggest that this gap must be dealt with by addressing cultural variables (e.g., gender roles, social, educational, political and professional opportunities—especially for women—and social pressures). As a report on teenage pregnancy in Latin America and the Caribbean notes, there are also "structural obstacles to obtaining contraceptives, many of which reflect the negative attitudes of parents and educators towards sexuality in general and among adolescents in particular. The intolerance that adolescents sense from family planning providers, justified or not, in combination with their own embarrassment and guilt, and the fear that parents will become aware of their behavior, are powerful factors that prevent many adolescents from entering the world of modern contraception."²

To change these attitudes, appropriate information must be communicated using the right vehicle. Traditional brochures and manuals on sexuality for young people tend to focus on describing reproductive anatomy and biological processes. But this seems to be an adult approach to sexuality: overly intellectual, artificially out of context and lacking emotion. Young people give a great deal of importance to the emotional aspects of any situation and information is more easily assimilated if it is placed in a real life context, including the emotional aspects involved.

The current *Gente Joven* program is the result of an ongoing process of learning and revision and a strong commitment to the needs of Mexico's young people. More homogeneous than the first, center-based approach, the *Gente Joven* program is now offered throughout the country by regional and local coordinators as a means of reaching adolescents in their communities. In each region topics of specific local interest are added to the basic module according to an assessment of community needs.

Taking the Program to Schools and Factories

The program is offered to students at junior and senior high schools and also colleges. With the support of teachers and assistant pro-



fessors, sex education is provided in the classroom. As part of an integrated approach to the sensitive issues involved, teachers have access to the *Gente Joven* materials beforehand. They are encouraged to participate in the discussions as well as to establish links between the course and other classroom topics. Mexfam suggests that schools offer the program as a ten-hour course presented as two-hour sessions on five consecutive days. Because each module feeds into the next, presenting the course in one week is more effective than spacing it out over several weeks. The sessions are conducted by a Mexfam coordinator or promoter with the support of teachers interested in building a better relationship with their students.

The school principal believes Mexfam's courses are very important for the students' education. At the end of the school year, the course is offered for third and fourth grade (13 and 14 year old) students. Sexuality is an important part of young people's lives. With Mexfam's course they begin to realize that it is not the most important part of their lives but only one aspect and they learn to manage their sexuality from this perspective.

*Alicia Segura
Junior High School Teacher
Cuajimalpa, Mexico*

Using a similar approach to that used in schools, the *Gente Joven* program is also offered to working adolescents. Discussions on sexuality and family planning are provided in factories and the emphasis is on discussion. *Gente Joven* does not limit its approach to providing information and distributing contraceptives, but instead it aims at promoting debate and analysis, and at stimulating young people to make their own decisions with respect to their sexuality. Mexfam coordinators approach factory managers with the suggestion that they offer family planning information to their employees. Since most industrial plants have a medical doctor on site, a link is established through the company's doctor who lets workers know when a family planning talk will take place, usually during work hours. In preparation for each talk, Mexfam's coordinators analyze the profile of the workers at that particular company. Whenever the average age of the workers is between 15 and 20 years of age, the course offered is either the same *Gente Joven* modules presented at schools (but using more appropriate examples) or, if time is limited, a condensed version of the original course.

...to Young People on the Streets

In Mexico, street gangs are an urban phenomenon found primarily in the capital, Mexico City. As in other large cities, Mexico's street gangs are a result of poverty combined with the increasing violence urban environments tend to breed. Gang members are normally teenagers who neither attend school nor work. They spend most of their time on the streets and are frequently involved in illegal activities as well as conflicts with the local police.

According to Gabriela Rodríguez, it is important to work with street gangs because "a large number of adolescents in Mexico have the youth gang member profile: they are school dropouts who are also out of the job market. This target group requires a distinct, more direct strategy." Using its young coordinators and promoters, Mexfam was able to make contact with gang members who became links between Mexfam and young people on the streets. In approaching street gangs Mexfam found that, surprisingly, their members were both male and female. While not the majority, the young female gang members are a significant group.

The "Youth Gang" component of the *Gente Joven* program took shape in January 1991, when Mexfam signed an agreement with a

Mexico City-based organization called the Popular Youth Council. The Popular Youth Council was created in the mid 1980s, when 30 gangs came together in an effort to develop joint activities. The Council has two objectives: 1) to bring an end to conflicts with the police, and 2) to carry out educational work that could benefit the community. With the help of private donations, the Council's founders were able to build and furnish a headquarters. An elected board composed of young people directs the Council. The activities offered by the Council range from provision of legal counsel, organization of a literacy campaign and improvement of the environment through community aid to karate, soccer and basketball. The Council organizes theater festivals, painting exhibitions, murals in the streets and rock 'n' roll parties or *tocadas*. It also offers courses in silk screening, nursing and cosmetology.

Most street gang members in Mexico are opposed to the formal systems of education and work and are highly critical of the way society is organized. They resent the values imposed on them by formal authorities and tradition. However, although the street gangs involved with the Popular Youth Council fit this profile, they have shown interest in developing their own "culture" and sharing their values with the community. They also view their association with



the Council as a way to escape from illegal activities, and thus to avoid conflicts with the police, without compromising their values.

When the leaders of the Popular Youth Council started working with teenagers they became aware of the alarming lack of information—as well as the misinformation—young people had about sexuality, sexually transmitted diseases, contraceptives and reproductive health. “The young boys and girls who visit our center don’t have any information about sexuality,” explains Andrés Castellano, a leader of the Council.

To reach out to Mexican youth and respond to the tremendous need for sexuality and contraception information and services, Mexfam started its campaign to work with gang members and gain their confidence. “The hardest thing was to convince them that we were different, that we only wanted to help them, and that we didn’t want anything from them,” says Carmen Leyte, Mexfam coordinator of the *Chavos Banda*, or youth gang project.

As part of the agreement with the Popular Youth Council, Mexfam incorporated a community program into the Council’s activities. Created and designed for young people, the youth gang course is a revised version of the one Mexfam offers to schools and factories. Together with young people, Mexfam organizes workshops and training sessions that provide Council activists with the necessary tools to incorporate sexuality and reproductive health information into their cultural activities.

Working with street gangs has represented a major step in the *Gente Joven* program. Gabriela Rodríguez says that “with street gangs the strategy must be different. They are not in the classroom, they are on the streets. Those associated with the Council are involved with music, organizing theater, having discussions, and that is where the theme of sexuality comes in.” For instance, when the gang members organize theater on the streets, it is a collective creation. The entire group of actors, scriptwriters, and so on, works together writing, rehearsing and producing the plays. *Gente Joven* topics are discussed with the theater group and frequently included in the productions, which are intended to generate discussion on the street afterward among everyone—children, old people, parents and adolescents. The program does

not tell young people what to do, rather it shows them different possibilities for expressing their sexuality. The program’s messages acknowledge the sexual motivation young people feel and provide them with an understanding of the consequences of sexual practice as well as the means to avoid situations such as unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.

The results of the Youth Gang program have exceeded the most optimistic expectations. In its first year, sex education was provided to more than 2,500 teenagers and 380 parents and 150 promoters were trained including psychologists, social workers and teachers who work with youth groups. In that same period of time, Mexfam donated equipment to establish the first clinic in the Council’s headquarters. In the silk-screen course, students designed T-shirts promoting the use of condoms, combining Mexfam’s logo with the Council’s, and young artists painted murals with messages related to reproductive health and sexuality.

