

**A sociological analysis of the sexual
learning processes and practices of
heterosexual young women in
Northeast Brazil**

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Abstract

The Brazilian *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais*, introduced in 1996, recommend the coverage of sex education within all disciplines, throughout a young person's education. However, implementation is often inconsistent, teachers frequently lack training and resources, and content continues to be largely biological. This research investigates this apparent "gap" between ostensibly progressive sex education policy, and the realities of young women's sex education experiences. It focuses on how young women in Lençóis, Bahia, Northeast Brazil understand the role of the State in their sexual learning processes, and how State-sanctioned sex education interacts with local sexual culture and informal sex education practices in their everyday lives.

This research contributes a semi-rural, interior study, based on young women's experiences, to the literature on sex education in Brazil, which has predominantly centred on urban, coastal young people's lives, and included young people's perspectives only infrequently. The thesis prioritises local sexual culture in the study of sex education, and promotes an understanding of the State as active at the level of the everyday.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-seven women aged 18–29, and contextualised with additional material. Findings indicated that *lençoense* sex education lacked uniformity, was viewed largely negatively, and seen as a localised process, mostly dependent on individual teachers. State-sanctioned sex education provided powerful messages of risk and risk-reduction, responsibility and respectability, while other important themes were identified as "missing". Participants often looked to "informal" sources to plug the gaps left by insufficient State-sanctioned sex education, and the enduring taboo of the topic in many *lençoense* homes.

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Glossary

Amor – love.

Bolsa Família – conditional cash transfer programme, designed to alleviate poverty.

Brasileira – Brazilian woman.

Candomblé – Afro-Brazilian spiritist religion.

Carnaval – Carnival, huge annual celebrations held to mark the beginning of Lent.

Casa – house/home.

Casar – to marry.

Conselheiras – advice-givers.

Crentes – literally “believers”, a term used for Evangelicals.

de fora – an outsider.

Educação sexual – sex education.

Ensino Fundamental – Brazilian equivalent of UK primary/middle school.

Ensino Medio – Brazilian equivalent of UK secondary/high school.

Estado – the State (also state, as in the smaller units making up federal Brazil).

Evangelismo – Evangelicalism.

Fama – a bad reputation.

Favela - informal community in an urban centre, similar to Anglophone terms “shantytown” or “slum”. Unlike other urban slums which lie on the outskirts of cities, *favela* communities commonly sit next to wealthy neighbourhoods, putting the richest and the poorest of Brazilian society in very close proximity.

Festa - party/festivity.

Ficante – someone with whom you practise *ficar*.

Ficar – popular relationship type amongst young people, which may include kissing, cuddling, and sexual activity, but is characterised by a lack of commitment.

Governo – the government.

Gringa - a foreign, Anglophone woman, originally used for US women, before expanding to encompass British, Australian and South African women. In my fieldsite, the term was used indiscriminately for any white foreigner.

Jaré – regional variant of Candomblé, widely practised in Lençóis.

Lençoense – person from Lençóis.

Machismo - concept of extreme masculinity, associated with Spanish/Portuguese/Latino cultures.

Marianismo – female counterpoint to *machismo*, an idealised femininity based on the traits of the Virgin Mary.

Mata - woodland areas.

Mestiçagem – racial “mixture”.

Mestiço – Racially “mixed”.

Moça – young woman. Often employed as a euphemism for a girl who has had her first period, e.g. ‘She’s not a little girl anymore, she’s already a *moça*’.

Mulata – mixed-race Brazilian woman, with specific racial characteristics such as light brown skin and smooth, dark (but not afro) hair.

Namoro – relationship suggesting commitment and strength of feeling.

Namorado/namorada – boyfriend/girlfriend.

Namorar – to date, have a relationship with.

na rua – in the street. In the context of nightlife, *ir na rua* means to go on a night out.

Nordestinos – people from Northeast Brazil.

Novelas - extremely popular cultural product in the region, similar to soap operas, known as *telenovelas* elsewhere in Latin America.

Orientação sexual – common terminology for “sex education” in Brazilian policy documents.

Palestra – talk or presentation, usually a one-off, commonly given by a visiting presenter, invited to cover a specific topic. Other topics recalled by participants included: fire safety; animal welfare; drugs and alcohol.

Pagode – very commercial style of music, with heavy use of slang. The songs

often tell the story of “boy meets girl”, though are increasingly sexual in content, with explicit lyrics. Pagode is very popular in Brazil, but has not found international fame.

Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais – National Curriculum Guidelines (referred to as PCNs).

Planejamento Familiar – literally “family planning”, the name given to the sexual and reproductive health services offered at the health-post.

Pousadas – guesthouses.

Prazer – pleasure.

Prefeita - head of local government, similar to “mayor”.

Prefeitura – local government.

Preliminares – foreplay.

Prevenção – literally prevention, usually used to refer to contraception (and particularly condom) information and use.

Primas - literally female cousins, this term was also commonly used for close family friends, or other relatives to whom the women were close.

Relacionamento – relationship.

Saúde e Prevenção nas Escolas – Health and Prevention in Schools (referred to as SPE).

Sexo – sex.

Sistema Único de Saúde – Brazilian public health system.

Tabelinha – a behavioural contraceptive method, similar to the “rhythm” method.

Tema transversal – a cross-cutting theme, refers to school subjects which are intended to be taught in an interdisciplinary way.

Umbanda – Afro-Brazilian spiritist religion.

Vestibular – competitive examination, the primary mechanism for securing a place at Brazilian universities.

Chapter 1. Introduction

In 1996, due in no small part to the efforts of Brazilian feminists, the Brazilian government issued the *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais* (National Curriculum Guidelines), henceforth PCNs. These PCNs positioned sex education as a *tema transversal*¹, a cross-cutting theme which should be covered in a cross-curricular way, within all disciplines, throughout a young person's education. In 2003, this commitment to sex education was strengthened when, as part of world-wide efforts to fight HIV/AIDS, the Brazilian government introduced the programme *Saúde e Prevenção nas Escolas* (Health and Prevention in Schools), henceforth SPE. This programme aimed to promote "healthy" sexual behaviours, and allowed for the provision of condoms in secondary schools for 15-19 year olds. Despite commendations for the holistic, progressive sex education proposed in Brazilian policy (see Sfair, Bittar and Lopes, 2015), the sex education reality is somewhat different: the PCNs are not mandatory, so frequently the policy is not implemented, or encounters resistance (Mountian, 2014), teachers often lack the training and resources to carry out sex education as suggested in the guidelines (Altmann, 2006), and sex education continues to be largely biological in content (Leão and Ribeiro, 2012).

The justification for the inclusion of sex education as a *tema transversal* within the PCNs was the understanding of the topic as one of the 'fundamental and urgent problems in social life' (Altmann, 2013, p. 74, my translation), due to rising teenage pregnancy rate and the risk of HIV/AIDS in the country. Although it has been argued that Brazil has been extremely successful in combatting the spread of HIV/AIDS, due in part to its educational programmes (Berkman et al., 2005; Greco and Simão, 2007;

¹ For Portuguese language terms, see glossary (pp. ix-xi).

Malta and Beyrer, 2013), the impact of these measures on the rate of teenage pregnancy in the country has been more modest. Fertility rates in the 15–19 age group are rising, though all other rates are falling (Heilborn and Cabral, 2011, p. 2), and rates are significantly higher than in neighbouring countries – with 67 births per 1000 women aged 15-19, compared with 48 per 1000 in Chile, 52 per 1000 in Colombia and 50 per 1000 in Peru (The World Bank, 2014a). The “problem” of teenage pregnancy has a spatial element within Brazil, with the North and Northeast regions commonly understood to be the most affected areas. Indeed, one-third of Brazil’s teenage mothers reside in the Northeast region of the country (IBGE, 2009). During a five-month stay in Lençóis, Bahia, Northeast Brazil, in 2009-2010, I was struck by the confusion many young girls seemed to feel about their bodies, and by what I perceived as myths regarding sex and “safer sex” practices. I was also astonished by the taboo nature of the subject and the clear reluctance to openly discuss any matters relating to puberty, sex or sexuality, a taboo which seemed to be at odds with stereotypes of Brazilian sexual culture as hypersexualised. The country, and its population – particularly its women – are frequently depicted, and understood, as open, uninhibited, and “hot” (Heilborn, 2006), yet the cultural and social reality was clearly far more complex.

This thesis explores the realities of State²-sanctioned sex education in this small, Northeast Brazilian town, and young heterosexual women’s experiences of this sex education, and of other everyday sexual learning processes and practices. With the official policy in mind, this thesis examines the social and cultural elements which intervene in the delivery of State-sanctioned sex education programmes, and their reception by a group of heterosexual women aged 18-29. It considers these cultural

² The “State” is capitalised throughout this research: firstly, to highlight it as a concept with various different readings and interpretations, and secondly to differentiate it from “state”, used to refer to the states of federal Brazil.

and social tensions as part of a wider understanding of sex education as a State intervention targeting the transformation of certain sexual practices. In addition, this thesis explores the contributions of “informal” sex education sources, and how these supplement or replace State-sanctioned sources in providing young *lençoense*³ women with the kinds of sex education they perceive as important for their everyday lives and realities.

This understanding of sex education as part of a complex, wider picture of Brazilian youth sexuality and sexual culture is somewhat novel: as Oliart (2008) states, existing research on teenage sexuality in Latin America is compartmentalised. In the Brazilian case, academic studies on access to reproductive rights in Brazil mostly focus on the importance of legalising abortion (Guedes, 2000) or on the prevention of HIV/AIDS (Parker, 1999), and far less frequently on the issue of sex education. Where such studies are undertaken in the country, they are largely quantitative studies in the field of health or education, focused on evaluating sex education interventions, in terms of knowledge-transfer and reported “safer sex” behaviours (e.g. Abtibol et al., 2015; Gondim et al., 2015; Pirota et al., 2015): very few focus on young people’s perspectives or experiences. Sex education studies, as well as studies of teenage sexual culture (for example, the GRAVAD study⁴) tend to be based in large urban areas, and seldom analyse the relationship between youth cultures and State services, such as sex education. In addition, the State itself is all-too-often assumed to be weak, fragmented or absent, as a result of enduring neoliberal reforms (Koonings and Kruijt, 2004; Grugel and Ruggirozzi, 2012). By framing this project across existing studies on sex education and sexual learning, Brazilian sexual cultures, particularly local youth sexual cultures, gender, sexuality

³ Term for a person from Lençóis.

⁴ See pp. 43-44.

and sexual practices, and State practices, this thesis helps to provide a missing link between key fields of study, which have each received varying degrees of research attention, but which have not often been researched in connection with one another.

Within this dynamic and complex context, I had four principal aims in formulating and conducting this research. Firstly, I wanted to explore how existing sex education policy works in practice in a small-town, Northeast interior context, in order to see how policy which has been perceived as progressive and even feminist translates into everyday experience. This is connected to my second aim: to examine how young *lençoense* women perceive State-sanctioned sex education, and apply it in their everyday lives. Given the importance accorded to “informal” sources in the sex education literature⁵, I also felt it was pertinent to explore how these young women supplement or enrich the State-sanctioned sex education they receive with education from other sources, for example, friends or the media. And finally, I hoped to cast some light on how sex education and sexual learning interact with gendered and sexual identities, by investigating how young heterosexual women’s sexual subjectivities are shaped by the messages within State-sanctioned and other sources of sex education, but also how cultural norms of heterosexual femininity impact on the reception and application of sex education knowledges.

These aims, and the thesis as a whole, are influenced by the broadly social constructionist theoretical position taken within this research. As described in greater detail in Chapter Two, this work understands gender and sexuality as socially constructed, subject to regulation and management, changeable and resisted, and historically and culturally specific. Therefore, it refers to heterosexual *femininities* to highlight this complexity and plurality, but also to indicate this thesis’ focus on

⁵ See Chapter Two.

heterosexual experiences. In line with this approach to sexuality, this work understands sex education as one important way in which young people learn about and construct their sexual selves, and therefore a process which must be explored and interrogated. Finally, sex education is often observed to have a regulatory role (e.g. Hillier, Harrison and Warr, 1998; Shoveller and Johnson, 2006; Moore, 2012), which prompted this thesis' positioning of the State as key to discussions of this topic. However, within this work the idea of a unified, monolithic State is problematised, using the works of Cooper (1995; 2002), Carabine (1996; 2004a; 2004b), Das and Poole (2004) and Canaday (2009) to conceptualise it in a more nuanced way, allowing for a productive exploration of everyday, localised experiences of State practices.

Why Sex Education?

In a field as complex as this, where sexualities, femininities, sexual cultures, youth cultures and the State intersect so frequently and are so difficult to extricate one from the others, it is important to justify the selection of sex education as a topic for research.

Sex education has long been seen as a way of managing young people's sexualities (e.g. Shoveller and Johnson, 2006; Moore, 2012; Elliott, 2014).⁶ In the case of Brazil, this has largely been focused on its use as a tactic for reducing "problematic" outcomes such HIV/AIDS infection and teenage pregnancy (see França, 2006; Pirotta et al., 2015; Sfair, Bittar and Lopes, 2015). However, sex education could also be considered instrumental in the construction and regulation of heterosexual femininity⁷, for example, in Lamb's 2013 work in the US, or Hillier, Harrison and

⁶ See Chapter Two.

⁷ When used in the singular, this thesis uses "heterosexual femininity" to refer to norms of femininity, and its culturally idealised form.

Warr's 1998 work in Australia. Whatever the motivations and outcomes of sex education, it was selected as the object for study here because it offers a lens through which to explore the presence of the State at its various levels in the everyday exercise of young people's sexualities.

In addition, sex education is topical in Brazil, frequently featuring on feminist, public health, and moralist agendas in the country. For example, a 2011 proposal to make sex education mandatory was overturned, and there is on-going debate in the country about the "Schools without Homophobia" campaign.⁸ And sex education is hitting the news once again, both in Brazil and internationally, due to the ongoing Zika epidemic.⁹ Several stories have been run on the short-sighted nature of advice telling women to avoid pregnancy for fear of Zika, given the inadequacies of sex education in Brazil and the wider region (e.g. Alter, 2016; Moloney, 2016).

In addition to the intellectual and contextual reasons for pursuing this topic, I had personal motivations for doing so. Since 2009, I have spent considerable time in Lençóis, interacting with children and young people there.¹⁰ During this time, I witnessed what I perceived to be a lack of knowledge and a sense of confusion from young girls regarding sex and sexuality, despite what I knew to be progressive sex education policy in the country. I was also privy to the challenges of implementing sex education: the director of the children's project in which I worked wanted to provide basic sex education, but her plans were thwarted due to parental opposition.

⁸ See Chapter Five.

⁹ Suspected cases of Zika were first reported in Brazil in March 2015, with the first confirmed case in April 2015. The epidemic grew throughout 2015, as did reported links to neurological conditions such as microcephaly. In November 2015, a public health emergency was declared in Brazil, with 739 cases of microcephaly being investigated in nine states. This rose to 2975 by the end of 2015. The Zika outbreak and related neurological conditions in Brazil and elsewhere was declared a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern" by the WHO on 1st February 2016 (timeline from Kindhauser et al., 2016).

¹⁰ The considerations involved in conducting research in a place to which I had personal connections are discussed in Chapter Four.

My interest in this topic was further piqued as some of the young girls from the charity became pregnant, at ages as young as twelve. This set of experiences prompted me to develop research which might help shed light on this complex situation.

Driven by these varied motivations, and with these aims and theoretical positions firmly in mind, I formulated five research questions:

1. What are the dominant cultural understandings of sex and sexuality of young women in Lençóis?
2. Where do they get their information about sex, both formally and informally?
3. How does this information interact with pervasive cultural norms and beliefs about sex and sexuality?
4. Do existing sex education programmes incorporate and cater to these norms and beliefs?
5. What do young women perceive to be the consequences of the exercise of youth sexuality for their bodies (e.g. teenage pregnancy), identities (e.g. reputation) and futures (e.g. economic support)?

These five research questions are addressed in the forthcoming data chapters.

Key Contributions

This thesis makes several important contributions to the study of sexualities, sex education and sexual learning, youth sexual culture, and State practices at the everyday level.

Its use not only of Anglophone literature, but also of Brazilian studies not always published in English, helps to bridge existing Anglo- and Lusophone¹¹ literature on sex education and youth sexuality, thus producing a more complete picture of the available research across key fields.