...on the Radio

Because of its impact and outreach, Mexfam decided to use radio as a vehicle for communicating *Gente Joven*’s messages. They created a program called *Estrenando Cuerpo* (learning to use or getting used to one’s own body). It is a light, humorous radio series, designed to offer sexual orientation to young people between 11 and 21 years of age. The series combines modern music—particularly rock and disco—with information, commentary and criteria for decision making in matters related to: sexuality, family planning and health; improving communication with those around you; and the important role affection plays in all human relationships, especially sexuality. The programs also offer reliable information about health, sexual life and human reproduction and include other topics such as: the body, the sexuality of the parents, sexual roles, homosexuality, machismo, adolescent mothers, sadness and depression, sexual myths, nutrition, imagination, platonic love, divorce, and fears. To date 100 different 25-minute programs have been produced. Each sequence is a complete unit that can be aired in any order; radio stations can use the segments as many times as they wish.

Produced by Mexfam and Radio Educación, the official station of the Public Education Ministry, *Estrenando Cuerpo* has been aired by 67 radio stations throughout the country and the results, in terms of estimated audience, are very encouraging. *Estrenando Cuerpo* received the 1991 Global Media Award from the Population Institute of Mexico as the best radio program on this subject in the country.

The Sex Education Course

The first step in preparing the *Gente Joven* program was the development of a training curriculum on sex education to train Mexfam's field coordinators. Under Gabriela's supervision, a 30-hour training course, supported by educational materials, was developed that defined the minimum content necessary to enable the coordinators to carry out the program.

The training course for coordinators includes analysis and discussion on 16 themes: Sex and Sexuality; Sexuality and the Family; Sexuality and the Media; Sexuality and Values; Sex Roles; Children's Sexuality; Puberty and Adolescence; Young People's Sexuality; Unwanted Teenage Pregnancy; Relationships; Human Sexual Responses; Sexual Dysfunctions; Sexual Variables; STDs/AIDS; Profile of a Sex Educator, and the *Gente Joven* program itself.

The training course is designed to stimulate a revision of the individual's own point of view through critical thinking. The first part of the course is dedicated to analyzing the participants' own values and understanding regarding sexuality, and in particular adolescent sexuality. Therefore, information is offered within the context of raising awareness about one's own sexual perceptions and actions. In the first phase of the course, participants are encouraged to analyze how they feel and what they believe with respect to sexuality. In the second part, they learn how to distance themselves from their own values in order to be able to understand and respect a different perspective, in this case the perspective of young people, and not to impose their own views on adolescents.

The intended result is that coordinators will be able to listen to adolescents, respect their values, provide them with accurate information, and help them make decisions according to their own views and values. In Mexico, as in many

other countries, sexuality is frequently understood as a basic animal instinct to be controlled or as an immoral force to be repressed and kept under tight reins—in either case, a negative view. The *Gente Joven* program attempts to present sexuality to adolescents as a positive aspect of life. The program's first objective is to communicate a message that clearly and consistently states that sex can be enjoyed in a safe, healthy and responsible way.

Opportunities are provided for coordinators from different parts of the country to come together at various times to exchange ideas, problems and experiences. Twice a year all coordinators and supervisors meet with Mexfam's central office senior staff and, at least once a year, coordinators and supervisors receive refresher training to improve their skills and update their knowledge.

The next step in the development of the *Gente Joven* program was to prepare a course on sexuality to be offered to young people. Five themes were selected based on research conducted among young people designed to identify their major concerns. For example, the lack of communication between adolescents and their parents was a common complaint. Additionally, one study among adolescents in Mexico City concluded that "sex education should be even more broadly defined and requires an important emphasis be placed on (the) family if prevention (of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases) is to be effective. Strategies should be designed to foster open and clear communication between parents and their children."⁶ For these reasons the five basic topics of the program have become: Communication between Adolescents and Their Families; Puberty and the Process of Human Life; Sexuality and Youth; Sexually Transmitted Diseases and Their Prevention; and Early Pregnancy and Contraceptive Methods.

First Session *Communication between the Adolescents and Their Families.* Basic concepts are: communication (e.g. communicating within the family as a continuous process of sending and receiving messages); expressions used in communication (such as sounds, silences, intonation of voice, crying, verbal and body language); the family and how families differ with

respect to communication styles (e.g., the rigid family, the overly protective family, the unstable family, the family that avoids conflicts, the single parent family), and ways to improve communication. Participants are encouraged to try to improve their communication with their parents and other family members, to clarify their personal values and to obtain accurate information on sexuality, human reproduction, prevention of STDs and contraceptive methods.

Second Session *Puberty and the Process of Human Life.* The facilitator offers a general introduction about the changes the body undergoes during life and explains male and female anatomy in detail. Both the facilitator and the *Gente Joven* materials use direct and simple language, avoiding overly scientific explanations about the reproductive organs and their functions. Also during this session the facilitator clarifies some of the most common Mexican myths about puberty (such as that young women should not bathe or exercise during menstruation and that kissing can lead to pregnancy).

Third Session *Sexuality and Youth.* This session gives young people an opportunity to discuss their feelings about sexuality as well as cultural norms including the traditional roles of girls and boys, women and men. The facilitator explains the mechanisms of sexual excitement and sexual relations. Other topics related to sexuality, including abstinence, masturbation, prostitution and pornography, are also discussed. At the conclusion of this session the facilitator introduces the image of a scale, suggesting to the young people that they analyze pros and cons of any situation before making a decision and emphasizing that they have the power to make choices in their lives.

Fourth Session *Sexually Transmitted Diseases.* This session covers what STDs are, how they are transmitted, the most common symptoms and the means for prevention and treatment, as well as HIV/AIDS transmission and prevention.

Fifth Session *Early Pregnancy and Contraception.* The facilitator touches on cultural aspects related to teen pregnancy and contraceptive use as well as some medical and statistical data. With the aid of films or videos, the

discussion normally encompasses the ways in which unwanted pregnancies can change teenagers' lives and disrupt their studies and future plans. Part of this session is dedicated to contraceptive methods and the most common advantages and disadvantages of each. The closing session focuses on the importance of being well prepared to make decisions according to one's own values and to be aware that young people have options in terms of their sexual behavior.

A manual for coordinators and promoters presents techniques on how to expand on each theme and how to deal with difficult or exceptional situations. Pamphlets have been developed on each topic and are distributed to the young people. Audiovisual materials serve as discussion aids. In the event of a power failure, problems with equipment or in situations where audiovisual materials cannot be used, there is an optional group exercise for use with each topic.

Each session begins with an introduction by the facilitator and preliminary comments about the video or other material to be discussed. The facilitator follows specific guidelines in conducting the discussions. At the close of each session, the next day's topic is mentioned or, in the case of the last session, an attempt is made to link that topic to the previous themes that have been covered. To promote discussion of sexuality and gender issues, *Gente Joven* has developed a number of communication materials (videos, films, brochures and pamphlets) and techniques specifically designed to reach young people.

The Videos

Video can be a very powerful medium for transmitting complex messages. When used within a specific curriculum and with teaching guides, videos are even more effective because the medium allows information to be placed in a context, a life situation where emotion plays an important role. Also, video is closer to the culture of young people, more closely related to television than to traditional school aids such as books and other written materials. With financial support from the Japanese Organization for International Cooperation in Family Planning (JOICFP), Mexfam has developed a series of



films and videotapes used to trigger discussions about sexuality. Produced locally, the materials reflect both urban and rural settings in Mexico. Also, since sexuality issues often carry an element of embarrassment as a result of the moral connotations attached to the subject, visual images allow program facilitators to add another element to the discussion, one that speaks for itself, and this helps to stimulate discussion.

Of course, the visual and verbal language used in these videos must be carefully chosen to transmit the desired message. Mexfam has emphasized language that is common among young people yet not overly trendy. A video production can be expensive and if language is not considered carefully, the final product may be applicable to only one community or social segment and can quickly become outdated. For instance, a video targeted at marginal urban adolescents might not appeal to rural youth. Mexfam has found that a very successful solution to this problem is the use of silent cartoons.

One example is "La Paloma Azul" (The Blue Dove), a silent cartoon produced for adolescents aged 10 to 15 which portrays a group activity led by an older girl and how one of the boys develops a fantasized sexual relationship with her. The story does not offer conclusions

nor does it point to consequences or future situations. The idea is to trigger the imagination and prompt discussion. This initial ground breaking serves as a basic structure for assimilating the information provided by the program. After viewing the video, the facilitator asks the adolescents to imagine how the story would continue, what they think would be likely to happen in a similar situation, or how they would prefer the situation to develop if it had happened to them.

A more recent video, also a silent cartoon, "Música para Dos" (Music for Two), is targeted to older adolescents 15 to 19. It describes the difficult choices facing a young woman who goes through disappointing experiences with two young men until she finally chooses her neighbor, a saxophone player who agrees to use a condom, as a boyfriend. "Music for Two" encompasses many issues relevant to young people's lives such as relationships, rejection, what is "cool" and what is not, stereotypes (one young man rides a motorcycle) and values. In addition, it creates an ideal ambiance for young people to feel free to express their concerns and doubts about sexuality. Thus, information can be offered on matters adolescents often do not feel secure about.

In a debate that followed the presentation of "Music for Two" in a high school in the city of Querétaro, the facilitator asked the participating young women and men what they understood about the video. When the adolescents mentioned the process the girl had gone through to decide which young man to become more involved with, the facilitator then asked them to explain why, in their opinion, the girl preferred one young man over the others, what she did not like about the other two, what they imagined she was feeling and thinking, what they believed was going on in her mind, whether they agreed with her decision and, if not, why.

It takes a while for the young people to feel free to express what they think and feel, but slowly they start identifying themselves with the situation portrayed in the video and the debate heats up. Their fears and doubts come to the surface. One of the boys supposes that the girl in the video is concerned about catching a sexually transmitted disease, while one of the girls say that it seems that the girl in the video is looking for a caring man who is able to understand the need to use a condom.

They have different opinions, sometimes based on incomplete information that the facilitator has the opportunity to clarify. The use of condoms, for instance, brings up a variety of feelings among adolescents. Many still view using or not using condoms as a sign of how much the person cares or the level of commitment in the relationship, and often the protection aspect of using condoms is trapped in a pool of mixed feelings and attitudes with respect to sexuality and affection.

As the debate continues, the adolescents go beyond the video into imaginary situations but without losing sight of the theme. They begin to make reference to the story or context of the video in terms of "if it happened to me I..." The video, therefore, serves as a frame of reference, a starting point as well as a common ground they can return to in order to check their own assumptions and interpretations.

Completing the silent cartoon trilogy, as Mexfam calls it, is a new video, "Los Mejores Deseos" (The Best Desires), that focuses on communication between a man and a woman involved in a relationship. The cartoon shows a young couple, Sara and Gaspar, who do not have enough money to have their own house and,

therefore, live with Sara's family. The story focus on the difficulties arising from lack of privacy, communication problems, Sara's and Gaspar's wishes and fantasies and their economic struggle within the cultural context of Mexico.

To date Mexfam has produced 16 films and 3 cartoon videotapes for the *Gente Joven* program. In the next few years, they are planning to slow down video production to concentrate on marketing the existing ones and to invest more time in developing new, innovative ways of using the videos they have already produced.

Incorporating Young People's Perspectives

For *Gente Joven*, producing a video or film starts with a needs assessment in terms of the topics to be explored, an analysis of the language to be used and a decision on the specific messages each video will contain. But even more important is the process of integrating the participation of young people into the production. Prior to deciding on a final version of a video or film, Mexfam shows the first edited copy to a group of teenagers to get their comments. Mexfam modifies that version and continues to seek input from adolescents until the final product is acceptable to young people and reflects their point of view.

An interesting example of this process is *El Ultimo Tren (The Last Train)*, a full color, 16 mm film about a lower middle class young couple in a marginal urban area. In Mexfam's original version, the young woman is waiting for her boyfriend at a train station. They have made plans to run away that day and start a new life. She is pregnant and afraid to tell her parents, so they have chosen this way out. At the end of the film, they meet at the train station and leave together. Mexfam felt this was a strong ending, showing two teenagers (school dropouts) running away to have a baby without knowing the dangers and difficulties they would find out in the world.

From Mexfam's adult perspective, it seemed enough to show that they had made a wrong choice and that their lives would be seriously endangered. However, when young people were shown the film, they argued that the "happy" ending was not realistic. When they

suggested a more realistic scenario (the young woman waiting at the train station for the boyfriend who does *not* come to meet her), Mexfam accepted their suggestion and changed the ending. *The Last Train* now shows the boyfriend's mother catching him as he packs his things to run away. They have an argument about it. Among other things, the mother tells her son that the young woman is not right for him, that she probably has already had sex with other boys. She argues that he has his entire life ahead of him. In the beginning, the boy is determined to go, but slowly he changes his mind. As she keeps repeating that he will still meet a nice girl, he is young, and so on, he decides against going to the train station. The final version of the film shows the girl waiting for hours alone at the station and, finally, boarding a train by herself.

The inclusion of these cultural norms and other teenage viewpoints in *Gente Joven* materials enriches the discussion and gives young people the opportunity to think about their own values and choices. For Mexfam, young people's participation in the production of program materials is essential to ensure that the right message is being transmitted in the most understandable and useful way.

Girls Are Different from Boys

The production of *The Last Train* was also an opportunity for Mexfam to grapple directly with gender roles and identity. As the program has evolved, staff have been developing their own understanding of how differences between male/female needs, perceptions and power affect sexual behavior and life planning.

Sexuality affects girls and boys and young women and men differently. This is not only because of different anatomies but also due to cultural gender roles for males and females. *Gente Joven* has realized that gender issues are the major factor contributing to the gap between knowledge and practice of contraception and safe sex.

For instance, when *Gente Joven* carried out a study about AIDS prevention among adolescents, the difference between the social roles of girls and boys regarding condom use became quite clear. Gabriela discusses the young people's ambivalence: "The young women say that if a young man uses a condom it is because he likes a girl, he takes care of her, and he doesn't want her to get pregnant. (AIDS is not a concern.) But they also think it might mean that he does not want to get involved, he only wants to play around. Most girls hesitate to bring up con-



dom use straightforwardly because it would indicate that they have too much sexual experience; it doesn't look good for them to be the ones talking about condoms."