In terms of its empirical contributions, this research contributes a small-scale,

¹¹ Portuguese-language.

qualitative study on sex education to the body of work on sex education in Brazil, which currently includes relatively little research exploring young people's perspectives on the education received. It also adds a semi-rural, interior focus to work that has predominantly centred on urban, coastal young people's lives.

Although the main contributions are empirical, theoretical contributions are made within this thesis. Firstly, it argues for the prioritising of culture in the study of sex education, particularly regarding the interaction between sex education and local gendered and sexual norms. Secondly, it situates the study of State practices at the level of the community and the everyday, in a way which could be considered more productive than common understandings of the State in Latin America as "weakened" or "missing" at the periphery. Finally, and possibly most importantly, this study seeks to rectify the way in which existing research on teenage sexuality in Latin America has tended to be 'compartmentalised' (Oliart, 2008), instead understanding sex education, youth sexuality, sexual culture and the State as intricately interwoven and endeavouring to highlight and explore these interconnections.

Thesis Outline

Having introduced and contextualised the research, this chapter now describes the structure of the thesis.

Chapter Two reviews relevant existing literature in the four main areas covered by this thesis – sex education and sexual learning, local sexual culture, gender, sexuality and sexual practices, and the State. This literature review includes Anglo-, Luso- and some Hispanophone¹² works, to ensure the most complete coverage possible of these topics. This chapter indicates how this thesis dialogues with existing work, highlighting current gaps, as well as how this study contributes to filling

¹² Spanish-language.

them.

Chapter Three focuses on context and policy. Firstly, the chapter explains the geographical, demographic and social context for the work, situating Lençóis at town, state and regional level. It then explores the policy context within which this research sits, including an examination of municipalisation processes, local feminisms, the reproductive rights agenda, sex education policy development and critique, and the *Bolsa Família* conditional cash transfer programme.

Chapter Four describes and justifies the methodology employed in this thesis. It begins by positioning the work epistemologically, and discussing my motivations towards feminist, qualitative research “done sensitively”, and then justifies the selection of the primary method of data production, the semi-structured interview. The rest of the chapter discusses the various methodological decisions made throughout the research process, from conception to write-up, including important moments of reflection on power, positionality and research ethics.

Chapter Five, the first of three data-led chapters, explores State-sanctioned sex education, mapping the provision experienced by participants. It highlights a lack of uniformity within participant experiences, and argues that the majority were dissatisfied with the education received, leading them to look to other sources to supplement this education. The chapter then examines the sex education work done at four different State levels, and how the young women perceived provision at each level. It argues that these young women experienced sex education as a localised practice, largely down to individual teachers, rather than as a well-implemented national policy. It concludes by exploring the young women’s perceptions of the State’s legitimacy in providing sex education to young people, given local understandings of sexuality as a “private matter”.

Chapter Six, which considers in greater depth the content of State-sanctioned sex education, identifies three main themes from the young women's accounts – “risk and risk-reduction”, “responsibility”, and “respectability”. It explores how the young women interpret and use these messages, and focuses particularly on what these themes tell the young women about “appropriate” heterosexual femininity. In addition, this chapter examines moments of resistance to these messages from both teachers and young women, as well as exploring what is “*missing*” in this provision, focusing mainly on pleasure, and considering how and why this theme is “missing”.

Chapter Seven examines the “informal” provision of sex education. It begins by focusing on the role of the family in young people's sexual learning: although seen by participants as the ideal source of sex education, in reality, the family was reported as rarely contributing to this process. Given this reality, and the criticisms levelled at State-sanctioned sex education in earlier chapters, this chapter explores the sources the young women described using instead of, or to supplement, State-sanctioned sex education. Firstly, it examines sexual learning in “the street”¹³, a category made up of learning with friends, learning in relationships and learning through gossip¹⁴, and then it considers the role of the media, particularly *novelas*¹⁵ and the internet. It explores how the young women used these sources and which dimensions of sexuality they use them to learn about, but also considers the criticisms and concerns raised about these “informal” sources. The chapter focuses particularly on learning about pleasure, a topic seen as “missing” in State-sanctioned provision, as discussed in Chapter Six. It explores how participants learn about this topic – from friends, in practice, and through pornography and media portrayals – arguing that

¹³ Quotation marks are used to distinguish between “the street” as an idea, a place of socio-cultural importance, and the street, a physical space.

¹⁴ It should be noted that these were not discrete categories, they often overlapped in young women's everyday lives.

¹⁵ Brazilian soap operas.

these sources grow in legitimacy, given the silences on the topic elsewhere.

Finally, *Chapter Eight* concludes the thesis, recapping the key arguments and reiterating the key contributions. This chapter highlights the implications of this research for policy and practice in the field of sex education, and indicates potential future research directions.

This chapter has introduced the thesis, placing it in its context and laying out its primary aims and motivations, as well as its key contributions. The thesis outline provided above describes the shape of the work to follow, which begins with an examination of the relevant literature.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature that has shaped this study, and situates this research within existing bodies of work on sex education and sexual learning, local sexual culture, the relationship between gender, sexuality and sexual practices and the State.

The chapter begins by briefly outlining the theoretical perspective taken, and is then divided into four sections. The first of these reviews existing literature on sex education, looking at critiques of existing practices, the importance of issues of pleasure and desire, power and gender, and regulation and management, Brazilian empirical studies and the role of “informal” sources of sexual learning. The second section focuses on local sexual culture and examines the literature on its relevance to sexuality, through examples of hyper(hetero)sexuality and the public/private divide. It then considers work on Brazilian youth sexualities more specifically, and the practices of *ficar*¹⁶ and the socio-cultural importance of “the street”. It finishes with an exploration of the literature on rural sexualities. The third section looks more closely at the interrelationship between gender and sexuality and specifically between femininity and heterosexuality, expressed by the term “heterosexual femininities”. It explores the specificities of heterosexual femininities in the Brazilian and broader Latin American contexts, before considering the relationship between heterosexual femininities and sexual practices. The fourth and final section explores those theories on the State which have been useful for examining the State’s role in young women’s everyday experiences of sex education in Lençóis.

Before commencing this review, it is important to situate the study conceptually with regards to sex education and sexual learning. Sex education is taken to mean the

¹⁶ A popular relationship type amongst young people, which may include kissing, cuddling, and sexual activity, but is characterised by a lack of commitment.

formal educational processes put in place at State level to inform young people about sex and sexuality, usually within the context of the school. However, this study understands school-based sex education not just as teaching young people about reproductive and sexual health, but as an important way in which they learn about their sexual selves. In her recent book about the content and impact of sex education debates in the US, Kendall (2013) describes sex education as having ‘sociopolitical consequences’, including ‘the lessons students... learn about themselves as sexual and social beings’ (p. 4), with reference to conceptions of adolescent parenthood, gender norms, LGBTQ identities and rape and sexual violence (Kendall, 2013). This study adheres to this broader conceptualisation of the impact of sex education processes, and also follows scholars such as Hillier, Harrison and Warr (1998), Shoveller and Johnson (2006) and Moore (2012) in recognising the regulatory capacities of school-based sex education, discussed in greater depth later in this chapter.¹⁷

However, school-based sex education is far from being the only way young people learn about these topics. This study follows Jackson (1999) in her chapter on sexism in sex education, and Walker (2004) in her exploration of the role of parents in educating their children about sex and sexuality, both UK-based, in recognising that young people’s sexual learning comes from a variety of sources and through a variety of practices. Jackson (1999) describes her participants’ narratives of “picking it up” from a range of different sources, rarely from parents or school (p. 60), whilst Walker (2004) uses the metaphor of “the jigsaw” to describe how young people piece together different sexual knowledges ‘by experience’ (p. 242). Therefore, this study conceptualises the “everyday sexual learning processes and practices” of young people as including not just those occurring in the classroom, but also the multiple

¹⁷ See pp. 24-25.

ways young people interact with sources such as health-posts, parents, peers, the community and the media.

This study focuses not just on the available sources of sexual learning in Lençóis, but on how this learning is perceived and put to use by heterosexual young women in the town, vis-à-vis their identities and relationships. It is important, therefore, to consider how to conceptualise their gender and sexual identities. In line with the broadly social constructionist approach taken within this study, both gender and sexuality are understood to be socially constructed, and culturally contextual: an understanding with a long history that cannot be adequately covered in this chapter. Gender scholars have worked for decades to highlight its socially constructed nature. For example, West and Zimmerman (1987) advanced an understanding of gender as a 'routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction' (1987, p. 125).

Additionally, Lorber (1994) discussed the concept's multiple facets – as a process in which individuals are taught to be masculine or feminine; as stratification where men are positioned more highly than women, but where the hierarchy is also cut across by other intersectional differences; and as structure, through the division of labour, space, authority, and sexual and emotional life (1994). The socially constructed nature of gender has formed the basis of considerable study before and since.

The understanding of sexuality as socially constructed also has an established academic history. The works of authors such as Gagnon and Simon (2005, [1973]) and Foucault (1998 [1976]) have been particularly influential in establishing an understanding of sexuality as something which is not universal, nor stable across all times and all cultural spaces, something which is socially scripted (Gagnon and Simon, 2005, [1973]), and shaped by a range of discourses within a given time and context (Foucault, 1998 [1976]).

This study also understands gender and sexuality to be interrelated. Several

scholars have worked to illuminate the interrelationship between the two concepts, with some privileging gender over sexuality, and others positioning sexuality as the privileged concept. Richardson (2007) traces the history of theoretical approaches to this interrelationship, and then proposes a new framework from which to view it. In order to capture the variability in context and in the strength of the interconnections, as well as the fact that the relationship occurs on multiple social layers, Richardson uses the metaphor of the shoreline as a 'boundary in motion' (2007, p. 470) between "gender" as the land, and "sexuality" as the sea. This construction positions the relationship as dynamic, and affected by micro and macro forces, and the two concepts as interrelated but distinguishable. This metaphor inspired her concept of "patterned fluidity" to better describe the complex relationship, claiming it 'enables the recognition of both the possibility of the fluid interplay between gender and sexuality, and that there exists structure and materiality as well as socially and culturally meaningful "sexual and gender stories" (Plummer, 1995)' (Richardson, 2007, p. 471).

Following Richardson's notion of "patterned fluidity", this study sees sexuality and gender as interrelated in fluid ways, with each concept influencing the other, to different extents and outcomes, varying over time, place and culture. This study, therefore, refers to "heterosexual femininities", in order to make apparent the consideration of young women's experiences within a context of heterosexuality. This focus adds to a growing body of critical work on heterosexuality. This includes work by Jackson (1999), who works towards a critical perspective on the concept through the exploration of a range of issues including love and romance, rape and sex education and who, in 2006, argued that closer attention needs to be paid to the links between gender, sexuality, and heterosexuality (Jackson, 2006). Additionally, Hockey, Meah and Robinson (2010) explore what they call "mundane heterosexualities", using life-course interviews with family members from different

generations to argue that heterosexuality is *the* organising principle of everyday existence, and engage with heterosexuality as a 'dominant, pervasive and invisible social category' (2010, p. 4). More recently, Beasley, Holmes and Brook (2015) use the concept of 'heterodoxy' to challenge the understanding of heterosexuality as 'nasty, boring and normative' (2015, p. 682), instead exploring less orthodox forms of heterosexuality as possibilities for pleasure and change.

As alluded to earlier, this study understands neither gender (specifically femininity for the purposes of this study) nor sexuality (specifically heterosexuality) to be monolithic categories, rather it recognises their fractured, contested nature. Connell (1987) highlighted this complexity, conceptualising gender as a hierarchy. At the top of this hierarchy comes 'hegemonic masculinity', the culturally-dominant masculinity in a given context, against which other masculinities, and all femininities, are subordinated or excluded (ibid.). In the case of femininity, Connell conceived of 'emphasized femininity' as the idealised form, compliant to male dominance, and 'oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men' (1987, p. 183), to the exclusion of other iterations of femininity. Its key traits are identified as sociability, compliance with men's sexual and ego desires, and acceptance of marriage and childcare (ibid.). Connell's work also acknowledged the cultural specificity of understandings of gender: the dominant or idealised masculinity might not be the same in every cultural context. Similarly, Smart (1996) compels us to think about *heterosexualities*, arguing that 'there can be multiple meanings... attached to different sexualities at the same time' (1996, p. 174). Such understandings allow for the critical examination of young heterosexual women's varied experiences across different cultural contexts.

This theoretical perspective, which understands (hetero)sexuality as socially constructed and therefore subject to management, regulation and control,

contextualises my interest in sex education, and in the role of the State in young women's sexual lives. In addition, seeing sexuality and gender as culturally specific and non-universal explains my commitment to exploring the local sexual culture of this study's fieldsite.

Sex education and sexual learning

This section explores existing work on sex education, reviewing studies on the variety of issues constituting the topic, from different geographical contexts, before moving on to explore the literature on "informal" sources of sexual learning. This was important in order to highlight ongoing academic debates on the subject, and to identify gaps in the literature which this study might help fill.

Sex education has long been a controversial issue, with many authors critiquing its design and implementation in a variety of contexts, arguing that it is too biological or health-focused; that it is insensitive to wider gender dynamics; or that it is at odds with local sexual culture. Several studies from within this considerable history of research have contributed to the critical stance taken within this study, and to the understanding that sex education has great bearing on young people's construction and experience of their sexualities. For example, Thomson and Scott (1991) positioned UK sex education as a process wherein young women work with and against a range of contradictory messages, coming from the school, the home, their peers, and popular culture. The authors highlighted the reductive nature of much sex education, arguing that many curricula focus heavily on the biological, especially reproductive, aspects, particularly for women (1991, p. 9). Similarly, in a review of existing literature, Harrison and Hillier (1999) explore the normative underpinnings of sex education, highlighting an emphasis on risk and "safety", and a frequent focus on penetrative sex which alienates LGBT students, narrows the range of possible heterosexual practices, and privileges male desire. They argue that although

knowledge about sex is important, an information-only approach fails to recognise the multiple and contradictory pressures faced by young people, and leaves little space for desiring bodies (Harrison and Hillier, 1999). Additionally, Allen (2008) argues that adults tend to determine young people's sex education needs, neglecting what they themselves identify as important. Through focus groups and questionnaires with young New Zealanders, Allen (ibid.) found that young people wanted to learn about emotions in relationships, teenage parenthood, abortion, and how to make sex pleasurable. A sex education curriculum which included such aspects would recognise young people as sexual subjects with rights, while continuing to ignore their demands puts their perspectives at odds with sex education programmes, reducing their effectiveness. Lamb (2013) uses discourse theory to analyse the ideologies represented within current and historical US sex education content, policy and curricula. She identifies three prominent discourses, "science", "healthy choices", and "efficacy", and explores how these (de)legitimise certain knowledges. Lamb proposes eight tenets for future sex education curricula, which would acknowledge a range of identities, focus on power and resistance, and explore an ethic of care for and awareness of others, rather than emphasising individual morality. Additionally, in a policy brief for the UK context, Ingham (2016) argues that sex and relationship education (SRE)'s non-statutory status is responsible for the failures within it: 'by leaving decisions to local school governors, teachers and parents, the current patchy and inconsistent provision is likely to continue' (2016, p. 3). He goes on to list the considerable debates surrounding SRE, including the conditions under which parents should be allowed to withdraw their children from lessons, the age at which SRE should be delivered, the training and support received by teachers/facilitators, the appropriate level of parental involvement, how to incorporate young people's needs and demands, and the inclusion of controversial

topics such as porn, social media, sexual abuse, consent, pleasure, and masturbation.

These limited examples are part of a considerable history of academic work that challenges how sex education has traditionally been conceived of and implemented, and the reasons and motivations for its implementation. These studies highlight a common focus on biological/anatomical content, risk-reduction, and knowledge-transfer within conventional approaches, and critique this, demonstrating a need for a more holistic, student-centred approach. This critique has informed this study in several ways, offering approaches against which sex education in Lençóis might be compared, and highlighting key issues with regards to sex and sexuality, which might usefully be explored within this study. The following section will explore in greater depth the literature on some of these issues: pleasure and desire, power and gender, and regulation and management of sexuality.

Important issues within sex education

A primary focus in the critique of sex education is the exclusion of issues of pleasure and desire, especially for young women. For example, through curriculum analysis and interviews and observations with adolescent women, Fine (1988) famously identified four major discourses within US sex education: sexuality as violence; sexuality as victimisation; sexuality as individual morality; and a discourse of desire. The latter, Fine argues, is largely absent and, where it *is* present, is largely tempered with reminders of risk and consequences. She insists that '[a] genuine discourse of desire would invite adolescents to explore what feels good and bad, desirable and undesirable, grounded in experiences, needs and limits' (1988, p. 33), however, she offers little concrete guidance as to what would constitute such a discourse and how it might be implemented.