Today's adolescents are still, to a great extent, torn between the conflicting stereotypes of two kinds of women: the decent and the indecent, the mother and the whore. The doubts and fears they express show that they have a hard time coping with the different pressures they are under, the conflicting messages they receive, and their own lack of understanding of what sexuality is all about. And not only do they feel they cannot discuss these matters with adults, but they are also afraid of talking about sexuality among themselves. As Gabriela says, "It is troubling, and we came to realize that, especially in terms of AIDS prevention, it is important to address the gender issues underlying these communication problems. The adolescents know all the AIDS preventive measures literally, but they are unable to act on what they know because there are other variables, gender variables, involved in the problem."

Much of the inspiration and leadership for addressing gender concerns has come from young women in the community. One of the most interesting projects has been a women's theater group, *Las Cucas* ("Sweet Little Things"), which emerged from the Popular Youth Council. Magdalena, a 22-year-old member of *Las Cucas*, says that "in general topics related to female sexuality are not thoroughly discussed, so in our plays we want to focus on themes such as female masturbation, rape, pregnancy, and the way women are portrayed in magazines." With Mexfam's help, *Las Cucas* put together "Heaven or the Bed," a play describing the story of a girl who has been asked by her boyfriend to have sex with him and the different responses that friends and parents give her when she asks for advice. The play doesn't give an answer to the question, but rather presents many points of view so that the audience can appreciate the range of social forces girls must contend with in their sexual decision making.

Mexfam has also conducted focus group research to learn more about how gender issues shape values and decision making. For example, a group of teenagers were divided into two focus groups, one for young men and one for

young women, to evaluate *Gente Joven's* newest video, "Los Mejores Deseos" (described above). The groups were asked to analyze 1) the possibility of supporting the individual development of both the woman and the man in a relationship; 2) the importance of collaboration in housekeeping activities and economic responsibilities; 3) the division of domestic chores, distribution of resources and power relations between the man and the woman; and 4) the importance of postponing the birth of the first child until after the couple is well adjusted to their life together.

The evaluation revealed that young women and men react differently to issues such as child care, work outside the home, use of contraception, communication and development of the individual. Most of the young men accepted that women work, saying that "Gaspar should allow Sara to help him," because they believe that both are responsible for the couple's financial situation. They seem to believe that "if the man doesn't make enough money to support the two of them, then he should allow the woman to work". Nevertheless, most of the young men thought that when there are children, the women should stay home and take care of them. The young women, on the other hand, felt that "men are afraid that women will have male friends if they work" and "they don't want women to make more money than they do." The women also thought that, "like all women, Sara wants to do more than housekeeping, she wants to develop herself," a message that was intended to be what Sara's "best wishes" were all about. As for Gaspar's wishes or fantasies, the young men seemed to agree that "men always have the fantasy of going with another woman." With respect to communication, the men found it important that in the video "Gaspar recognizes his mistakes and, somehow, so does she." The young women believed that "each one should have and state his or her own opinions and let the other express how he or she feels."

For Mexfam it was important to analyze the reactions of the young women and men because "cultural" issues have an impact on attitudes toward sexuality and contraceptive use. Young women and men seemed to agree on most of the issues. For instance both groups

mentioned the importance of postponing the birth of the first child and using contraceptives “so that they could get to know each other and enjoy their relationship before having children, like Gaspar and Sara who use pills and could also use condoms.” However, communication patterns and values related to gender roles may interfere with how women and men deal with sexuality. Mexfam believes that changing attitudes about sexuality is a process that involves a reevaluation of both gender roles and cultural values.

Awareness of the link between gender roles and how adolescents view and express their sexuality is a new concept being introduced into *Gente Joven's* training and courses. Today *Gente Joven* courses are presented to mixed groups of 30 to 60 young women and men. It was a conscious decision to address adolescents in mixed groups instead of separating boys from girls. As Gabriela says, “Our assessment is that the communication between a woman and a man is very poor: men talk to men, women talk to women, but when we ask them to talk to each other as couples, before having sex or to talk about prevention, it is as if you are demanding the impossible. For this reason, we explicitly decided to encourage discussion in mixed groups, because we feel it is important that such topics be talked about among men and women. We want to facilitate communication in order to promote a better dialogue. It may be that both boys and girls will feel inhibited during the discussion, but at least they will talk a bit more than they usually do. It is a beginning.”

According to Gabriela, “A gender perspective is something new that we are beginning to add to the program. We have just begun to train ourselves in gender analysis, but we already realize that we can and should introduce a gender perspective into the program in a systematic way.”

Adults May Oppose Sex Education

A common constraint that sex education programs face is opposition from parents or other adults. In the case of *Gente Joven*, such opposition has not been a major obstacle. However, as Gabriela notes, “Of course there has been some opposition to the program because

of the misbelief that sex education favors early sexual activity or promiscuity among young people. That is why Mexfam is giving increasing emphasis to sensitizing adults, specially school principals and parents. More schools are accepting the program, but there are still some that do not allow the *Gente Joven* program to come in.”

In some communities, parents have asked the coordinators if they can find out more about the program as a means of understanding the changes their children are experiencing during adolescence, as well as to learn about contraception and to improve their relationships with their daughters and sons. For example, having learned that their children were receiving sex education information provided by Mexfam, a group of parents in the community of Cuajimalpa requested more information about the *Gente Joven* course. As a result, a Mexfam coordinator organized a group of parents and offered them the same sex education course being given to their children. A group of about 12 parents met in the evening in one of the family's homes, where they watched the same videos and were given the same information their teenage daughters and sons were receiving at school. They then had an opportunity to discuss the themes among themselves, with the support of the Mexfam coordinator. This experience gave them a sense of their children's concerns and helped them to find ways to be supportive. Most of the parents were concerned about adolescent pregnancy because they could identify cases of early pregnancy in their neighborhoods. The negative consequences of teen pregnancy, particularly for girls (interruption of school, early responsibility for the care of children, often a second pregnancy and the end of professional opportunities) were a serious issue for them.

Mexfam does not ask permission from parents to offer the *Gente Joven* program to young people because it believes this would only delay the process. Experience thus far has shown that the vast majority of the parents do not oppose the program; instead they feel a great relief in knowing that their children are receiving information on sexuality, a topic they admit is difficult for them to discuss with their own daughters or sons.



Distribution of Contraceptives

A particularly sensitive issue for many adults is providing unmarried teenagers with access to contraceptives. It is a common belief that making contraceptives available to teenagers will stimulate promiscuity. Parents prefer to believe that adolescents will not think about or engage in sex if left on their own, but will immediately respond if they are given information about sex or, even worse, are exposed to contraceptives. Around the world, there is a tendency for adults to blame sex education programs for teenage sex and pregnancies instead of accepting the fact that teenagers naturally are interested in sex and that by providing them with knowledge, sex education actually helps them to make informed choices. Mexfam considered the possibility of such a negative reaction to the *Gente Joven* program in Mexico, but the staff was convinced that the program would help teens and thus overcome any possible opposition.

Gente Joven promoters, therefore, distribute condoms to adolescents over 16 years of age in schools, factories, recreation and cultural centers, gymnasiums and other gathering places. The promoters give condoms to adolescents under age 16 only when they request them directly. Only condoms are distributed

directly by program staff to adolescents because this is a method free from side effects and contraindications and can also protect young people from sexually transmitted diseases. Mexfam promoters always carry condoms with them, thus serving not only as support people with whom young people can talk but also as a source of contraceptives for adolescents intending to have sex.