Since Fine's 1988 article, many scholars have explored the 'missing discourse of

desire', and considered what its inclusion within school-based sex education might look like. For example, Allen's research in New Zealand proposes a "discourse of erotics" which legitimises young people's desires, and acknowledges their right to knowledge about the body's sexual responses and the logistics of bodily engagement in sex. In a mixed-method study with 515 heterosexual young people, Allen (2004) develops an argument for the inclusion of pleasure and desire in sex education though, by her own admission, she fails to discuss the logistics of such inclusion. Allen (2007) develops her argument to explore young people's interest in the inclusion of pleasure within sexuality education, and its perceived challenges. According to her findings, participants reported wanting to know more about sexual pleasure than was afforded to them within existing sexuality education. However, some students found it difficult to imagine how pleasure might legitimately be taught in school, highlighting such challenges as opposition from conservative sections of society, student and teacher embarrassment, and concerns that it is "unteachable" or "private" (Allen, 2007, p. 263). In the UK context, Ingham (2005) argues that the focus on public health outcomes in both teaching plans and programme evaluations dominates over other important aspects of SRE, particularly pleasure. He claims that this is despite evidence that awareness of positive sexual experiences *improve* health outcomes, due to increased capacity for communicating one's wishes, and reduced "pressure" into unwanted sexual relationships and activity. Although he acknowledges that the inclusion of pleasure into SRE is likely to face immense opposition, Ingham suggests that the solution is 'creative placing of topics and delivery' (2005, p. 385), such as in media studies, and through small-group work. More recently, Lamb, Lustig and Graling (2013) examine US sex education from the past decade for discourses regarding pleasure. They found that discourses around pleasurable sex were frequently linked to risk and danger, and associated with a

range of negative outcomes such as unprotected sex, regret, pregnancy and STDs. Elsewhere, discourses on pleasure were medicalised and focused on “knowing one’s body”. Occasionally, pleasure did appear in more positive ways – linked to marriage in ‘Abstinence Only Until Marriage’ education, or within feminist discourse in rarer comprehensive sex education curricula. Overwhelmingly, however, although not “missing” entirely, the topic of pleasure was subsumed into wider “safer sex” discourses, and therefore equated frequently with “danger” (Lamb, Lustig and Graling, 2013). Similarly, Hirst (2013) argues that, despite more than two decades of academic and activist work calling for the inclusion within sexuality education of a recognition of pleasure and desire for young people, such education is still absent in many contexts. She reviews existing work to highlight the importance of this inclusion to sexual health, rights, equality and safeguarding, whilst acknowledging the challenges. She also draws on heterosexual young people’s perspectives from her 2004 urban northern English study on socialising, sexual practices and sex education. Hirst intends that her work be used to ‘problematise traditional models of sex education and offer a substantiated case for SRE that includes pleasure’ (2013, p. 432).

Reviewing these texts, which represent a mere snapshot of the academic debate on the inclusion of pleasure within sexuality education, raised questions as to whether pleasure would appear as a similarly key concern within this study. Consideration of the importance of the coverage of pleasure within the *lençoense* case would contribute to this rich and ongoing academic debate.

Another much-critiqued aspect of sex education is its lack of focus on dynamics of power and gender. In her chapter on sexism in sex education, Jackson (1999) argues that “[o]f all school “subjects”, sex education is perhaps the most obviously sexist... assumptions about gender, which elsewhere in the curriculum are

submerged and implicit, are brought to the surface' (p. 58), particularly through the enduring focus on sex for reproduction. Similarly, drawing on three pieces of research on gender, information and sexuality, carried out 1984-2003 in several locations across England, Measor (2004) argues that experiences of sexual learning are highly gendered, and influenced by what it means to be a "proper" girl or boy in a given context. The fact that these studies were carried out over a twenty year period, and in different geographical and institutional locations, suggests the persistence of these themes. Indeed, more recent works have exposed the contemporary nature of this problem. For example, Harrison and Ollis (2015) highlight the continued importance of the inclusion of gender analysis within sexuality education, and the reluctance or difficulty some teachers find in doing so. This Australian study, based on the experiences of pre-service teachers, found that they generally demonstrated a binary, hetero and traditional understanding of gender (Harrison and Ollis, 2015).

Still more authors have highlighted the heteronormativity of sex education practices. *Heteronormativity* is a commonplace concept within sexuality studies, but merits brief discussion here. An early definition was provided by Berlant and Warner (1998), who highlighted the coherence and privileged status of heterosexuality, within both everyday life and institutions:

By heteronormativity we mean the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organized as a sexuality – but also privileged... It consists less of norms that could be summarized as a body of doctrine than of a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations – often unconscious, immanent to practice or to institutions. (1998, p. 548)

Heteronormativity is often taken to mean the privileging of heterosexuality over and above homosexuality, however, Berlant and Warner problematised this, stating that 'forms of sex between men and women might not be heteronormative' (ibid.). This

idea of non-heteronormative forms of heterosexuality has since been developed by scholars such as Seidman (2005), who drew attention to the hierarchies constructed *amongst* heterosexuals, resulting in 'hegemonic and subordinate forms of heterosexuality' (p. 40), and by Jackson (2006), who argues that 'heteronormativity needs to be rethought in terms of what is subject to regulation on both sides of the normatively prescribed boundaries of heterosexuality: both sexuality and gender' (p. 105). This focus on what is normative and non-normative *within* heterosexuality as well as outside of it is key to this study.

Heteronormative attitudes to sexuality have often been detected in studies of sex education, which have highlighted a frequent focus on vaginal penetration, and absence of discussions of alternatives, working to produce what Jackson (1984) termed 'the coital imperative'. Jackson (1984) analysed the work of several renowned sexologists, and questioned the essentialist model she believed underpinned their research, a model where, amongst other factors, sex is equated with heterosexuality and coitus is a biological imperative. She usefully employed the term 'the coital imperative' to sum up the assumptions 'that the most natural form of heterosexual activity is coitus... other kinds of sexual activity are regarded as either preliminary (as indicated by the term 'foreplay'), or optional extras, or substitutes when the 'real thing' is for some reason not available' (ibid., p. 44). This understanding has been employed by other scholars to highlight similar assumptions within sexuality education. For example, in her 2004 research on young people's sexuality and sexual learning with 15-16 year olds in a northern English city, Hirst (2004) argues that sex education's focus on vaginal penetration failed to acknowledge the plurality of sexual practices and experiences within her sample, thus 'sabotag[ing] the opportunity for input to promote safer non-penetrative sexual practice (which some young women were striving for), and reinforc[ing] the legitimacy

of vaginal penetration over other forms of sexual expression' (Hirst, 2004, p. 120). In his 2005 article arguing for the inclusion of pleasure in SRE, Ingham claims that 'it would surely be a legitimate measure of the 'effectiveness' of sex education to assess the extent to which young people feel confident to persuade partners that alternatives [to vaginal penetration] can be almost or equally (or more) pleasurable' (2005, pp. 381-382), and that SRE's silences on alternatives ways of giving and receiving pleasure reinforce 'the heterosexual priority of sexual activity' (ibid., p. 382). More recently, Bolander (2015) argues that the focus on condoms in Swedish sex education television programmes works to maintain heteronormativity and promote vaginal intercourse as the norm. Similarly, Hirst (2013) purports that a focus on "proper sex" to the exclusion of other sexual practices 'perpetuates institutionalised homophobia, invisibilises and marginalises LGBTQ students, and fails in its equality duty to offer inclusive education and meaningful guidance on same sex identities and sexual practices' (pp. 431-432). Such studies highlight the pervasive gendered and heteronormative dynamics of sex education, prompting sensitivity to these issues within this study.

Whilst some scholars have highlighted elements which are "missing" within sex education, just as useful to the development of this project were works which focus on what is *present*: discourses which work to regulate and manage adolescent sexualities. For example, in their Canadian study, Shoveller and Johnson (2006) argue that much public health work conceptualises youth sexuality as problematic, and that health promotion has focused on altering "risky" behaviours and modifying individuals' lifestyle choices. They claim that this reflects unrealistic assumptions about the degree of agency and free choice enjoyed by young people (2006, p. 57). Similarly, Moore's 2012 review of British sex education programmes employs Foucauldian notions of biopower, seeing sex education as 'the formal expression of

the training and disciplining of bodies' (p. 27). She identifies three main discourses within sex education interventions: a biological discourse, an emotional discourse, and a risk-avoidance discourse which assumes that 'youthful passion is fundamentally risky and that it is possible and desirable to teach specific behaviours, emotional dispositions and decision-making processes to answer these risks' (ibid., p. 28). Moore argues that this teaching is aimed primarily at young women, positioning them as autonomous decision-makers, whilst neglecting cultural, social and emotional obstacles to such autonomy. Additionally, Hillier, Harrison and Warr (1998) draw on surveys and focus groups with rural Australian youths to argue that the dominant presentation of "safe sex" is based on assumptions of rational decision-making, which obscure the unique risks and often rigid social expectations faced by young women, whilst masking unequal power relations. The authors conclude that "safe sex" promotion should look at the range of concerns young people face beyond becoming pregnant or contracting STDs (Hillier, Harrison and Warr, 1998). Similarly, in her work on the utility of the concept of "sexual competence" to SRE, Hirst (2008) highlights the difficulties inherent in "safer sex" negotiations, what she calls 'a complex interplay of various prior and *in situ* social, cultural, and historical contexts and biographies which vary in and between individuals and relationship formations' (p. 403). To illustrate this complexity, she uses the example of sex occurring outdoors, with friends nearby, stating that such conditions limit the possibilities for negotiation over sexual activity and, therefore, that sex educators ought to acknowledge the impact such contingencies can have on negotiation, decision-making and sexual subjectivity.

This body of literature resonates with work linking neoliberalism and sexuality. Neoliberalism is a problematic concept, employed in many different ways. There has been a tendency to focus on the effects of neoliberal policy, particularly on the

welfare state. For example, in his book on the neoliberal class project, Harvey (2005) claims that dominant groups have used “neoliberalism” to refer to policies which work in their own interest, and lead to increased inequality, decreased public services, and growing poverty. However, as Larner (2006) argues in an attempt to use neoliberalism to theorise what she calls the “New Zealand experiment” in recent governments, ‘neoliberalism is a more complex phenomenon than may have been recognized by many participants in these debates’ (2006, p. 200). She reassesses existing analyses of the concept, and identifies three different interpretations – neoliberalism as a policy framework, neoliberalism as an ideology, and neoliberalism as governmentality – arguing that those who ignore the latter ‘run the risk of underestimating the significance of contemporary transformations in governance’ (ibid.). The ‘transformations in governance’ to which Larner refers are ‘found in diverse realms including workplaces, educational institutions and health and welfare agencies’ (2006, p. 206) and ‘encourage people to see themselves as individualized and active subjects responsible for enhancing their own well-being’ (ibid.). Similarly, in his 2009 examination of the employment of the concept in Africa, Ferguson recommends that analyses of neoliberalism acknowledge two separate uses of the concept: the ideology of neoliberalism, and the neoliberal “arts of government”. The latter refers to ‘specific mechanisms of government, and recognizable modes of creating subjects’ (2009, p. 171), where the subjects in question are ‘responsibilized’ (ibid., p.172). Further clarification of this process is offered by Lupton in the 2013 edition of her book on the concept of “risk”. In it, she argues that risk-taking is viewed as evidence of irresponsibility and an inability to regulate oneself, whereas ‘risk-avoiding behaviour... becomes viewed as a moral enterprise relating to issues of self-control, self-knowledge, and self-improvement. It is a form of self-government’ (Lupton, 2013, p. 122). In a chapter on risk and governmentality, she claims that risk

is a regulatory strategy employed by neoliberal states to manage populations, one routinely directed at ‘the autonomous, self-regulated individual’ (ibid., p. 118).

Such studies reflect the work of Rose (2001) in his study of the politics of life itself, with particular focus on health. In this paper, Rose argues that individuals and families have faced increasing exhortations to monitor and manage their own health, and that ‘[e]very citizen must now be an active partner in the drive for health, accepting their responsibility for securing their own well-being’ (2001, p. 6). He situates this change at the nexus of biopolitics and what he calls “ethopolitics”: ‘the “medium” within which the self-government of the autonomous individual can be connected up with the imperatives of good government’ (p. 18), arguing that ‘biological identity becomes bound up with more general norms of enterprising, self-actualizing, responsible personhood’ (ibid.)

Due to the focus of this thesis, it is the understanding of neoliberalism as a transformation in governance (Larner, 2006) and a mechanism of government (Ferguson, 2009), which will be explored here. Several sexuality scholars have found understandings of “neoliberalism” such as those described above useful to their studies, drawing comparisons between neoliberal exhortations to responsibility and rationality, and “safe sex” discourses in public health and sex education campaigns and materials. For example, Adam (2005) uses neoliberal notions of free-market choice and responsibility to explore barebacking in HIV-positive men in Toronto. He discusses how his participants work within the ‘doctrine of individual responsibility’ (2005, p. 337) to engage in protected sex with HIV-negative men, but in barebacking with other HIV-positive men. Adam’s participants justified these latter practices through neoliberal discourses of ‘individualism, personal responsibility, consenting adults, and contractual interaction’ (ibid., p. 339) which construct barebacking as “responsible” within their context (ibid., p. 344), illustrating how

deeply these ideals permeate society, and impact upon the construction of sexual subjectivities. However, Adam also identifies the flaws in neoliberal ideologies, in that they obscure the complex concerns and realities of human interaction, and the vulnerabilities, dynamics and feelings which contextualise them. Similarly, Elliott (2014) used ethnographic work in US high schools to explore the mobilisation of neoliberal discourses of personal responsibility within sex education, and the construction of what she calls the 'responsible sexual agent'. She identifies a variety of discursive mechanisms through which personal responsibility is reiterated in the classroom, and which construct the responsible sexual citizen as a person who displays individual agency and free rational choice, and takes responsibility for their actions and their consequences, thus reducing the burden on the neoliberal state. She highlights the fact that, despite the 'responsible sexual agent' being 'ostensibly gender neutral' (2014, p. 216), gendered messages about personal responsibility 'peppered' the lessons – conveying the importance of responsibility to both masculinity, through disparaging comments about “playas”¹⁸, and femininity, through the persistent positioning of girls as sexual gatekeepers. Despite the teachers' focus on independence and autonomy, the lessons often highlighted how contingent these traits were, due to the complexities and intimacy of sexuality, the mutual dependence seen in human interaction, and the structural inequalities which impact on people's lives. Elliott therefore disrupts the usefulness of the concept of personal responsibility within school-based sexuality education.

Whilst this is in no way a political science study, the specific use of “neoliberalism” as a individualising, responsabilising mechanism of government, developed from the works of Rose (2001), Larner (2006), Ferguson (2009) and Lupton (2013), is productive in that it offers a lens for analysing themes of personal responsibility and

¹⁸ Elliot also critiqued the racist connotations of this term.

individualised morality within sexuality education.

Brazilian empirical studies

The studies discussed so far have largely focused on Anglophone contexts, due to the quantity of literature from the UK, the US, Australia and New Zealand. However, there have also been significant studies conducted by Brazilian academics, and this section will review this literature, focusing on empirical studies.

Several studies have been conducted in the fields of health and education, most of which are largely quantitative. For example, in a study based on questionnaires from 341 students from São Paulo public schools¹⁹, Pirotta et al. (2015) found that over one-third had received no sex education in school, whilst many others indicated a lack of interdisciplinarity. They conclude that sex education was generally experienced as an occasional activity, with a predominantly informative slant, restricted to science lessons and modelled on public health campaigns. It was not seen as a process, nor as driven by students' interests or needs, and ideas around tolerance, respect, and self-determination appeared to be absent. Similarly, Abtibol et al. (2015) focus on adolescents' knowledge of contraception, based on questionnaires from students aged 12–18 from public schools in São Luis, Maranhão, Northeast Brazil. They found that 100% were familiar with the male condom, 56% with the pill, 60% with the contraceptive injection²⁰ and just 20% with the female condom, and that most had started having sex aged 14–16. The authors conclude that young people's knowledge was insufficient, and that they required consistent sex education, which should come from the school, the family, and the health-post in collaboration (Abtibol, et al., 2015). Whilst Abtibol et al. (2015) and

¹⁹ In Brazil, "public" schools are State schools.

²⁰ The article does not specify how long-term these injections were, though monthly and quarterly injections are both common in Brazil.

Pirotta et al. (2015) highlight inadequate knowledge and a need for improved sex education, Gondim et al. (2015) tell a rather different story. Based on questionnaires from 90 public school students in Fortaleza, Ceará, Northeast Brazil, the authors determined that students had relatively good access to educational activities on sexual and reproductive health, with the school identified as the main source. Information was sought from a range of sources – in order of importance: friends, family, and teachers/health professionals – as well as television, the internet, books and magazines. Despite this access, only 42% of sexually active participants reported using any contraceptive method in the last six months. Oddly, the researchers conclude that this good access to sexuality information is not true for the majority of schools, however, they fail to describe the basis for this claim.

In short, there is a reasonable body of recent quantitative work on sex education in Brazil, with some studies focusing on the Northeast region. However, these studies largely focus on the coverage and efficacy of sex education programmes in terms of their outcomes, such as contraceptive knowledge and reported sexual behaviours. Though there is, of course, value in such evaluative studies, they do not tell us much about young people's *experiences* of sex education, nor how this education interacts with knowledges gained elsewhere, or with the pressures, constraints or desires experienced in their everyday lives. There are, however, examples where sex education is approached in more qualitative ways. For example, da Fonseca, Gomes and Teixeira (2010) explored teens' perceptions of sex education at a public school in Rio Grande do Sul, South Brazil. In interviews with 15 adolescents, the authors found that they supported sex education, especially given silences at home, and identified several improvements which could be made, including using the importance of friends to sexual learning as a basis for the development of a peer-educator programme. The authors conclude that sex education should focus on a

broader range of topics, and recognise young people as protagonists in their own sexuality. Similarly, Russo and Arreguy (2015) explore teacher and pupil perceptions of condom distribution in schools as part of the SPE. Based on a mixed-methods study in the Rio de Janeiro metropolitan area, the authors found that teachers felt that sexuality already formed a large part of daily school-life, in terms of students who are “different” and girls whose sexuality is “advanced”. However, when asked about sex education content, teachers mostly mentioned biological and prevention-related elements, and felt it should be taught by biology teachers or specially-trained individuals, suggesting a focus on knowledge-transfer. Many teachers felt the condom dispenser proposed in the SPE was a waste of money, and that providing easy access to condoms would encourage promiscuity in young people. Meanwhile, students were enthusiastic about the introduction of sex education, and did not perceive condom availability as encouraging sex. The majority supported the condom dispenser, given that the principal cause stated for condom non-use was not having one to hand. The authors conclude that the SPE guidelines are more in line with what young people want/expect out of sexuality education than with what teachers think is appropriate for the subject.

Although there is a significant body of work on sex education in Brazil, nearly all of this is based in cities, and a high proportion of studies are based in the South. Of those conducted in the Northeast, most focus on states such as Pernambuco and Ceará: only a handful of studies were found on Bahia, and only one of these looked at sex education in the interior of the state.²¹ This study, by Rodrigues et al. (2015), aimed to identify student knowledges about sexuality, especially those gained from the family and school. Based on questionnaires from 111 students from public

²¹ See map (p. 71).

schools in Juazeiro and Abaré²², this study suggests that young people possessed limited knowledge about contraceptive methods. Although most had received sex education at home and at school, friends were considered the most important source on the topic. The authors concluded that schools should make sex education a priority, and try to strengthen links with both the individual and the family, involving the whole community in the creation of a space for dialogue about sexuality.

Before moving on, it is important to briefly mention the body of Brazilian work specifically focused on sex education policy analysis.²³ For example, França (2006) reviews the PCNs and related critical literature to explore the development of sex education in Brazil. She highlights that the school has only recently been seen as a legitimate place for this education, and that sex education has largely been, and continues to be, the domain of biology teachers, and so predominantly biological in content. She concludes that this is reductionist and oversimplifying, and does not offer young people everything they need. In a review of the PCNs from a critical pedagogical perspective, da Silva (2015) analyses the inclusion of sex education in the Brazilian national curriculum, and argues that although its positioning within the PCNs was originally considered a significant advance, it has since become a focus for criticism. He concludes that, although the PCNs put forward a complex and interdisciplinary understanding of sexuality, that understanding is not supported practically, due to the prioritisation of the school's logistical needs ahead of any interdisciplinary approach. Finally, Sfair, Bittar and Lopes (2015) performed a policy analysis of twenty-five federal and São Paulo state sex education policy documents from 1990-2010, and found that 56% came from the Ministry of Health. They argue that this highlights the strong influence of the Department of Health in sex education

²² In the north of Bahia, near the border with Pernambuco, 7 and 9 hours from Lençóis respectively.

²³ See pp. 91-101.

interventions, even though these occur in the school sphere. In addition, 76% of references to sex education interventions within the policy documents were not referred to as “sex education” or “guidance”, but rather as “*prevenção*”²⁴, a fact which they argue demonstrates the priority of such interventions: not overall youth education regarding sexuality, but prevention of STDs/HIV/unwanted pregnancy.

This review of the Brazilian literature was necessary to ensure I did not miss native intellectual production that was important for informing the study. Although there is significant Anglo-centric work on the topic of sex education, the perspective of local researchers was vital in ensuring a well-informed study, and reflection on existing Brazilian studies was essential to better understand the research context. The majority of those Brazilian empirical studies identified were quantitative, rather than qualitative, and focused predominantly on assessing programme efficacy and evaluating outcomes. There is relatively little material qualitatively analysing the experiences and perspectives of young people regarding sex education. In terms of the locations of these studies, many are based in Southern Brazil, and nearly all focus on urban centres. Although there is significant work on the Northeast of the country, Bahia is relatively under-researched in comparison to other Northeast states, and there is a dearth of material on both interior, and semi-rural areas. This study of young women’s experiences of sex education in Lençóis addresses many of these gaps.

Role of “informal” sources

Finally, although the term “sex education” is usually understood to refer to formal school-based education, a considerable body of literature highlights how young people engage in processes of sexual learning using a variety of different sources.

²⁴ Literally prevention, usually used to refer to contraception (and particularly condom) information and use.

This broader conceptualisation of the topic was vital to this study, which incorporates analysis of not only school-based sex education, but also of sources such as family, peers, and the media.

Several studies have explored the role of these so-called “informal” sources of sex education. For example, Ballard and Morris (1998) explore the most influential sources of sexual learning for US university students; 203 students rated sources on their potential utility, and then ranked the five most useful sources in their own lives. The authors found that peers, parents and the media were the three most prominent sources, and that this was gendered – young women were more likely than young men to report parents as useful, and both identified mothers as more important than fathers (Ballard and Morris, 1998). Stone and Ingham (2002) reported similar findings in the UK context. From their quantitative survey of 16-18 year olds, they found that prior communication about contraception with a partner, intimate reasons for having sex, and positive parental portrayals of sex throughout one’s upbringing were key to improving odds of contraceptive use at first intercourse (Stone and Ingham, 2002). Their analysis emphasised the need for open discussion of sexuality issues at home, in order to reduce poor sexual health outcomes. Similarly, Secor-Turner et al. (2011) performed secondary analysis of the Minnesota Student Survey, which sampled 22,828 sexually-experienced young people, to explore the associations between “informal” sources of sex education and risk outcomes, and found that peers and siblings were the most frequently-cited sources of sexual information. Those citing parents as an important source had lower risk of multiple partners, and those reporting any “informal” sources had lower risk of unprotected sex at last intercourse. They concluded that ‘[t]o maximize effectiveness, formal sex education programs should engage informal sources of information about sex in adolescents’ everyday lives’ (ibid., p. 489).

A considerable body of research explores the use of these “informal” sources in greater depth. For example, Powell (2008) draws on questionnaires from 401 young people in Cardiff to explore how they use family and friends to obtain information and advice about sex and relationships, and what factors influence this engagement. “Formal” sources were used less than “informal” sources, and “passive” sources (e.g. reading) were used more than “active” ones (e.g. phoning a helpline). However, Powell used focus groups to go beyond frequency to nature, quality and perceived effectiveness, highlighting four main criteria: perceived legitimacy; honesty/openness/comfortableness; anonymity/privacy; and appropriateness. She highlighted that this “appropriateness” varied according to topic – for example, parents were seen as useful sources of advice for emotion-related topics, but less for sexual ones, whilst peers were seen as important for learning about puberty because they were “going through the same things”. She concludes that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for sex education: those developing interventions need to consider wide-ranging sex education influences.

Particularly salient in the literature is the role of the peer-group in sexual learning. For example, Kehily et al. (2002) follow a group of British 9 and 10 year old girls making and breaking friends as part of the (re)negotiation of femininities. The girls identified and sanctioned inappropriate behaviours, in what the authors call a ‘collective negotiation of a normative femininity’ (2002, p. 171), while group discussions about issues such as puberty and periods demonstrated the girl-group to be a ‘self-generated resource’ (ibid., p. 172), where the more-experienced pass on knowledges to the less-experienced. Similarly, in her study of peer-group attitudes and reactions to the C-Card²⁵ scheme in Northeast England, Cheetham (2014) found

²⁵ A card entitling the bearer to access condoms and sexual health advice in health and community settings.

that friends offered key support in obtaining the C-Card in the first instance, and accompanying a young person in attending health services, but that peer constructions of maturity, status and “cool” and the C-Card as a “membership club” could represent pressure on young people. On balance, she argues that the importance of peers to young people’s sexual learning could be harnessed usefully: ‘there is scope to explore the positive, protective elements of peer influence as a social resource to encourage sexually healthy behaviour... rather than assuming the effects of ‘peer pressure’ inevitably result in negative risk-taking activities’ (Cheetham, 2014, p. 125). The importance of peers to sexual learning is also mirrored in the Brazilian context. Borges, Nichiata and Schor (2006) combined structured interviews and surveys of 383 adolescents in São Paulo state to explore their sources of information about sex. Whilst 86% had received some form of school-based sex education, the vast majority of participants indicated their friends as the principal source of support and guidance on the subject (Borges, Nichiata and Schor, 2006). Similarly, Franch (2010) explores the relationship between female friendship and sexuality, based on research with young people in working-class neighbourhoods in Recife, the capital of Pernambuco. Older friends were seen as advice-givers on topics of relationships and sexuality, not about the “technical” side but about experiences: the focus was not on maintaining virginity but on securing commitment from a man. However, friendship group discussions about sexuality were not without risk: girls had to strike the right balance between sharing their experiences and risking their reputations through word spreading about their sexual lives.

Other scholars focus on the role of the media in young people’s sexual learning. For example, Bragg (2006) details the development of a media sex education resource, based on a survey of 800 young people across North and South-East England, and

interviews with young people and parents. She argues that part of the media's appeal is that it treats young people as knowing and mature, in contrast to other sex education sources which tend to patronise them. More recently, Albury (2013) considers how sexuality educators might productively use the media, rather than purely understanding media-based knowledge on sexuality as "risky". She questions the idea that "exposure" to media is the only sexual learning process which occurs, thus moving away from the lens of "sexualisation", and instead assuming that sexually-active or sexually-curious young people seek out broadcast, social and online media as an important part of their sexual learning.

Finally, some academic attention has been paid to the accumulation of experience as sexual learning. Allen (2001) explores what is often called the "gap" between the knowledge young people receive from sex education and what they do in practice in their sexual lives. From mixed-method research with young New Zealanders, Allen found that young people conceptualise sexual knowledge in two ways – "information" gained from sources such as sexuality education, and "knowledge" which comes from personal experience. When the two were compared, Allen detected 'a hierarchy in which these young people perceived knowledge acquired through practice as having greater status and being more useful' (2001, p. 113). In order to "close the gap", Allen suggests including more of the types of information young people desire into sexuality education. This would bring sexuality education closer to the lived experience of young people, making it more useful to their lives.

From this brief review of the literature on "informal" sources, it seems that young people privilege these sources within their sexual learning processes. Therefore, it was important to consider the place of peers, family, the media, and experience in young *lençoenses*' sexual learning, and how these sources might interact with, or even surpass, the school as sources of sex education. However, these "informal"

sex education sources were not without their problems: for example, Stone, Ingham and Gibbins' 2013 work with parents of children aged 3–7 in the UK, describes intense parental worry about dealing with sexuality-related questions from their children and highlighted multiple barriers to communication – concerns over the preservation of childhood “innocence”, the need to be “age-appropriate”, personal discomfort, and the fear of being judged by other adults (Stone, Ingham and Gibbins, 2013). Although Stone, Ingham and Gibbins' study focuses on a much younger age group, similar barriers were foreseen within this study also.²⁶

Local Sexual Culture

The introduction to this chapter situated both femininity and heterosexuality as complex categories, affected greatly by cultural context. It was important, therefore, to examine the literature on local sexual culture, and consider the potential impact for this study.

The concept of ‘cultural grammar’ (Parker, 1999) has been particularly helpful in exploring this issue. Parker (1999) highlights a lack of focus on the ‘culturally constituted practices that affect the spread of HIV/AIDS’ (p. 253), and attempts to rectify this by exploring the social and cultural constructions of sexuality in Brazil, drawing on existing long-term ethnographic research, including his own. He coins the phrase ‘cultural grammar’ to describe ‘the sometimes contradictory cultural patterns – the ideological constructs and the value systems – that work to shape the sexual universe in contemporary Brazil... the underlying, and often unconscious, yet very much culturally constructed, rules that organize sexual life’ (ibid., p. 255).

Parker then relates ‘cultural grammar’ to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and suggests how

²⁶ There were clear differences: for instance, parents in Stone, Ingham and Gibbins' study were not worried about their children engaging in sexual activity, a key concern reported by participants in this study.

one impacts the other, concluding that a solution will only be reached if the epidemic is considered in a sociocultural as well as a biomedical way.

Parker's work is important to this study because it provides a lens through which to examine assumptions about Brazilian sexuality, and the impact of those assumptions on everyday life. Much is taken-for-granted about the 'cultural grammar' of Brazilian sexuality, given the depictions of the country in the media and in tourism materials, discussed later in this chapter. Its positioning as the country of beaches, bikinis and samba comes with associated ideological baggage about sexuality: 'Brazilians are generally considered to be very uninhibited, "hot", sultry, and always up for anything in the bedroom. It's as though the country were some kind of sexual paradise' (Heilborn, 2006, p. 49, my translation). These common-sense understandings produce tensions between hypersexuality and respectability, chastity and passivity, discussed in-depth later in this chapter. Certainly, in Lençóis, it was far from easy to determine the limits of acceptability and desirability, perhaps because 'northeastern Brazilian society is a combination of tolerance for sexual and sensual expression and a traditional patriarchy in which the double standard remains strong' (Willson, 1997, pp. 29-30). This means that young women must often walk a tightrope between the two, portraying themselves as simultaneously chaste and sexually liberated (Rodriguez, Glas and Castro, 2008); a tightrope that it was difficult for women in Lençóis to negotiate.

However, tensions between hypersexuality and chastity are not the only aspects of Brazilian 'cultural grammar': according to Parker (1999), the conceptualisation of sexuality as "private" or "public" is also part of the 'cultural grammar' of a place. He argues that the idea that "between four walls, anything can happen" is common to Brazil's 'cultural grammar' (ibid.). Therefore, it was important to explore this concept in greater detail.

In Brazil, and elsewhere, public/private have traditionally been viewed as two separate, and highly gendered, spheres of life, although this divide has been increasingly problematised (e.g. Plummer, 2003), not least by feminists, through the idea that “the personal is political”. In his influential anthropological analysis of social conditions in Brazil, DaMatta (1997 [1985]) developed a formulation of Brazilian social life which contrasted the feminised, domestic “private” sphere, represented by the *casa* (house/home), with the masculinised “public” sphere of political and social life, represented by the *rua* (street). He claimed that these two spheres had very distinct activities and world views associated with them, with expressions of sexuality firmly positioned in the domain of “the home”. DaMatta’s work has proven influential for those attempting to conceptualise the public/private in Brazilian society (e.g. Robben, 1989; Beattie, 1996; Gregg, 2000); indeed ‘DaMatta’s opposition between the street and the home is often considered to be a key to understanding the social organization of Brazilians’ (Gough and Franch, 2005, p. 151). This division is commonly applied in sexuality studies; specifically those sexual behaviours and practices associated with the public and private spheres. For example, in her 2000 study on cervical cancer in Recife, Gregg employed DaMatta’s division: ‘The house is the domain of family and conjugal relations where the wife/mother resides, whereas the “street” represents danger and freedom and is the domain of men and of extraconjugal sexual relations’ (2000, p. 56). Sexuality is positioned as something private which becomes unacceptable when it escapes the confines of the house and enters the public world.