Initially spermicidal foaming tablets were also distributed, but problems arose because the expiration date of these contraceptives had to be closely monitored. This placed an added supervisory burden on coordinators. Since foaming tablets, as well as other contraceptives, were available from Mexfam's community clinics, the program chose to be on the safe side and have promoters distribute only condoms. Recently, however, Mexfam has been exploring a new approach to distribution of contraceptives to teenagers that combines condoms and spermicidal tablets in an attractive package thus promoting the combined use of both barrier methods for dual protection. As yet Mexfam has not been able to evaluate the impact of this new approach among teens.

When adolescents approach the promoters requesting other types of contraceptives and indicate that they have sex regularly, the

promoters refer them to Mexfam's community clinics where they can choose a contraceptive appropriate for their age, health conditions, lifestyle, and preferences. Mexfam has provided special training to its network of community doctors (recent graduates of medical school who Mexfam helps to start up practices in marginal or rural areas) in how to meet the special needs of young women and men. In addition to contraception, at the community clinics teenagers can also have a checkup, receive counseling about any of their reproductive health problems, as well as get answers to any questions they may have. Young people, therefore, are able to receive information on contraceptive methods and sexually transmitted diseases, choose a safe way to prevent unwanted pregnancy, learn about how to have safe sex, and receive medical follow-up appropriate for their age within their own community and at a reasonable cost.

Programs for Adolescents Do Not Generate Income

A major problem in sustaining adolescent programs is the lack of financial resources available to the target audience. Most teenagers do not have an income of their own to pay for sex education and contraceptives. And, considering Mexfam's overall target population, the problem becomes even more delicate because Mexfam is trying to reach out to low-income people. Therefore, since its inception, the *Gente Joven* program has been funded largely by international donors. Current donors include: The International Foundation, The Moriah Fund, The David and Lucille Packard Foundation, The Public Welfare Foundation, The Japanese Organization for International Cooperation in Family Planning, The Bergstrom Foundation and the IPPF's Western Hemisphere Region office. Despite such impressive donor support, Mexfam is aware of the importance of the program generating at least a minimum of cost recovery. In 1992, the *Gente Joven* budget was around US\$ 300,000 with cost recovery of approximately US\$ 6,000. Costs are being recovered by the sale of pamphlets (US\$ 0.15 to 0.25 each) and educational materials to other organizations. Mexfam also charges for training and refresher courses offered to professionals

(psychologists, physicians, social workers) who pay between US \$15 and \$30 per course.

Mexfam's overall goals for the 1990s include greater focus on both quality and self-sufficiency. However, it is not realistic to expect that the *Gente Joven* program will be able to generate significant revenue. Therefore, *Gente Joven's* goal is to maximize its reach through more efficient use of existing resources.

Sex Education Programs Are Difficult to Evaluate

Most sex education programs focus more on giving information than on providing specific services so it is difficult to evaluate their effectiveness. Further, their long-term goals of changing attitudes and behavior concerning sexuality are almost impossible to measure using currently available indicators. However, Mexfam has paid attention to the need to document and evaluate *Gente Joven's* activities and there is every indication that the program is having an impact on students. For example, Ricardo Calvillo, Mexfam's coordinator for the area of Tlanetlaupantle, reports that "in schools where the number of pregnancies was very alarming, the number of pregnancies dropped after Mexfam's arrival with a ten-hour course about two and a half years ago: in 1991 only one pregnancy occurred in the school [in Tlanetlaupantle]."

Given that most of the *Gente Joven* strategy is educational, Mexfam emphasizes the qualitative aspects of the program in its evaluations. However, in quantitative terms, Mexfam's evaluation department reports that in 1992 alone, the *Gente Joven* program reached 22,864 adolescents aged 10-19 through the ten-hour sex education courses and *Gente Joven* staff responded to requests from other schools to give talks on sexuality, thus reaching another 82,548 teenagers. The *Gente Joven* program has also reached professionals and parents through talks and courses. In 1992, about 2,756 professionals (including psychologists, social workers and educators) and 1,742 parents attended *Gente Joven* courses and talks. Today the *Gente Joven* program is offered in 52 cities throughout Mexico.

The response of other organizations in the field also reflects an appreciation of Mexfam's contribution. Professionals working with sex

education programs in other Latin American countries have participated in Mexfam's training courses and have requested *Gente Joven* materials for use in their own programs. Staff from the IPPF/WHR affiliates in Nicaragua, Colombia and Guatemala have also been trained to use the *Gente Joven* program. Further, the AIDS prevention program of the IPPF/WHR affiliate in Puerto Rico, as well as several other organizations, are currently using some of *Gente Joven's* audiovisuals and videos. The adolescent program of the IPPF affiliate in Colombia is also adapting the *Gente Joven* strategy to meet the needs of that country's adolescents.

New Audiences, New Priorities

Over the years, Mexfam has expanded its services, diversified its programs, and improved the quality of care it provides to the population. In this regard, the *Gente Joven* program has been an important stimulus for the organization. For example, responding to the needs of young people for contraceptives without jeopardizing their health resulted in Mexfam's adopting a more user-oriented approach within their adult contraceptive distribution strategy as well. This translated into paying more attention both to the information given to clients and to the training given to service providers. Incorporating the *Gente Joven* program into Mexfam's network of services and activities also produced an awareness of the diverse contraceptive needs of other groups of users who should be given more attention (e.g., men, unmarried women in relationships). Mexfam's director, Alfonso López sums up: "We want to continue in the directions that have demonstrated good results, and we plan to concentrate additional effort on the rural programs and programs directed at men. We also plan to give increased importance to quality and improving the status of women."

Toward this end, Mexfam is now evaluating all its programs from a gender perspective and is designing special materials and projects specifically targeted to the rural areas. After six years of hard work trying to respond to the needs of young Mexicans, José Aguilar agrees that "*Gente Joven* must continually be changing, incorporating new ideas, and reevaluating the program content to ensure that information prepared five or six years ago is still appropriate.

We also need to strengthen the program in the rural areas and include a gender perspective in our work with young people." Gabriela Rodríguez will soon undertake an analysis of the *Gente Joven* materials from a gender point of view and introduce "gender analysis" into the training curriculum.

Another sensitive issue related to the *Gente Joven* curriculum is child abuse and sexual abuse. Although the issue has not been addressed as yet, Mexfam has acknowledged the extent of the problem in Mexico and a project has been designed (pending funding) to train Mexfam's service providers on how to ensure that appropriate care is provided to victims of violence and sexual abuse. Mexfam may also consider ways in which this topic can be introduced in the *Gente Joven* program.

Also among Mexfam's future plans for *Gente Joven* is expansion of the program to reach even younger children. Experience indicates that the earlier a child receives sex education information in a relaxed and friendly manner, the easier it is for her/him to develop positive and healthy attitudes toward sexuality.

Meanwhile, Gabriela Rodríguez is already thinking about yet another challenge *Gente Joven* must face: delegating more responsibility for the program to adolescents. "In the future," she says, "we should take a giant step and give much more responsibility to young people. While they might not possess the techniques needed to produce a video or write program materials, they certainly have the messages. The young people want responsibility in sex education. An important step would be to offer them training so they can train other adolescents. We are still a little paternalistic." One way of doing this would be to explore techniques and strategies that appeal to out-of-school teens and to make less use of formal sex education courses developed for classrooms. Gabriela believes that in the near future emphasis should be placed on the ways teenagers express themselves, particularly the forms of communication used by out-of-school adolescents such as the "theater of the street" and rock songs.