The understanding of sexuality as inherently private, as represented in DaMatta (1997 [1985]) and subsequent works, has implications for law, policy, public health and education. It has long been contested how far sexuality falls under the remit of State action and/or intervention, as Carabine (2004a) highlights in her work on the

relationship between sexuality and social policy in the UK, wherein she argues that 'the notion of [sexuality] as private is commonplace and influential' (2004a, p. 19). The idea that people can do as they please in the privacy of their own home, and the consequent rejection of State intervention, means that there is often little public support for State activity in the arena of sexuality, as suggested, for example, by intense parental opposition to school-based sex education. According to Carabine (2004b), however, sexuality has never been truly private: it is clearly present in law, policy and welfare, in schools, healthcare facilities, prisons and other institutions. Whilst for those demonstrating socially "acceptable", unproblematic sexualities – typically heterosexual, married, white, middle-class couples – sexuality is "permitted" to be kept private and personal; others considered outside "the norm" find their sexualities subject to public scrutiny and sanction, legislation, intervention, and even punitive measures (Carabine, 2004b): one's "right to privacy" depends very much on *who* one is. Young people's sexualities, for example, are policed and regulated through sex education, age of consent laws, and policy governing access to contraception and abortion, and teenage parents are especially scrutinised: their sexualities sit firmly in the arena of the "public". When it comes to sexuality then, any rigid construction of the public/private divide ceases to be useful: 'our personal lives can be said to straddle the public/private divide, being simultaneously of private and public concern' (Carabine, 2004b, p. 166).

Rather than understand "public" and "private" as two separate spheres, then, it would perhaps be better to think of a blurred boundary: and one which is only ever discursively constructed. What is currently deemed appropriate, acceptable, and protected within a person's "privacy" could be reconceptualised and deemed public, and thus made subject to scrutiny and sanction, meaning that the remit of the State in the sexuality of the individual, and the population as a whole, is negotiable and

contingent. One way in which this complexity has been conceptualised is through Plummer's 'sociology of intimacy' (2003); a way of examining 'how our most intimate decisions are shaped by (and in turn shape) our most public institutions: how the public may become more personal and the personal become more public' (2003, p. x), an approach which helps to problematise the connection between "public" and "private".

Another useful way in which "public" and "private" have been conceptualised is in Walby's 1990 examination of the move from 'private patriarchy' to 'public patriarchy'. In her influential book analysing patriarchy, Walby argues that whereas in the past, patriarchy was 'based upon the household, with a patriarch controlling women individually and directly' (1990a, p. 178), society has moved towards a public patriarchy model, in which 'institutions conventionally regarded as part of the public domain are central to the maintenance of patriarchy' (ibid.). This means that, although families are still considered responsible for monitoring and policing young women's behaviour, there are ever-more mechanisms for doing this within the public sphere instead/also, including State mechanisms such as public health policy or sex education curricula.²⁷ With this change in the form of patriarchy, according to a 1990 article in which Walby traces the degrees and forms of patriarchy throughout recent British history, 'we see the development of a new strategy of inclusion, but new forms of control... as some sites of patriarchy lose their salience... others come to the fore' (1990b, p. 101): whilst parents might have lost some of their ability to control their daughters' sexuality through demands for chastity, sexuality continues to be policed and regulated through the heteronormativity of school-based sex education lessons, for example. Because this process has occurred alongside gains in women's rights,

²⁷ It would be interesting to explore how the idea of public patriarchy conflicts with the "weakening" of the State in Latin America due to neoliberal reform, however, this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

access to the public sphere, and so forth, this change has seen significant acceptance, and may be viewed as less insidious than family control.

This literature has helped conceptualise the complex relationship between “public” and “private”. Despite the persistence of traditional formulations of this divide within the Brazilian social imaginary, there is far more interplay between the two spheres than such a formulation would suggest. Therefore, the role of the State, the family, and wider society in the exercise of an individual’s sexuality is a complex and contested issue, and one to which the study of sex education can add a useful lens.

Brazilian youth sexualities

Whilst looking at the general ‘cultural grammar’ (Parker, 1999) of a place is important, it is pertinent to remember that young people’s sexual culture can differ wildly from that of older generations. With this in mind, it was useful to explore the literature on the *youth* sexual culture in Brazil.

One of the most influential bodies of Brazilian scholarship on youth sexuality is a series of articles based on data from GRAVAD - Adolescent Pregnancy: A Multicentre Study on Young People, Sexuality and Reproduction in Brazil – a collaboration between three prestigious Brazilian universities, conducted in 2002. This study collected data from 4,634 individuals aged 18-24, in the cities of Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul), Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador (Bahia), using face-to-face survey interviews. The research focused on areas of intense public debate, such as first sexual encounter, HIV/AIDS, low rates of contraceptive usage, and other aspects of sexual trajectory.

One of the most pertinent articles emerging from GRAVAD is Heilborn and Cabral’s (2011), which explores the construction of teenage pregnancy as a “problem”, using GRAVAD data combined with semi-structured interviews. Whilst GRAVAD indicated

a well-informed youth with all the necessary information to practise “safe sex”, Heilborn and Cabral highlight the decline in contraceptive use of young people in steady couples to indicate that possessing adequate information about contraception does not necessarily ensure its use – intervening factors include difficulties accessing contraception, challenges negotiating condom use with older or more experienced male partners, amongst others (Heilborn and Cabral, 2011). This study was also useful in that it found that ‘conversations about sexuality continue to be taboo in the family; contraception is not openly discussed in school, and sexual education is a highly controversial theme in Brazilian society’ (ibid., p. 2), which highlights a continued need for sex education research.

GRAVAD is useful for understanding Brazilian youth sexual culture in that the data is readily-available, having formed the basis of several articles which help to create a picture of trends in Brazil. The fact that one of the study locations was Salvador means the data offered useful context to this study, also based in Bahia. However, GRAVAD is centred in cities, and therefore does not contribute to illuminating sexual cultures in semi-rural, small-town locations. In addition, the GRAVAD study is now almost fifteen years old. Whilst this does not invalidate its findings, much has changed in Brazil since 2002, including significant social reform and a much stronger focus on contraceptive and sex education provision, as part of the SPE, making necessary more up-to-date studies to complement and advance the GRAVAD findings. Finally, in order to capture the richness and variety of young people’s sexual experience, a more intensely qualitative element is required, which several of the GRAVAD scholars have gone on to incorporate. This study helps contribute to the body of work coming out of GRAVAD, albeit in a small way.

Ficar

GRAVAD is important to this study due to its focus on youth sexual culture, something foregrounded in this study also. A vital element in this culture is the variety of relationship modalities experienced by young people, principally *o ficar*.

Several Brazilian scholars have explored how young people adapt romantic, affective and sexual relationships within their sexual culture, examining the differences between *casar* (to marry), *namorar* (to have a relationship with), and *ficar* (explained below). For example, Justo (2005) explores the popularity of *ficar*, characterised by its fleeting and uncommitted nature, arguing that it reflects other social and relational realities, such as the short-term nature of much employment and the decreasing durability of family ties, as well as societal obsession with consumption, innovation and change. Justo highlights the discrepancy between the meaning of *ficar*, which connotes permanence and fixity, and its use by teenagers to mean just the opposite – a temporary coming-together, involving kissing, hugging and caressing and potentially intercourse, but with no commitment, consequences or future development. He indicates the social acceptability of *ficar*, and the vastly-decreased social stigma for young women engaging in these practices, however, he acknowledges that they must still exercise caution: ‘there exists a tone of recrimination with relation to those who [practise *ficar*] frequently, especially if their version of “ficar” includes sexual relations... those girls end up being seen as “sluts”, “not-serious” and “untrustworthy” (Justo, 2005, p. 74, my translation). Similarly, de Jesus (2005) also links changes in relationship modalities to social changes, claiming that wider insecurities in adolescents’ lives breed insecurity when choosing a relationship type. Based on questionnaires from 38 teenagers in Sergipe, Northeast Brazil, de Jesus found that their preferred relationship type was *ficar*, but with a view

to later become *namoro*²⁸, suggesting that his participants welcomed the development of something more serious and committed. de Jesus claims that the practice of *ficar* generally does not go beyond kisses and touches, taking as his definition a relationship type without commitment, but also without intercourse.

Some scholars have focused on the gendering of these relationship types. For example, Scott, Quadros and Longhi (2002) used focus groups to highlight young men's and young women's perspectives on reproductive health issues. The authors found that the young men felt asking a girl to *namorar* would be considered old-fashioned, however, the young women complained that boys no longer dared ask for *namoro*, or were more interested in a *ficante*²⁹. The practice of *ficar* was considered especially risky for young women: whilst there was a chance it could lead to a more committed relationship, it could also 'lead to the girl's vulnerability within the community, because if she gets with one guy and then another, she's going to get a reputation and a bad image and no other boy is going to want to date her' (Scott, Quadros and Longhi, 2002, p. 219, my translation). In these discussions, girls were easily and quickly divided into girls who were good for a relationship, and those who were only good for *ficar*.

These studies highlight the mutability of young people's relationship modalities, and of their overall sexual culture. Given these complexities, it is important to gain an understanding of the relationship context in which young people are engaging in sexual activity, and to acknowledge that young people may well have different educational and contraceptive needs with a *ficante* than with a *namorado*³⁰, in order to make sex education as relevant as possible.

²⁸ A relationship suggesting commitment and strength of feeling.

²⁹ Someone with whom you practise *ficar*.

³⁰ Boyfriend/Girlfriend.

“The street”

Another important element of the local youth sexual culture is the context in which these relationships occur. Many occur in the street, due to the pressures felt in bringing a partner home to meet one's parents, especially for young women, and because the street is a key site of sociability for young people. Therefore, it is important to explore existing literature on this sociocultural space.

As discussed earlier regarding DaMatta's socio-spatial formulation (1997 [1985]), the street has been traditionally understood as a marker of the “public” and, as a result, has commonly been disparaged and almost feared (Kuznesof, 2005). However, young people's relationship with the street is more complex than this simplistic division might suggest. In fieldwork with 40 low and middle-income youths in Recife, Gough and Franch (2005) explore their experiences and perceptions of the street, and the class and gender dynamics which permeate these. They found that the lower-income youths spent the majority of their free time in the street: the young men played there as children, and continue to hang out there, whilst young women used the street in a similar way until puberty, when they cease hanging out in the street proper, instead spending time in the space in front of their houses, chatting with friends passing by. The authors also identified a clear gendering to spaces such as bars and street corners, which were exclusively male. However, middle-class youth did not use the street in the same way, preferring to hang out at home, in friends' homes, and in shopping centres. Youth use of the street is also subject to regulation – by parents and guardians, neighbours, peers, the church and the police. This regulation was stronger for girls than for boys: ‘Girls who spend a lot of time in the street are called ‘loose girls’ (*meninas soltas*) and are considered to not really be under their parents' control’ (2005, p. 161). Neighbourhood gossip was a major form of regulation for young women, and many preferred to remain at home rather than

risk being in the street and becoming the subject of gossip. This indicates a level of risk associated with participation in street youth culture.

Other studies have also highlighted the particular risk such participation poses for women: women who spend time in the dangerous, masculine, public space of the street, are contrasted with “respectable” women who stay at home. Assumptions are made about their sexual morality (Lewis and Pile, 1996, p. 34), and they are seen as “sluts” or “tramps” as opposed to “family girls” (Miranda-Ribeiro and Potter, 2010, p. 228, my translation). The street is associated with “more adventurous” sexual practices, such as anal sex, as seen in Goldstein’s 1993 work in São Paulo (cited in Gupta and Weiss, 1993, p. 405). With such assumptions informing understandings, “the street” becomes shorthand for all sorts of “improper” behaviours: ‘Women and men in the *favela*³¹ used “of the house” and “of the street” as verbal shortcuts to describe persons and behaviors (sic) that were considered, respectively, to be either proper or outside the bounds of propriety’ (Gregg, 2000, p. 57). Through these complex cultural associations, “the street” is constructed in the Brazilian imaginary as a dirty, risky place, inhabited by “sluts” and “tramps”; a place where inappropriate sexual conduct occurs. For example, Gregg (2000) reports hearing this division from many of her participants, who referred to cervical cancer as an STD that men bring home from sleeping with other women in the street. Here, the street is assumed to be a dirty and dangerous place, compared with the cleanliness and fidelity of the home: ‘women suffer from the sexual activities of men in the street who “deposit their *sujeira* (dirtiness)” in the woman at home’ (2000, p. 56).

According to this literature, then, the street is an important, but classed, gendered, and sexualised space for young people’s sociability, thus of great potential relevance

³¹ Informal urban settlement, similar to the English language “slum” or “shantytown”.

to their sexual learning.

Rural sexualities

As discussed throughout, there is very little work on Brazilian youth sexual culture outside urban centres. Therefore, it was important to review the existing literature on rural sexualities, to help in analysing this study's semi-rural context. Much of this work has been conducted by geographers, and explores how adding a spatial element exposes many assumptions about sexuality. For example, Hubbard (2008) examines how heteronormativity is reproduced spatially, and argues that rural areas are commonly conceptualised as sexually stable and heteronormative, in contrast to the experimentation of the city (2008, p. 652). He suggests that there is an assumed link between rurality and conventional sexual identities, which often coincides with ideas of rural sexualities as "natural", "timeless" and how things ought to be (ibid.). Similarly, Little (2003) explores the relationship between sexual identity and the social construction of rurality in the UK and New Zealand, specifically the embodiment of heterosexuality and rural masculinities and femininities. She argues that rurality often incorporates 'highly traditional attitudes and expectations about the notions of masculinity and femininity' (2003, p. 401) and identified a 'broader conservatism in relation to sexuality' (ibid., p. 413) which participants often attributed to the remoteness and isolation of where they lived. Additionally, in a reflection on the field of rural sexualities based on recent projects in Peru, Mannarelli (2008) highlights rural sexual culture as relatively under-researched, with studies tending to focus on urban areas. She points out that rural societies tend to be more hierarchical, which impacts upon how sexuality is regulated: in rural communities the family unit and kin tend to have greater control in this regulation, over and above external, political actors. She also compares the great degree of control over female sexuality with the low-level control of male sexuality. However, Mannarelli identified

'an intense conflict between the survival of conservative patterns of sexual behaviour, and more individual explorations of sexuality – love and sex, recreational sex, curiosity' (2008, p. 87, my translation) within rural Peruvian communities, and positions girls' education as extremely important in this process. In her chapter in the same book, Oliart (2008) highlights the fact that rural does not necessarily mean rigid and unchanging. Drawing on her work with young people in a rural Peruvian community, Oliart argues that 'conventional ways of being a man and being a woman... used to be identifiable as typical and distinct, but are now in question and in transformation' (2008, p. 45, my translation). She challenges the compartmentalised way in which youth sexuality, and particularly rural youth sexuality, has been studied, and encourages sexuality scholars to examine the, often-accelerated, changes ongoing within youth sexual culture.

Finally, Rebhun (2004) explores the complexity of sexual morality in Brazil: a country presumed to be sexually liberated and liberal, but with conservative tendencies, especially in rural areas and in the Northeast. Although not entirely a rural study, Rebhun draws parallels between rural and northeastern attitudes. During fieldwork in Pernambuco, Rebhun found that many in her fieldsite still 'tended to judge women's status on the basis of rumors (sic) about sexual propriety and condoned male violence in response to presumed female sexual misconduct' (2004, p. 184). She concluded that gender relations in her fieldsite reflected a double standard where men had considerable sexual liberty, whilst women faced division into two categories "legitimate and respectable" or "illegitimate and nonrespectable". Rebhun determined that stigma, shame and reputation were important concepts: acquiring a *fama*, a bad reputation, was worrying to many of the women in her study, and they described a host of negative consequences resulting from such reputations. She also found that darker skin colour placed a woman at greater risk of a damaged

reputation – whether or not she had defied sexual convention.³² This final observation highlights the consequences of the intersection of identities: rurality does not function in isolation, rather its implications for sexuality are racialised, gendered, and classed, amongst other factors.

Reviewing this body of work has exposed several assumptions regarding the link between rurality and sexuality, which must be considered when working in a semi-rural environment. These include assumptions of traditional approaches to masculine and feminine roles, intense heteronormativity, conservatism, family control, and structures of shame, honour and respectability. The relative lack of research on (semi-)rural sexualities in the Brazilian context makes this research a useful addition to the field.