Another lesson that has been learned is about promoters. The role of promoters found in most family planning programs (distributing contraceptives and providing information about

family planning service sites) is not suitable for an adolescent program that aims at increasing youth participation and focuses on a more complex concept of education. When trying to get the message across to teenagers, the important thing is to be sure that the information is presented in a way that is relevant and meaningful to young people. Information on sexuality needs to be invested with values and emotions adolescents can relate to and placed within the context of their world. To be able to present the material in this manner requires a significant amount of training and tends to improve with experience.

For this reason, Mexfam has begun to reduce the number of promoters used in the program and to enhance the role that the coordinators play, especially with regard to training teachers and health and community workers. *Gente Joven* promoters are now being employed primarily to work in street theater, serving as facilitators for theater groups to insure that sexuality and reproductive health messages are included in their plays. As Mexfam's *Gente Joven* program develops and learns from its own experience, other changes are likely occur as part of

a process that enriches the program and enables it to respond more effectively to the country's needs.

Gente Joven is far from being a "perfect" program for teens or a model that can be replicated everywhere. Rather it involves a constant effort to reach out to a particularly sensitive, needy, and often difficult-to-reach segment of the population. Being attentive to the Mexican reality, *Gente Joven* is in the process of finding ways to make adolescents not only more knowledgeable about but also more comfortable with their bodies and their sexuality, and to empower them to make informed decisions about sexual behavior, contraception, and disease prevention.

The *Gente Joven* staff admits that there is still a lot to be learned both from professionals with experience in the field and from the young people themselves. The program seeks to maintain an open structure that is ever ready to incorporate new information, new methodologies, and different approaches. Mistakes are accepted as part of the risk of developing a dynamic program: the important thing is to remain open and aware that there are always ways to do better.



Afterword

With its focus on listening to young people, *Gente Joven* has paid careful attention to how the needs of adolescents are different from those of adults. However, after seven years of experience and reflection, staff members have deepened their awareness that “adolescents” are not a homogeneous group. While *Gente Joven* has already differentiated between the realities of in-school and out-of-school youth, it is currently poised to recast the program to reflect the reality that adolescent boys and girls are affected by profoundly different messages, experiences, perceptions, risks and needs regarding their identity and their sexuality. This Afterword seeks to clarify some of the key theoretical and practical issues that confront programs like *Gente Joven* when they begin to re-examine their approach to adolescent sexuality from the perspective of gender.

Who Has a Sense of Control?

From an early age, boys receive messages that give them a sense of control over themselves and over others, whereas girls are socialized into abdicating control. By the time they reach their teens, adolescents’ views of what a girl and boy “ought to be” are nearly fully established. In one educational experiment conducted in the U.S., boys were asked to answer the question, “You suddenly find yourself a girl. What would your life be like?” Some boys became depressed and many were unable to come up with an answer. The girls, on the other hand, when fantasizing about suddenly being reincarnated as a male, described the great adventures and accomplishments they could look forward to—activities they felt were denied to them because they were girls.

When girls grow up, the tension over how women are “controlled” carries over to work as well. From listening to young people, *Gente Joven* has learned that young women want to enter the work force in order to “develop themselves.” However, they are aware that men often impede or disapprove of women working because “Men are afraid that if women work they will have male friends.” At an early age, women learn that they must cope with male suspicions; that the men in their lives often perceive any wider association with other men as disloyalty.

Certainly, girls’ negative, constrained view of life affects the degree to which they can exercise free will and equality in matters of sexuality. Girls often internalize the idea that they should not have any control over what happens to them sexually. Accordingly, in Latin America, a girl’s first sexual contact is typically with a male partner two to three years older than she is. This male age advantage means that most girls abdicate the possibility of negotiating their sexual experiences directly and, not surprisingly, have little control over the decision whether or not to use contraceptive methods. Often, a girl fears even bringing the issue up: if she appears to be too familiar with and eager to use contraceptives, the boy may conclude that she is “too experienced.” Programs like *Gente Joven* can be more sensitive to gender differences between girls and boys by asking questions such as: Can we really define adolescence as a “time in your life when you decide who you want to be”? Do boys and girls respond differently to courses such as “Planning Your Life”? What do gender power dynamics imply about the nature of young girls’ sexual activity? Does the socialization of girls into passivity also put them at risk of STDs, AIDS and physical violence? If so, should adolescent programs confront these issues?

Parents, too, are generally far more controlling of the behavior of girls than boys, particularly with respect to sexuality and fertility. They generally hold different norms and keep tighter reins on their daughters than on their sons. While many techniques and approaches to parent-child communication are effective regardless of gender, *Gente Joven* might want to re-examine its efforts to empower adolescents in their negotiations with parents from a gender perspective. Does fostering open and clear communication “between parents and their children” have a different meaning for daughters than it does for sons? Is it reasonable to provide materials for adults intended to help them deal with their adolescent children without regard to the children’s gender?

Who Has Responsibility?

Men and women also have different responsibilities regarding childrearing and family maintenance, and it is not clear that boys and

girls are being presented with a realistic picture of what their lives may actually be like. For example, how many girls assume that with marriage will come childbearing and that with childbearing will come consistent economic support from their husband? How many young Mexican women realize that a significant proportion of their lives are likely to be spent working to support themselves and their families? Are they aware of the risks they run of marital separation? How many young men really understand and are comfortable with what is expected of them as “fathers” and providers for a family? When most public and religious institutions and the media still cling to a model of a “traditional family” (one that may, in fact, never have existed for most people), and with families in all societies experiencing increasing levels of social and economic stress, “Life Planning” courses need to make young people aware of the reality of who is going to pay for the children.

Gente Joven is learning a great deal about how to portray reality without losing its critical consciousness and vision of change. The staff listened when kids told them that their original romantic and “gender-blind” ending to the film *El Ultimo Tren*—in which the boy stayed with his pregnant girlfriend to face an uncertain future—was wishful thinking. In the video, “Music for Two,” a high school girl must figure out which boy she prefers to be with. It is certainly true that in most societies girls are still discouraged from fantasizing about an independent identity. However, in addition to empowering young women to make a choice of partners that is in their own interest, shouldn't they also be presented with the option of “choosing” to delay sexual activity—not being told that they shouldn't have sex—if they don't feel ready to make such a commitment? Many young people may value support for a decision not to be sexually active in a world where peer pressure and the media are telling them they should be, just as others who are sexually active need support to make intelligent decisions about their sexual behavior. We need to be careful not to reinforce the notion that “success” for a woman equals finding a nice man. Programs like *Gente Joven* need to ask themselves, at various points in their evolution, “Is this the moment to push

ourselves and our clients past comfortable fantasies of what love and life are all about or is it a moment to validate those fantasies?”

The answers are not always easy. For example, *Gente Joven* has bravely moved across the “information only” boundary into providing both information and services. Yet the choice of offering only condoms may have sent a mixed message. For practical reasons (the problem of expiration dates), the program had stopped distributing foaming tablets but continued to offer condoms. This decision reflected good intentions: insuring quality control and promoting male responsibility. But at the same time, it meant that no methods were being provided that were under the control of young women.

The availability of foaming tablets for girls, even if only limited numbers use them, sends a strong message to girls that they have a right to protect themselves, to take the initiative and to touch their genitals. Girls' confidence in their ability to use barrier methods can also lay the groundwork for their future use of another generation of female-controlled methods—such as the anti-HIV microbicides now under development. *Gente Joven* is now exploring the possibility of offering a new, combination package containing both condoms and spermicides through their program.