Gender, sexuality and sexual practices

In the introduction to this chapter, femininity and heterosexuality were positioned as complex, fragmented, culturally and historically contingent, and interrelated. This section explores the literature which better illuminates how gendered norms and dynamics impact upon heterosexual relationships and practices, in the Northeast Brazilian context.

The interrelationship between gender, sexuality and sexual practices has frequently been studied in Anglophone contexts. For example, Holland et al. (1998) explore power within conventional heterosexual relationships, based on research conducted in Manchester and London on the social aspects of AIDS in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They dispute the idea that adolescent sexual culture is divided into two separate spheres – masculinity and femininity – instead arguing that there is collusion in the reproduction of male dominance (Holland, et al., 1998). They claim

³² This ties in to discussion of “race” and sexuality, both later in this chapter (pp. 55-56) and in Chapter Eight.

that ‘femininity is constructed from within heterosexuality and on male territory, yet this territory can only exist with female consent and collusion’ (ibid., p. 11) and that young women have a “male-in-the-head”, acting as constant surveillance as to their compliance with feminine and heterosexual norms. In a more recent article, based on two US studies of young people’s sexual and relationship behaviours, Tolman, Davis and Bowman (2015) argue that hegemonic masculinity and femininity ideologies influence both young men and young women in their heterosexual relationships. Whereas Holland et al. (1998) identified no corresponding “female-in-the-head” for young men, Tolman, Davis and Bowman (2015) suggest that whilst girls often managed their feminine identities in tandem with, or subjugated to masculinity ideologies, both masculinity and femininity ideologies contributed significantly for boys’ beliefs about relationships and sexuality.

However, there is also an interesting body of work on the specificities of heterosexual femininities in the Brazilian context, works which position heterosexual practices and relationships, as well as heterosexual institutions such as motherhood, as central to femininity. Traditionally, the concept of *marianismo* has been invoked to describe Latin American heterosexual femininity. The term was developed by Stevens (1973a), in response to what she considered an un-nuanced understanding of Latin American gender relations by North American feminists. Stevens conceptualised *marianismo* as the counterpoint to the more widely-accepted *machismo*³³, and characterised by passivity, self-sacrifice, and dependence; traits of the Virgin Mary. Stevens’ concept has been heavily critiqued, for example by Navarro (2002), who describes it as ‘an a-historical, essentialist, anachronistic, sexist, and orientalist fabrication’ (p. 270), and criticises Stevens’ attempts to explain Central and Latin American femininity without first-hand research or thought to historical, cultural and

³³ A concept of extreme masculinity, associated with Spanish/Portuguese/Latino cultures.

contextual variations. Navarro presents ethnographic and historical research to counter this approach, and also evidences Latin American women's strength through their involvement in political movements throughout the region's history, thus challenging the female powerlessness described by Stevens.

Within *marianismo*, motherhood is seen as inherent to what it means to be a woman. Several scholars have explored how the veneration of motherhood has given women access to political power and citizenship (e.g. Bejarano, 2002; Franceschet, Piscopo and Thomas, 2015), whilst others have highlighted how traditional understandings of motherhood have been co-opted within anti-poverty programmes (e.g. Molyneux, 2006). The importance of motherhood to feminine identity has been raised repeatedly by scholars of the region. For example, in an ethnographic study with female sex workers in San José, Costa Rica, Rivers-Moore (2010) found that her participants often highlighted their ability to provide materially for their children, but also to spend quality time with them instead of spending all their time in low-paid service work: appealing to dominant gender ideologies allowed them to reduce the stigma associated with their profession (Rivers-Moore, 2010). However, the easy association between mothering and femininity has been called into question, especially by Scheper-Hughes' influential 1992 ethnography in Pernambuco, Northeast Brazil, in which she questions the universality of "mother love", suggesting that it is a luxury unaffordable for women who cannot guarantee that their children will survive the ravages of poverty (Scheper-Hughes, 1992). This flies in the face of conventional understandings of Brazilian heterosexual femininity based on self-sacrificing, all-suffering motherhood. This body of literature is interesting because, aside from Scheper-Hughes' (1992) work, it positions motherhood as central to Latin American, and Brazilian, heterosexual femininities. Based on these works, one would expect "motherhood" to emerge as a key theme within participant narratives in

this study. This was not, in fact, the case, suggesting the young women in my fieldsite have other motivations driving their relationships, sexual encounters, and behaviours³⁴, which raises interesting questions about the relationship between motherhood and femininity in the *lençoense* context.

Examinations of the literature on *marianismo* and motherhood show the traditional positioning of Latin American women vis-à-vis their gender and sexuality, and presents a starting-point from which to think through heterosexual femininities in the *lençoense* context. However, as Navarro (2002) highlights, the hugely varied Latin American contexts require greater nuance: other explorations of heterosexual femininity are needed. Juxtaposed with the *marianista* idea of Brazilian heterosexual femininity as dependent on chastity, passivity, self-sacrifice and motherhood, is the popular idea of Brazilian women as hyper(hetero)sexual, sensual, and available (Selister Gomes, 2007; Adelman and Ruggi, 2008; Pravaz, 2012), as alluded to earlier.

In their examination of representations of Brazil within colonial writing and tourist materials, and in the accounts of male American tourists, Bandyopadhyay and Nascimento (2010) describe how Brazil has been constructed as a “sexual playground” for tourists (see also Sacramento and Ribeiro, 2013), with the figure of the *mulata* at the heart of this construction. The *mulata*, product of sexual relations between Portuguese colonialists and black female slaves, is seen as the archetypal Brazilian heterosexual female – racially mixed and ‘defined by sex, by sensuality and by unrestrained desire’ (Moutinho, 2004, p. 345, my translation). Such understandings of the *mulata* represent persistent racist stereotypes of black and Afro-Brazilian women as hypersexual, which originated in Gilberto Freyre’s 1933

³⁴ See Chapter Eight.

exploration of racial mixture in Brazil, which he attributed to the corrupting force of black female slaves' sexuality (cited in Rezende and Lima, 2004). However, the *mulata* has also come to represent all Brazilian women, through touristic constructions of the country, resulting in the pervasive myth of the hyper(hetero)sexuality of *as brasileiras*³⁵.

In her work on sex tourism in Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, Northeast Brazil, Carrier-Moisan (2015) explores how women working in the industry mobilise their expected hypersexuality but also demonstrate their respectability to make themselves seem loveable, worthy and marriageable. This idea of a balancing act between hypersexuality and traditional markers of femininity such as respectability, chastity and passivity has been the subject of some scholarship. In semi-structured interviews with young women in Paraná, South Brazil, Neiverth and Alves (2003) found that, whilst considerable social change had occurred, including increased sexual liberty for women, vestiges of old approaches remained, leaving young women in a problematic position: they must be sensual and attractive, but must resist male advances. More recently, Turner (2014) explored the tightrope between "vulgarity" and chastity walked by middle-class white Brazilian women, who wanted an active, pleasurable sexuality but wished to avoid being branded "vulgar". Turner positions this tightrope as key to femininity: although the women in his study no longer defined their heterosexual femininity by the values of *marianismo*, instead appropriating aspects of what would traditionally be seen as "male" sexuality, they were concerned about being seen as "putas" (whores) if they went too far in this (ibid., p. 88). From ethnographic fieldwork and interviews in Florianópolis, South Brazil, Turner identifies the tenuousness of this tightrope, highlighting how ill-defined the line is between acceptable, modern sexual behaviour, and the kind of behaviour

³⁵ Brazilian women.

that gives Brazilian women 'a bad name' (ibid., p. 85). Turner also comments on the connection between "race" and sexuality, discussed above, describing how the body of the *mulata* is the 'most overly-inscribed with sex' (ibid., p. 83), and how she came to represent all Brazilian heterosexual femininity. He discusses how the women in his study sought to distance themselves from an idea of "vulgar" Brazilian sexuality which was so closely tied to these racialised ideas, claiming instead "modern" and "progressive" sexualities for themselves as white, middle-class women. Finally, Heilborn (2006) tracks the origins of the 'myth of Brazilian sexuality' (p. 43, my translation) as open, uninhibited, and "hot" (ibid., p. 44), analysing it from a historical perspective as rooted in the original colonial encounter. She compares this with young people's sexual behaviours based on data from GRAVAD, and argues that it is vital to consider not just the imaginary of sexuality in Brazil but also the concrete conditions, both material and symbolic, of exercising sexuality in the country. She concludes that what young Brazilians experience is 'far from the image of a sexually uninhibited country' (ibid., p. 56, my translation).

This literature highlights the fragile nature of Brazilian heterosexual femininity, identifying the different characteristics young women must simultaneously embody and reject. It was important to be conscious of this tightrope, and the often contradictory pressures faced by young women within this research.

Heterosexual femininities and sexual practices

The above works hint at how the hypersexuality myth can be damaging for Brazilian women, and resonate with other works examining the impact of the norms of heterosexual femininity on sexual practices. For example, as part of the Women, Risk and AIDS Project (WRAP), Holland et al. (1994) interviewed 150 young women aged 16–21 in London and Manchester about their sexual encounters. They found that, although women could negotiate their sexual encounters, this was constrained

by the acceptable model of passive femininity, an unsafe strategy that makes women responsible for men's sexuality but not in control of it, has no concept of women's bodily autonomy or desire, and makes it hard for women to practise "safe sex" (Holland, et al., 1994). Similarly, Impett, Schooler and Tolman (2006) found that the pressure faced by young US women to behave in "feminine" ways is damaging to the construction of a healthy adult sexuality and sexual self-efficacy. Based on questionnaires from 116 twelfth-grade girls, the authors found that girls who had internalised the ideology of femininity, including ideas that they should be "seen" and "not heard", had 'a diminished ability to act on their own desires in sexual relationships' (2006, p. 140) and were therefore less likely to engage in wanted, protected sex.

These works suggest that compliance with norms of heterosexual femininity can represent a risk to young women, in that it makes the negotiation of safe, wanted sex more difficult. This is also seen in literature in the Brazilian context, which highlights how context-specific norms of heterosexual femininity (and masculinity) impact significantly on young women in terms of their subjectivity, relationships, expressions of sexuality, and sexual health; with particular reference to "safer sex" negotiations. For example, based on questionnaires and focus groups with high school students in Salvador, Levinson, Sadigursky and Erchak (2004) argue that there is a strong cultural tendency for young men to see men as sexual conquerors/adventurers, which has a direct effect on sexual health behaviours. A large proportion of young male participants reported that they often do not use condoms during *ficar*, if they feel it will get in the way of sex. Several also indicated that Brazilian women do not want direct conversation about condom use, rather they expect the man to be quick and decisive, whilst many also felt they were expected to pressure girls for sex. These cultural factors seemed to produce a fear of using and discussing condoms: 'It

seemed as if they felt that their manhood was being questioned and their chances of getting the sex they wanted put in jeopardy' (2004, p. 216). The authors also identify in the young women in their study a 'clear sense of powerlessness' (ibid., p. 218) regarding the sexual encounter, claiming that they seemed worried about asking for condom use, for fear of upsetting, angering or disheartening their partner, which could have negative consequences for the relationship. In both cases, traditional gender norms contributed to difficulties negotiating condom use.

More recently, Heilborn and Cabral (2013) explore young people's sexual practices and management of sexual desire, based on GRAVAD data. They found that the acceptability of certain, previously stigmatised, practices has increased – or at least discussion and reporting had increased – suggesting changes to sexual morality. However, gender inequalities were detected throughout the study, suggesting that more "modern" approaches do not automatically lead to more equal gender relations. According to the authors, 'Brazilian social construction of the female gender binds together sex and affection so as to configure a relational perspective of sexuality' (2013, p. 35), whilst male sexuality is configured as instrumental and based on number of partners and earliness of debut. However, the authors detected some signs of more relational male attitudes to sex, with men as likely as women to say that sex represented a display of love or affection (2013, p. 40). Even more tellingly, women were as likely as men to say that sex represents a source of pleasure or personal satisfaction (ibid.). Overall, Heilborn and Cabral concluded that 'a differentiated modernization of sexual values is underway' (2013, p. 42), with highly-educated women showing extremely flexible attitudes regarding sexuality, whilst their male peers showed only weak commitment to gender equality. However, they also note the persistence of traditional attitudes to gender overall.

Although these studies are useful in contributing to the wider picture of the impact of

norms of heterosexual femininity and masculinity on Brazilian youth sexual practices and sexual health, and although some are focused on the Northeast, the overwhelming focus on urban areas means the existing literature offers little regarding semi-rural experiences. The study which came closest was Sampaio et al.'s 2010 study in the São Francisco river valley, in which the authors explore understandings of gender and sexuality in an area they describe as marked by *machista* values. The study is based on focus groups with adolescents, interviews with healthcare professionals, and participant observation in health-posts in Juazeiro, in the northern interior of Bahia, and Petrolina, in the southern interior of Pernambuco. The authors found that young men were felt to have more freedom to express their sexuality and to talk about sex than did women, and that participants often felt traditional gender roles were encouraged by their parents. They also indicate that *machista* values were more present in the young women's accounts than in young men's. The young women were more insistent on the importance of virginity, preserving one's reputation, not having sex without feelings, and sex being for the purposes of reproduction: 'they were the ones who most repressed their own sexuality, following rules imposed by society, which were actually questioned by the boys' (Sampaio et al., 2010, p. 183, my translation). This suggests the presence of the kind of "male-in-the-head" described in Holland et al. (1998).

These studies show that sexual behaviours are heavily structured by heterosexual feminine and masculine norms, which must be taken into account during any study of sex education. Not only are young women affected by norms of heterosexual femininity, they must also negotiate how norms of heterosexual masculinity in their context constrain and affect their heterosexual relationships and encounters. Many of these authors argue that, without addressing these norms, even the most comprehensive sex education is unlikely to see real changes in sexual and

reproductive health outcomes (e.g. Levinson, Sadigursky and Erchak, 2004; Sampaio et al., 2010).

The State

Finally, this section explores literature on the State which has influenced its conceptualisation within this study. Defining the State has been notoriously difficult, as the State 'seems to be nowhere. When we look for it, it melts away' (Ferme, 2004, p. 137). This is, perhaps, especially true if one attempts to understand the State as some form of unified entity, with which individuals can come into contact, comply, or resist. Cooper (1995) has been especially productive in destabilizing such a view, setting out a framework for how the State and sexuality co-relate, which sees the State 'as irreducible to a single core, conceptualizing it instead as a historically contingent articulation of different identities... both unified and fragmented, a complex of apparatuses as well as a social relationship' (1995, p. 3). This focus on the State as a complex of apparatuses permits the examination of the State at various levels – federal, state, local, community and individual – recognising the importance of each. Additionally, the focus on the State as a social relationship allows for the analysis of everyday interaction as a basis for understanding.

Cooper also draws heavily on Foucault's work on power, which allows for the consideration of how State power is dispersed along its networks, with multiple centres, rather than concentrated in a governmental centre. If power is everywhere, then it is also present at what has traditionally been seen as the periphery. Rather than geographically and socially isolated areas like Lençóis being beyond State control, State power is reconceived as being present in various different ways, not least in the day-to-day interactions between local State actors and the public. This decentring of the State allows for an analysis of local and community State levels as important and relevant mechanisms. Cooper furthers this analysis in her 2002

chapter mapping scholarship on the State in the field of lesbian and gay studies, arguing against traditional analyses of the State, which highlight ‘the limited capacity of state bodies to “step out of line”’ (Cooper, 2002, p. 238). Understanding the State, instead, as a complex of apparatuses allows for a scepticism of internal State unity, and for recognition of resistance within and between State structures: ‘[d]espite the pervasiveness of certain discourses, policies and structures, state apparatuses operate in different ways... signifying resistance to political hegemonising impulses’ (ibid.). This creates space for explaining perceived inconsistencies between official State policy, and lower-level State action. Cooper’s 1995 work also identifies the multiple and mutable identities of the State: it is never fixed nor static, rather it can hold different identities at any one time. In one review, Cooper was praised for this particular conceptualisation of the State as ‘shape-shifter’ (Bell, 1997, p. 458), and this less rigid reading of the State is useful for analysing the many and varied responses to the State seen within this study’s fieldsite.

Formulated in their comprehensive edited collection, Das and Poole’s idea of “the margins of the state” (2004) also helps to illuminate the relationship between young women and the State, by emphasising everyday interaction. According to Das, ‘to study the state, we need to shift our gaze from the obvious places where power is expected to reside, to the margins and recesses of everyday life’ (2004, p. 227). This represents a useful approach in the Latin American context, where neoliberal reform has been seen as dismantling the State, leaving it weakened, in need of ‘rebuilding’ (Grugel and Riggirozzi, 2012, p. 2) and in some cases ‘effectively absent’ (Koonings and Kruijt, 2004, p. 2). Looking at “the margins of the state” assumes that the State is, in fact, still present, and allows for its exploration even in areas previously deemed beyond its reach.

There are many reasons why young *lençoense* women could be interpreted as living

in the margins of the State, in the traditional sense. The town's geographical isolation and interior location, the marginal place of the Northeast in the Brazilian imaginary, and the racial inequality rife in the country³⁶, combined with distinct patriarchal tendencies with Brazilian society means that, in almost all imaginable ways, their identities are marginalised in a country where most economic and political might is located in the rich, white, urban South. Yet the aim of Das and Poole's collection is to use the term "margins" to move away from this idea of marginal as meaning peripheral, where marginal spaces are seen as sites of disorder, waiting for the intervention of the State (2004, p. 6). Instead, the idea of the "margins of the state" is to broaden understandings of the State, encouraging us to 'distance ourselves from the entrenched image of the state as a rationalized administrative form of political organization that becomes weakened or less fully articulated along its territorial or social margins' (ibid., p. 3). In short, although State power may be manifested differently in places like Lençóis, it is not necessarily absent or diluted. This is a much more productive understanding, as it helps to locate the State in a place which is far from the reaches of central government, and to acknowledge the State at its various levels – federal and state government, local government, community institutions and individual actors. By examining these "margins", supported by fieldwork from a wide range of geographical contexts, Das and Poole and their contributors call for an extension of the conceptual boundaries of the State, decentring and destabilizing it, allowing us to understand it as 'enmeshed' in local worlds (Das and Poole, 2004, p. 22), as 'a network rather than a node' (Nelson, 2004, p. 118). The young women in this study focused principally on State presence at the level of these "local worlds": local government, schools, health-posts, teachers, and healthcare professionals. With the idea of the State "in the margins" opening up

³⁶ See Chapter Three.

these local worlds of the State to closer reflection, these kinds of micro-level interactions can be more easily analysed. This approach is complemented by Canaday (2009) in her work on sexuality and the State in twentieth century US, which prompts the examination of the State through its practices – what do officials at all levels *do*? (2009, p. 5). Such an approach acknowledges that the State is made up of people and practices, and that much of the relationship between the people and the State is based in human interaction.

A third way of looking at the State is through the lens of social policy, an approach which has proven particularly fruitful in sexuality studies. In the UK context, Carabine (1996) explores the powerful role social policy has in normalising certain sexualities – usually conventional heterosexuality – and defining and constituting what is acceptable and appropriate, and sanctioning what is not (1996, p. 63). This normalisation, and the penalisation of those outside the “norm” has consequences, as discussed in Carabine (2004a), described earlier: ‘[i]n social policy, discourses of sexuality and welfare intersect to produce “deserving” and “undeserving” welfare subjects constituted on basis of their acceptable or unacceptable sexualities’ (2004a, p. 33). This understanding of the work of the State through social policy has multiple levels – the federal level in creating and issuing the policy, the local level in prioritising (or not) the implementation of the policy, the community level in its commitment to the implementation of said policy, and the individual level in the ways that policy is adhered to or subverted by individual State actors. In a study of sex education, therefore, it is vital to analyse the State through the lens of policy – in this case whether or not sex education is a priority, how and when it is delivered, and what the content says about “appropriate” sexuality in this context.

In short, the work of Cooper (1995; 2002), Carabine (1996; 2004a; 2004b), Das and Poole (2004), Canaday (2009) and others has contributed to the development of an

understanding of the State as a multifaceted complex of apparatuses, multi-centred, active in the margins, enmeshed in local worlds, embodied in State actors, and enacted through social policy. This allows for its exploration in a place like Lençóis, far from the nexus of Brazilian political power, where the State is most commonly experienced in day-to-day dealings with local government, schools, health-posts and individual actors such as teachers and healthcare professionals.

Conclusions

This chapter has reviewed a significant number of works which have been influential in informing this study. Focusing on the most relevant work in the four key areas to which this study contributes – sex education and sexual learning, local sexual culture, the relationship between gender, sexuality, and sexual practices and the State – it has explored how this study connects to, and dialogues with, existing literature.

Having reviewed this literature, there are several key contributions my study can make. Firstly, it helps link existing Anglo- and Lusophone literature on youth sexual culture and sex education. Secondly, it adds to the literature on gender, sexuality and sexual practices in Brazil, by contributing work on the semi-rural interior of a Northeast state, an area which is underresearched in this field. Thirdly, it helps fill in the relative dearth of small-scale, in-depth qualitative studies of sex education in Brazil, focusing on young people's experiences and perspectives, rather than on evaluating programmes or assessing health or behavioural outcomes. Additionally, it adds some different perspectives to studies of the role of the State. By looking at the literature *across* these areas, this study begins to address the compartmentalisation of studies of Latin American youth sexuality, a concern expressed by Oliart (2008), and discussed in the introductory chapter.

The chapter which follows builds on this review of the literature, providing the

necessary background to this study, in terms of the geographical and social context of the fieldsite, and the policy landscape of sex education in Brazil.

Chapter 3. Situating the Study: Context and Policy

The purpose of this chapter is to situate this study geographically, socially and politically. To achieve this, it begins by giving background on the study site, including social and demographic data and cultural understandings of the Northeast region, the state of Bahia, and the town of Lençóis itself. It then explores two relevant cultural factors: “race”, and religion. The chapter then summarises the Brazilian political system, and the policies and strategies in place regarding sexuality and sexual and reproductive health. This contextualises sex education as part of wider attempts by the Brazilian State to manage youth sexualities, with the express purposes of reducing adolescent fertility and combatting the spread of HIV/AIDS. It concludes with a brief summary of the *Bolsa Família* conditional cash transfer (henceforth CCT) programme.

Lençóis: Geographical and Social Context

Lençóis is located in Bahia, in the Northeast region of Brazil. The Northeast is comprised of nine states³⁷, and represents 18% of the country’s territory and 28% of its population. The region has an average Human Development Index³⁸ (HDI) of 0.659, compared to 0.727 for Brazil as a whole (PNUD, IPEA and FJP, 2013). GDP per capita in the region is R\$11,044, around £1713.50 (IBGE, 2012), which represents less than half the national average, and many parts of the region suffer chronic poverty (Garmany, 2011). The Northeast economy was traditionally based on coffee, sugar and cattle, though the region’s beautiful white-sand beaches have resulted in a developing tourist industry.

³⁷ Brazil is composed of 26 states and one Federal District.

³⁸ The HDI is a composite measure, developed in response to arguments that economic growth is not a sufficient measure of development. It is based on what the United Nations Development Programme calls ‘key dimensions of human development’ – a long and healthy life (assessed on life expectancy); being knowledgeable (assessed on years of schooling); and decent standard of living (assessed on gross national income per capita) (United Nations Development Programme, 2015).



Figure 1 - Map of Brazil by region (Brazil-help, n.d.)

The region's specificities are frequently acknowledged: 'The Northeast is like no other region in Brazil or, for that matter, in Latin America' (Garmany, 2011, p. 46). It has traditionally been isolated and neglected, politically and socially, something some of the young women in this study acknowledged.

The region's poverty relative to much of the rest of the country is not the only factor in its marginalisation, which is based in no small part on the place of the Northeast in the Brazilian imaginary. Due to the region's rurality, and poverty, it has 'long been considered a "problem" or "backwards" area' (Fox, 1979, p. 16), the non-modern "Other" to the more developed South. It is not just the region which is 'putatively backwards' (Draper, 2010, p. 26): the region's people are also perceived as such, especially Bahians. 'The image of Bahians as lazy... was constructed throughout history... and reinforced by the media' (Menezes, 2005, pp. 9–10, my translation), and has been mobilised as an exclusionary practice against slaves, free blacks, indigenous Brazilians, and *nordestino*³⁹ immigrants alike, used to justify discrimination, unfair salaries, and lack of investment in the region. This discriminatory image is persistent, to the extent that criminal cases have had to be brought against people using defamatory language against *nordestinos* on social media (Lima, 2012).

A further way the region has been traditionally marginalised is in assumptions about the hypersexualisation of its population: 'The famous clichés and jokes tell us that *nordestinos* have an incredibly high sex drive' (*Portal O Dia*, 2009, n.p., my translation). Such assumptions are often related to the high percentage of Afro-Brazilians in the populations of this region, reflecting the racialized stereotypes of sexuality, discussed in Chapter Two. However, this perception is also encouraged

³⁹ Person from Northeast Brazil.

by the teenage pregnancy rates in the region: figures from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (henceforth IBGE) show that almost one-third of all teenage mothers in Brazil live in the Northeast region (IBGE, 2009). These statistics have been used as confirmation that young *nordestinos* – and particularly young *nordestina* women – are more sexual than their compatriots from other regions, or at least that they take greater risks.⁴⁰ Such prejudices contribute to the marginalisation of (especially Afro-Brazilian) *nordestinas* and potentially to the subsequent prevalence of sex tourism, prostitution and child exploitation in the region (Segundo, et al., 2012).

Bahia

Although its location in the Northeast region is important, Lençóis is a Bahian town, and the state of Bahia presents specificities of its own. Bahia is the fifth largest Brazilian state by area, and fourth largest by population, projected as 15,203,934 in 2015 (IBGE, 2014). It comprises 417 municipalities and has a HDI of 0.660, compared with 0.824 in the Federal District, 0.783 in São Paulo and 0.761 in Rio de Janeiro, the sixth lowest in the country (PNUD, IPEA and FJP, 2013). The GDP per capita is R\$11832, around £1835.80, almost a third of that of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro states, making Bahia the state with the seventh lowest GDP per capita in the country (IBGE, 2012). Bahia was a hub of sugar cultivation for over two centuries, and therefore a centre for the slave trade: Brazil received more slaves than any other country, almost 5,000,000, and most passed through Bahia, from the slavery markets of Salvador (Setti, 2015). Nowadays, Bahia has a large industrial sector, but agriculture is still a major part of its economy, producing cacao and soy. Tourism is also important, with Bahia one of Brazil's principal tourist destinations. The Bahian

⁴⁰ However, HIV cases in the Northeast represent just 14% of total cases, with 56% being in the Southeast and 20% in the South (Brazilian Ministry of Health, 2014).

state capital, Salvador, is famous internationally for its beaches, gastronomy and music, and its historic centre is a UNESCO World Heritage site. It is Brazil's third most populous city, and has the nickname "Brazil's City of Happiness": although it also has the third highest murder rate in the country (Ivo, 2012).



Figure 2 -The location of the state of Bahia in Brazil (Wikipedia, n.d.)

Although Salvador is the main attraction for international tourists, the *Chapada Diamantina* National Park does draw tourists to the interior, with Lençóis being its primary hub.



Figure 3 - Map of Bahia (Brazil Travel, n.d.)

Lençóis

Lençóis is situated more than 250 miles from Salvador, a journey which takes between six and seven hours by bus. Situated on the edge of the *Chapada Diamantina* National Park, an area of outstanding natural beauty, the town itself was declared National Patrimony in 1973, due to its attractive colonial architecture.

Lençóis was established in 1844, after the discovery of diamonds in the region in 1822, and the mining industry quickly grew, leading to a boom in the town, in wealth and population (IBGE, 1958). However, in the early 20th century, excessive mining, combined with the discovery of diamonds in Africa, led to the abandonment of the industry in Lençóis, ushering in an era of extreme poverty. The area's recovery only began with the establishment of the National Park in 1985 and, since then, the town's income has largely been based on tourism: tourist agencies, hostels, hotels, guesthouses, restaurants and bars.

The municipality of Lençóis has a population of 10,368, and the town itself of 5520 (IBGE, 2010a). Specific demographic information on the town is difficult to obtain, with IBGE data focusing mainly on the municipal level. In the municipality, then, 52.3% of people earn less than one minimum salary⁴¹ (R\$880 or £165.85⁴²) each month: and for those working in the informal economy, average income is around 80% of that of formalised workers (IBGE, 2010b). The majority work in the service industry, linked to tourism, and for women that figure is as high as 81.1% (ibid.). The HDI of the town is significantly lower than the Brazilian average, at 0.623 (Atlas Brasil, 2013), possibly due in part to educational challenges.

⁴¹ Workers' salaries are calculated in multiples of the minimum salary.

⁴² Value for 2016, up from R\$724 in 2014.

35.7% of women and 40.5% of men aged 18-24 dropped out of school early (IBGE, 2010b), and the area has high illiteracy rates, especially when one considers that nationally 91.33% of the adult population can read and write (Portal Brasil, 2013). In Lençóis, 19.6% of women are illiterate (IBGE, 2010b) which, although not a factor for the women in this study, would clearly impact on the reception of sex education, ability to engage with sex education materials and so forth.

From the maps displayed throughout this chapter, the level of geographical isolation faced by *lençoenses* is clear. Salvador is a seven-hour bus journey away, Feira de Santana, the closest mid-sized city, is more than four hours away by car and probably, in reality, five-and-a-half hours by bus, and the closest towns, Seabra and Palmeiras, are 70km and 60km away respectively, distances compounded by a heavily neglected infrastructure.

This physical remoteness, combined with poverty, and dependence on tourism, creates a picture of isolation. However, at the same time, *lençoense* young people are increasingly connected, through mobile technology and high media penetration. Over half the Brazilian population now have internet access, up from one-third in 2008 (The World Bank, 2014b), and internet access through mobile devices more than doubled between 2011 and 2013 (CIG, 2014). Social networking sites (henceforth SNS) are also immensely popular: a recent report showed that Brazilians spend a higher proportion of their time online on SNS (58%) than any other surveyed nation, including the UK (41%) and the US (39%) (ATKearney, 2014). Such statistics indicate an increasingly connected nation, and *lençoense* young people's experiences mirror these trends.⁴³ The young women in this study frequently described their use of mobile phones and SNS, and their access to television. It

⁴³ See Chapter Seven.

should also be acknowledged that Lençóis' status as a tourist town means that flows of national and international visitors potentially add to the town's connectedness. Lençóis, then, is an example of how semi-rurality and physical isolation can co-exist alongside connectedness and participation in global youth cultures. Assumptions that the town will exhibit stereotypical characteristics of rurality such as tradition and conventionality should therefore be interrogated.

Important Socio-cultural Factors

Having situated Lençóis socio-economically and geographically, there are some socio-cultural factors it is important to acknowledge, particularly "race" and religion.

"Race"

Brazilian nationalism is founded upon a myth of *racial democracy*, which purports that racial mixture, *mestiçagem*, was so widespread between Portuguese colonists, African slaves, and indigenous Brazilians, that all Brazilians are *mestiços*⁴⁴ and therefore racism cannot and does not exist. This 'foundational myth of the racial paradise served the interest of the Brazilian state by forging a sense of unity' (Reiter and Mitchell, 2010, p. 222), simultaneously masking experiences of racism, discrimination and inequality.

Because of the tension with national identity practices, discussions of "race" and racism have long been silenced in Brazil, although many have critiqued this deeply entrenched ideological racism (Guimarães, 1995, p. 210). Brazilians have tended to discuss "race" in terms of a sliding scale of colour descriptions: a kind of 'pigmentocracy' (Sansone, 2003). One's colour is not "fixed", rather perceptions of one's colour are mitigated by other characteristics, such as social class: 'most people have multiple identities according to with whom they are interacting and in what

⁴⁴ Racially mixed.

context' (Wade, 1997, p. 18). In reality, Afro-Brazilians are disadvantaged: although black and mixed Brazilians make up more than 50% of the population (IBGE, 2010c), they earn on average just 58% of the mean salary for white Brazilians (Gradín, 2010, p. 8). In the wealthiest sector of society, known as Class A, 82.3% are white, whilst in the lowest socio-economic class, Class E, 76.3% are Afro-Brazilian (IBGE, 2010c). Such inequality has resulted in a powerful, and growing, black movement in the country.

This complex racial picture has been vastly oversimplified here, due to time and space constraints. However, a snapshot of this dynamic was important due to the specificities of the state of Bahia, in terms of "race". Bahia is the state with the second highest percentage of Afro-descendants, at 76.2%, and 96.1% of its municipalities are majority Afro-Brazilian (IBGE, 2010c), while Salvador is known as the "blackest" city in Brazil. Although no racial demographic data was found for Lençóis itself, it is my experience that the municipality and the town mirror wider state trends.