Who Are We Silencing?

There is a final, and uncomfortable, dimension of girls' (and some boys') sexuality that remains unexplored by almost all adolescent fertility programs around the world—sexual abuse and incest. For the millions of young people who have been sexually abused, a defense of their “right” to be sexually active may not only have a hollow ring but also can feel like an active denial of their own experience and their pain. These young people have already been denied a sense of autonomy; adolescent programs must insure that they do not reinforce these adolescents' silence and deepen their shame and confusion by denying their reality. Programs need to develop mechanisms that allow the victims of sexual abuse an opportunity to acknowledge those experiences and validate their feelings.

While programs themselves may lack the skills and resources to deal directly with these



issues, moral support and a system of referrals could go a long way toward helping these young people develop a sense of autonomy and control over their bodies. Such an approach may also help prevent many early adolescent pregnancies. In one U.S. study of teenage mothers, two-thirds of those interviewed had a history of sexual abuse, which frequently took place at the hands of a close male family member. Such figures are not uncommon in many societies.

Are adolescent fertility programs ready to acknowledge that sexual abuse, particularly incest, is a powerful predictor of early sexual activity and pregnancy? Are programs prepared to discuss girls' feelings of being "at risk" physically or emotionally in relation to males with whom they feel some intimacy, including within their own families? For women in general, but especially for girls, making connections for them outside the family, with other girls, in school or through community organizations, can provide them with a "safe haven" and help them to overcome their pain and begin to build a new sense of self-esteem.

In recognizing the urgency of addressing gender issues in a meaningful way, *Gente Joven* is moving toward a more effective but radical program strategy. Understanding and grappling

with the power dynamics between males and females requires courage and clarity. Before challenging the inequities of these dynamics, we must make them explicit. The honest treatment of male/female intimate experiences will help make it possible for young women and men to live more meaningful, pleasurable, and productive lives.

Notes

¹This data was confirmed by the 1991 INEGI, Censo General de Población y Vivienda, Mexico.

²The Alan Guttmacher Institute, *Today's Adolescents, Tomorrow's Parents: A Portrait of the Americas*, 1990.

³The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1990.

⁴Pick de Weiss, et al., *Planeando Tu Vida*, Limusa, Mexico, 1991.

⁵Lucille C. Atkin, "El Embarazo en la Adolescencia en America Latina y el Caribe: Causas y Consecuencias Psicosociales." In *Conferencia Internacional sobre Fecundidad en Adolescentes en America Latina y el Caribe*. The Pathfinder Fund/The Population Council, November, 1989.

⁶Pick de Weiss, et al., "Sex, Contraception, and Pregnancy Among Adolescents in Mexico City," in *Studies in Family Planning*, v. 22, n. 2, 1991.

⁷This analysis of the distinctions between the sexes permits the understanding of the different social roles that men and women are encouraged to adopt. Gender roles are a social construct and are different from biological sexual distinctions.



Reference

For more information about the *Gente Joven* program or their materials, please contact Gabriela Rodriguez, Mexfam, Calle Juarez 208, Tlalpan, Mexico 14000 D.F. Mexico, Telephone (525) 573-7070; FAX (525) 573-2318.

Résumé en Français

Le sous-titre de cette question, «Dialogue avec les adolescents mexicains sur la sexualité», a comme intention de mettre en évidence le fait que la plupart des programmes d'éducation sexuelle pour les jeunes ont été élaborés par des adultes enclins à ignorer la réalité de l'adolescence telle qu'elle est perçue par les jeunes. Toute organisation s'efforçant d'élaborer un programme à l'intention des jeunes se heurte à cinq difficultés principales : 1) les adolescents sont différents des adultes; 2) les filles sont différentes des garçons; 3) les programmes à l'intention des adolescents ne génèrent pas de revenus; 4) il se pourrait que des adultes s'opposent au programme; et 5) les programmes d'éducation sexuelle sont difficiles à évaluer et les organismes donateurs veulent des résultats quantitatifs.

MEXFAM (Fondation mexicaine pour la planification familiale), société affiliée de l'IPPF, a amorcé l'élaboration d'un programme à l'intention des jeunes en 1986, en se basant sur une analyse de données démographiques et de résultats d'enquête révélant ce qui suit : plus de 25 pour-cent de la population mexicaine était âgée de 10 à 19 ans; l'activité sexuelle commençait, en moyenne, à 15,7 ans pour les garçons et à 17 ans pour les filles; les écoles n'offraient aucune éducation sexuelle; et les jeunes gens se plaignaient communément du manque de communication avec les adultes.

Après avoir tenté une expérience avec un programme à partir d'un centre, programme qui atteignait relativement peu d'adolescents et dont les coûts d'exploitation étaient élevés, MEXFAM a réévalué la situation et élaboré l'approche actuelle de *Gente Joven* qui rejoint les adolescents dans leur milieu — dans les écoles et les collèges, dans les centres sportifs et les centres de loisirs, au travail, dans la rue et dans d'autres endroits de rassemblement. Le programme a changé d'optique : au lieu de tenter de convaincre les jeunes de se joindre à MEXFAM, on va les rejoindre dans leur milieu.

Le programme *Gente Joven* est mis en oeuvre par des coordonnateurs (les membres du personnel de MEXFAM) et des organisateurs (des jeunes bénévoles) possédant les techniques nécessaires pour communiquer l'information sur l'éducation sexuelle aux jeunes gens, avec l'appui de matériel visuel et d'imprimés élaborés explicitement pour le programme. En plus d'impliquer des jeunes gens en tant qu'organisateur, le personnel de *Gente Joven* s'est rendu compte que les techniques de communication normalement utilisées dans les activités de planification familiale de MEXFAM n'étaient pas nécessairement les plus appropriées aux adolescents. On a plutôt mis l'accent sur la façon dont on devait faire passer le message au lieu de sur ce qui devait être communiqué. Pour sensibiliser les jeunes et influencer leurs attitudes et leur comportement, l'information doit être communiquée à l'aide de l'outil approprié. Les brochures et les manuels traditionnels sur la sexualité ont tendance à mettre l'accent sur les descriptions de l'appareil reproducteur et les proces-

sus biologiques. Or, aux yeux des adolescents, cette optique répond davantage aux attentes des adultes qu'à leurs propres attentes. Les jeunes accordent beaucoup d'importance aux aspects émotionnels d'une situation et assimilent l'information plus facilement lorsqu'elle est mise en contexte dans la vie réelle et présentée avec les aspects émotionnels s'y rattachant. C'est en tenant compte de cette idée qu'avec l'apport direct des adolescents, *Gente Joven* a élaboré une série de films et de vidéos pour présenter des concepts et stimuler la discussion sur des sujets délicats.

Le programme *Gente Joven* est actuellement offert aux élèves des écoles secondaires et aux étudiants des collèges dans un cours de dix heures présenté généralement en segments de deux heures chaque jour durant une semaine. Des versions modifiées du cours sont offertes aux jeunes ayant quitté l'école et travaillant dans les manufactures, ainsi qu'aux membres des bandes de rues.

Au cours de leur expérience de travail avec les jeunes, le personnel de *Gente Joven* s'est rendu compte que les filles et les garçons reçoivent des messages très différents de leur famille, de l'école et des médias sur la façon dont ils peuvent exprimer leur sexualité. Ces perspectives différentes ont une influence sur les décisions qu'ils prennent ou ne réussissent pas à prendre, en ce qui a trait à leur activité sexuelle, peu importe l'exactitude de l'information qu'ils ont en leur possession. Aujourd'hui, *Gente Joven* est en train de réexaminer son programme en tenant compte du sexe de l'adolescent afin de répondre de façon plus efficace à toutes ces questions.

Une question très délicate pour un grand nombre d'adultes est celle de fournir aux adolescents non mariés l'accès aux contraceptifs. Souvent, les parents craignent que cet accès facile aux contraceptifs n'encourage la promiscuité, au lieu d'accepter le fait que les adolescents sont naturellement intéressés au sexe et qu'en leur fournissant les connaissances appropriées, l'éducation sexuelle les aide en fait à faire des choix éclairés. MEXFAM a considéré la possibilité de ce genre de réaction négative mais était convaincu que le programme aiderait les jeunes et que, par conséquent, il triompherait de toute opposition éventuelle. Les organisateurs de *Gente Joven* ont donc distribué des condoms sur demande aux adolescents de 16 ans et plus dans les écoles, les manufactures, les centres culturels et les centres de loisirs, les gymnases et les autres endroits de rassemblement.

Quoique le «succès» des programmes élaborés à l'intention des adolescents (dont le but est davantage de provoquer un changement d'attitude que de fournir des services spécifiques) soit difficile à évaluer sur le plan quantitatif, on peut souligner que 22 864 adolescents ont participé au cours formel de *Gente Joven* en 1992 et que 82 548 jeunes ont été sensibilisés au moyen de causeries et d'autres activités complémentaires. Aujourd'hui, le programme *Gente Joven* est offert dans 52 villes du Mexique.

Resumen en Español

La mayoría de los programas de educación sexual para jóvenes han sido elaborados por adultos que desconocen o no comprenden las percepciones y los puntos de vista de los adolescentes de hoy. El subtítulo de este número, "Un diálogo sobre el sexo con adolescentes mexicanos", subraya la necesidad de corregir este error. Cualquier organización que busque elaborar un programa para jóvenes deberá tener en cuenta las siguientes realidades: 1) los adolescentes no son como los adultos; 2) las muchachas no son como los muchachos; 3) los programas para adolescentes no sirven para generar ingresos económicos; 4) los adultos suelen oponerse a este tipo de programa; y 5) resulta difícil evaluar un programa de educación sexual, aunque las entidades que han donado fondos quieran ver resultados concretos.

Mexfam (Fundación Mexicana de Planificación Familiar, afiliada al IPPF) empezó a elaborar un programa para gente joven en 1986, en base a un análisis de datos demográficos y los resultados de varios levantamientos. Estos estudios indicaban que más del 25% de la población mexicana tiene entre 10 y 19 años de edad; que la actividad sexual comienza, en promedio, a los 15,7 años de edad para los varones y a los 17 para las mujeres; que las escuelas no ofrecían ningún tipo de educación sexual; y que los jóvenes típicamente se quejaban de la falta de comunicación entre ellos y los adultos. Los datos también pusieron de relieve la existencia de muchísimos embarazos no deseados entre adolescentes y un importante aumento en la frecuencia de las enfermedades de transmisión sexual.

Inicialmente Mexfam experimentó con varios programas basados en centros en los que se trataba de congregar adolescentes para realizar actividades educativas. Este método alcanzó a muy pocos adolescentes y resultó ser muy caro. Tras una evaluación, Mexfam decidió cambiar el enfoque y elaborar un programa que trataría de alcanzar a los adolescentes en los sitios donde se encuentran naturalmente: las escuelas y universidades, los centros deportivos y recreativos, el trabajo, las calles de barrio y otros sitios populares. En vez de tratar de traer adolescentes a Mexfam, el nuevo programa, denominado *Gente Joven*, adoptó la estrategia opuesta, dirigiéndose hacia los sitios donde éstos se encuentran.

Gente Joven funciona a través de coordinadores (personal de Mexfam) y promotores (adolescentes voluntarios) que han sido capacitados para poder comunicar información sobre sexo y reproducción a otros jóvenes, empleando materiales gráficos y folletos producidos especialmente para el programa. Además de involucrar a jóvenes como promotores, el personal de *Gente Joven* reconoció que las técnicas de comunicación normalmente utilizadas en las actividades de planificación familiar de Mexfam probablemente no serían apropiadas para adolescentes. En consecuencia, se buscó ponerle menos énfasis al contenido de la información y más al modo en que se la comunicaba. Se reconoció que para alcanzar a los jóvenes de hoy, la información se debe presentar por

medio del canal más adecuado. Los folletos y manuales tradicionales sobre sexualidad tienden a limitarse a descripciones de anatomía reproductiva y procesos biológicos, un enfoque típicamente "adulto" desde la perspectiva de los adolescentes. Para los jóvenes, la dimensión afectiva y emocional de cualquier problema es casi siempre la más importante; en consecuencia, es mucho más probable que asimilen información que ha sido contextualizada en situaciones "de vida real", con todos los matices sociales y emotivos pertinentes. Con este fin, *Gente Joven* ha solicitado las contribuciones de adolescentes en la elaboración de una serie de películas y videos que sirven para presentar conceptos y estimular discusiones sobre temas delicados.

Hoy el programa *Gente Joven* se presenta ante estudiantes de séptimo grado escolar en adelante, típicamente en cinco sesiones de dos horas cada una. Una versión modificada del programa se utiliza con jóvenes que no cursan estudios, que trabajan, o que son miembros de pandillas callejeras.

A través de su experiencia con el programa, el personal de *Gente Joven* ha aprendido que los varones y las mujeres reciben mensajes muy distintos sobre el modo en que deben expresar su sexualidad. Las ideas contrarias que los muchachos y las muchachas reciben de sus familias, en la escuela y en los medios de comunicación popular afectan y determinan sus decisiones respecto al sexo, no obstante la información objetiva que posean sobre el tema. Los dirigentes de *Gente Joven* actualmente se están dedicando a evaluar todo el programa desde una perspectiva de género, con el propósito de responder mejor a estas diferencias.

Uno de los temas más controversiales desde el punto de vista de muchos adultos es el acceso de los adolescentes a los métodos anticonceptivos. Muchos padres temen que la disponibilidad de dichos métodos promueva demasiada libertad en las relaciones sexuales de los jóvenes. Dichos padres se olvidan que la educación sexual, al proveer información concreta e imparcial, en efecto ayuda a que los adolescentes tomen decisiones objetivas sobre su vida sexual. Los dirigentes de Mexfam tuvieron en cuenta la posibilidad de una reacción negativa por parte de los padres de jóvenes expuestos al programa, pero a la vez estaban seguros que los aspectos positivos del programa superarían la oposición. Por lo dicho, los promotores de *Gente Joven* reparten condones a pedido entre adolescentes mayores de 16 años en escuelas, fábricas, centros recreativos y culturales, gimnacios y otros sitios populares.

Aunque resulta difícil evaluar el "éxito" de los programas para adolescentes, ya que éstos buscan cambiar actitudes en vez de proveer servicios concretos, es posible reconocer que 22.864 adolescentes participaron en el curso formal de *Gente Joven* en 1992, mientras que 82.548 fueron alcanzados a través de presentaciones informales y otras actividades de promoción. En la actualidad el programa opera en 52 ciudades a lo largo de México.

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