Religion

The three main religious groups in Lençóis are Catholicism, *evangelismo* (a loose term encompassing Evangelical, Pentecostal and other Protestantisms) and Afro-Brazilian religions (*Umbanda*, *Candomblé* and its regional variant *Jaré*). Trends tend to reflect the rest of the country: Catholicism - though still the country's majority religion - is in decline, whilst various Protestantisms have grown rapidly in recent decades (IBGE, 2010c). Whilst statistics for Lençóis itself are hard to come by, in Bahia as a whole, almost 9.25 million people identified as Catholic, 2.4 million as Evangelical, and a smaller but substantial 160,000 as members of an Afro-Brazilian religion (IBGE, 2010c).

It is worth mentioning, however, that identification with any of these faiths does not

necessarily mean adherence to their teachings in day-to-day life in Lençóis; for example, many Brazilian Catholics ‘maintain religion merely as a form of social identity’ (Pierucci and Prandi, 2000, p. 630). It is also pertinent that membership of one religion does not exclude a person from practising another: many people in Lençóis “belong” to more than one religion, and this hybrid religious practice possibly weakens the overall authority of any single faith.

Whilst the Catholic position on sexuality and chastity is well-known, it is relevant to explore how the other two faiths approach youth sexuality. Research suggests that certain evangelical factions may be more sexually conservative than Catholics; *crentes*⁴⁵ often hold ‘restrictive, punitive beliefs about sexual morality, such as prohibitions against sex outside of wedlock or condemnation of homosexuality’ (Ogland and Hinojosa, 2012, p. 2), and many also prohibit drinking, drugs and dancing, and enforce a strict dress code. There is some evidence, therefore, that ‘Brazilian teenagers from Protestant and Pentecostal faith traditions are at significantly lower risk for sexual initiation during the adolescent years’ (ibid, p. 4). Conversely, studies show that Afro-Brazilian religions are quicker to recognise the importance of pleasure in sexual relations than either Catholics or Protestants, and that members of such faiths tend to believe less rigidly that sex is only legitimate within marriage (Paiva, Aranha and Bastos, 2008). This information paints a complex picture of the role of religion as an authority on sexuality – degrees of conservatism vary between faiths, within faiths, and according to the strength of individual commitment.

The Policy Context

Having briefly summarised the geographical and social context of this study, the

⁴⁵ Literally “believers”, an informal term for Evangelicals.

following section contextualises the research within the current policy landscape. It explores the municipalisation of healthcare and education in Brazil, looks briefly at the country's reproductive rights agenda, examines the development and implementation of sex education policy, and summarises the *Bolsa Família* policy.

Municipalisation of healthcare and education

Before exploring this policy landscape, it is important to understand the political structures in place to issue and implement those policies (see figure 5 for diagrammatic representation).

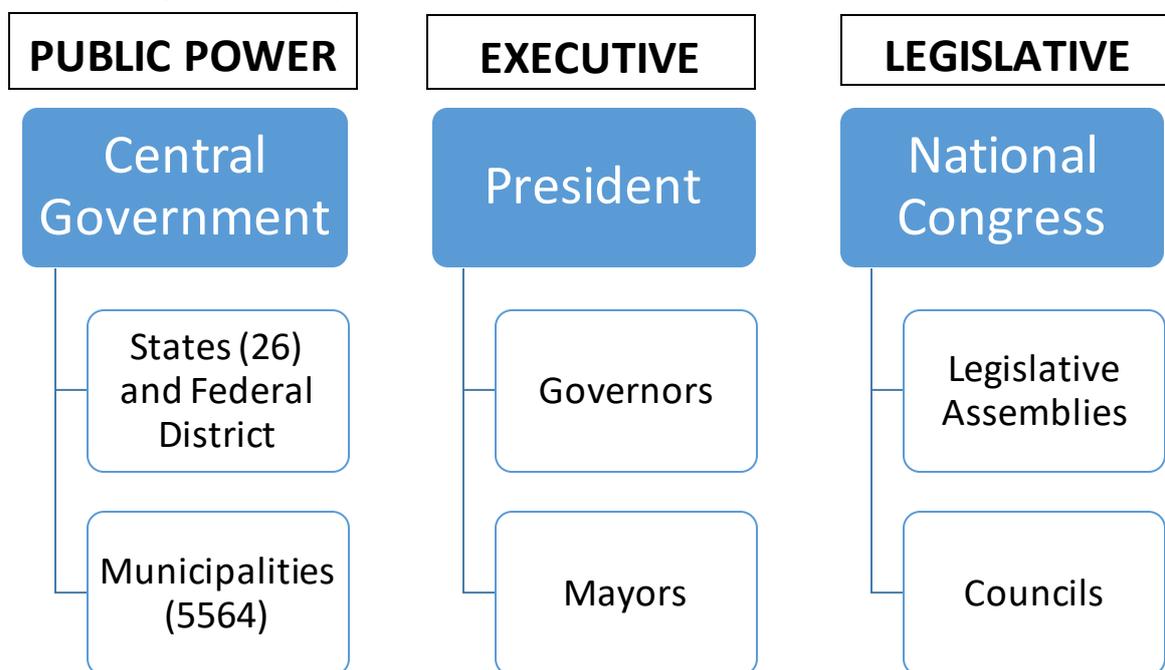


Figure 5 - Diagram of Brazilian Political System

The federal government, based in the federal capital, Brasília, is the seat of executive, legislative and judicial power, and the President – currently Dilma Rousseff – is both head of State and head of the government. The 26 states are semi-autonomous sub-national entities, with their own governments, and powers over state laws. At the more local level, municipalities are minor federal units, each with its own local government, made up of a directly elected mayor and legislative body. Each municipality has a *sede*, an urban centre for which the municipality is named, and several *distritos*, other minor rural or urban areas in the vicinity: in the

case of Lençóis, the town is the *sede* of the municipality of the same name. The municipalities have the power to collect taxes, keep a local police force, and pass laws which do not contradict those at higher State levels.

The extent to which power is devolved at each of these levels is pertinent to discussions of responsibility for sex education and sexual health provision, and overall authority in matters of sexuality. Since the 1990s, '[m]any aspects of governmental administration were decentralized and shifted to the municipalities. Most funding for educational and health services is now generated and allocated by the municipalities.' (Svitone, et al., 2000, p. 299), which is pertinent as the study of sex education crosses both these fields. Municipal governments are required to earmark a set percentage of their annual budgets for health and education; the idea being that local governments are best-positioned to determine local priorities (Afonso and de Mello, 2000, p. 20), and that "municipalisation" would improve the quality and efficiency of government spending (ibid, p. 2).

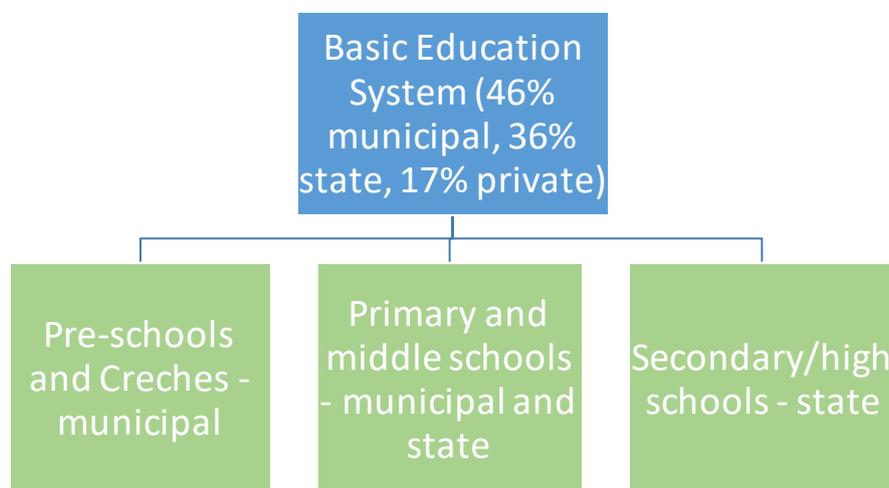


Figure 6 - Decentralisation of Brazilian Education

Within education, municipalities have been given increased educational responsibilities since the 1990s (Winkler and Gershberg, 1999, p. 206): 25% of their budgets must be earmarked for education, for example for the provision of infrastructure, food, transport, teaching training and employee salaries (Ferraz, Finan

and Moreira, 2012, p. 715). However, in reality, secondary schools largely remain under state control, whilst the municipalities are responsible for primary and pre-school education (see *figure 6*). Additionally, 10% of revenues must be spent on health (Svitone, et al., 2000), and municipalities operate their own system of healthcare activities (see *figure 7*).

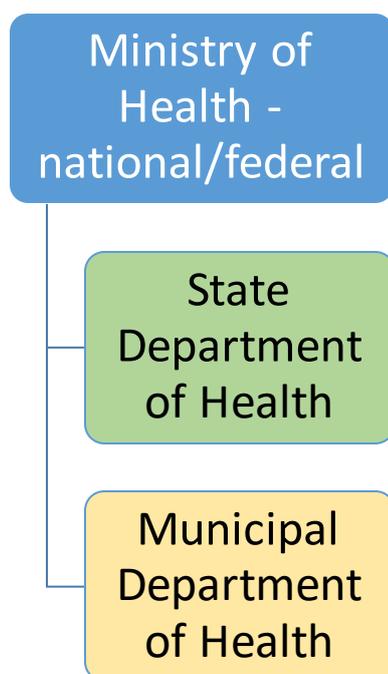


Figure 7 - Municipalisation of Brazilian Healthcare

Several scholars have highlighted a key difference between the two areas: within health, the federal level takes on ‘typical macro functions’ (Collins, Araujo and Barbosa, 2000, p. 116), determining the healthcare agenda at all levels through national health policy, maintaining control of the decision-making process and determining the uses of the funds dedicated to healthcare (Almeida, 2005, p. 38); within education, however, municipalities have ‘had their own policies, based on controlling the resources from their own budgets’ (ibid, my translation).

This difference would suggest that local governments have significantly more freedom over what is taught in schools than they do over healthcare priorities. This may, in turn, offer schools an opportunity to disrupt or challenge national-level policy

with which they do not agree: 'Perhaps the greatest disadvantage posed by federalism... is the opportunities for meso-level governments to obstruct, reshape, or fail to apply national laws and policies' (Franceschet, 2011, p. 277). Although Franceschet poses this as a disadvantage, in the case of sex education provision it may offer instead an opportunity.⁴⁶

Many criticisms have been levelled at the Brazilian State for its increasing municipalisation, largely focusing on the lack of clarity regarding the responsibilities and powers devolved (Afonso and de Mello, 2000; Almeida, 2005), the absence of any form of robust regulation (Collins, Araujo and Barbosa, 2000; Franceschet, 2011; Paim, et al., 2011), and inadequate local capacity to carry out designated responsibilities (Gorostiaga Derqui, 2001; Franceschet, 2011; Paim, et al., 2011; Sánchez-Ancochea and Mattei, 2011). Whatever the reason for the weaknesses in the municipal-level governance of health and education in Brazil, they have resulted in one clear outcome: vast inequalities in provision nationally (Almeida, 2005; Sánchez-Ancochea and Mattei, 2011). Several scholars have pointed out that this inequality is particularly prejudicial to the Brazilian Northeast: education spending per capita is below the Brazilian average in all states in the Northeast (Sánchez-Ancochea and Mattei, 2011, p. 310); Bahia, Paraíba and Ceará 'have the lowest levels of income, education, and the highest levels of illiteracy' (Kempner and Jurema, 2002, p. 336); whilst the majority of hospitals and clinics are private, and located in the most developed Southern Brazilian regions (Viana, da Silva and Yi, 2015, p. 4).

Critics have stressed the extent to which this decentralisation has occurred, suggesting that it indicates an overall weakening of the Brazilian central government,

⁴⁶ See Chapter Five.

to the extent that it has become 'merely a problem-management agency, in charge only of transferring money from the federal government and international agencies to the states and cities' (Kempner and Jurema, 2002, p. 339). However, the truth of this is debatable: some studies have argued that the decentralisation of service provision has been coupled with a centralisation of policy and decision-making (Gorostiaga Derqui, 2001). Others have pointed out that the supposed autonomy of the municipal-level governments, education systems and healthcare services is still dependent on the release of resources from federal levels, and encouragement and facilitation from those levels (Almeida, 2005, p. 37). Therefore, caution should be exercised when making claims about the autonomy of municipal governments: although in some areas, like education, they may enjoy some freedoms, greater autonomy in policy and decision-making would be needed to increase their efficiency (Afonso and de Mello, 2000, p. 12), limiting the blame which can be laid at their door.

The Reproductive Rights Agenda

In order to contextualise current sex education policy, it is pertinent to explore the broader reproductive rights agenda in Brazil, including the important moments for reproductive rights, and the key issues under debate. One of the principal forces within this agenda is the Brazilian feminist movement, which warrants brief discussion here.

Brazilian Feminism(s)

Brazil has a strong history of feminism, with its women's movement often recognised as the most organised and effective in Latin America (Fiedler and Blanco, 2006).

The movement is frequently analysed as three separate strands – government/institutional feminism, academic feminism and popular/social feminism (Maluf, 2011, p. 38). Like many Global South feminisms, as well as some Western feminisms, Latin American feminists tend to reject Western feminism's periodisation

into “waves”, however, contemporary feminism in Brazil also tends to be examined in three phases (Pitanguy, 2002). From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, Brazil was still under dictatorship (1964-1985), so the women’s movement coincided with a wider movement for democracy, within which feminists worked for the inclusion of women’s rights and needs. Between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s, the end of the dictatorship saw an institutionalisation of the demands of the women’s movement, with the establishment of the National Women’s Rights Council in 1985 and the inclusion of equality articles in the 1988 Constitution. During this period, feminism also became fully established in Brazilian academia. Finally, from the early 1990s to the present day, the movement has taken on a more international perspective, joining global networks, increasing presence at international meets and so forth (Pitanguy, 2002). The Brazilian feminist movement has an extensive agenda. Beyond the reproductive rights issues detailed below, land rights, sexual harassment culture, domestic violence and increasing political participation and representation have been primary foci.

In Brazil, as elsewhere, there has been significant backlash against the feminist movement. Anti-feminist discourses in the media and in culture has caused the ‘systematic depreciation and delegitimation’ of feminism (Schmidt, 2007, p. 1).

Feminism is often understood as ‘white middle class woman’s triumph in reconciling professional activities with the pleasures of maternity’ (ibid., pp. 2-3), leading to criticism over the lack of consideration for “race”, ethnicity and class within its agenda (Damasco, Maio and Monteiro, 2012, p. 134). In addition, feminism has commonly been criticised as “foreign”, seen as an import in Brazil, which has ‘nothing to do with our reality’ (Schmidt, 2007, p. 8). Finally, though a dynamic faction of Brazilian feminism, with its mothers’ clubs, and a plethora of groups campaigning for childcare, health, housing and reproductive rights, and against domestic violence, popular

women's movements have sought to distance themselves from the term "feminism", opting instead to call themselves "feminine" movements. This is due, in no small part, to the aforementioned treatment of feminism as something which is exclusive of lower-class, black and indigenous women, which is irrelevant to everyday Brazilian life, and which is also anti-men.

The Brazilian black feminist movement and various popular feminist movements emerged as responses to much of this criticism. In Brazil as a whole, black women make up the majority of those living on or below the poverty line (Maluf, 2011, p. 48), and many felt their needs were not being met within a largely upper-middle-class movement. Many black women came to feminism around the issue of mass sterilisation of Afro-Brazilian women in the Northeast in what was perceived to be racial population control (Damasco, Maio and Monteiro, 2012, pp. 133-134). Black feminism is particularly strongly rooted in the Southeast of Brazil (ibid.), however, there are powerful black women's movements across the country, including in the Northeast – for example, Bamidelê in Paraíba.

One example of the extent to which black feminism differs from mainstream Brazilian feminism is its attitude to religion: whilst religion is seen by most mainstream feminists as repressive towards women, the unique role of women in Afro-Brazilian religions such as *Candomblé* creates a space for religion to be understood as a source of female empowerment by Afro-Brazilian feminists. Similarly, popular grassroots feminist movements have hit out at the mainstream movement for ignoring the needs of working-class women who wish to engage in feminist activity – stating, for example, that having a registration fee for events excludes women from less privileged backgrounds (Maluf, 2011, p. 43). This has, once again, led to a rejection of feminism by certain class groups, in favour of an alternative which accommodates class difference.

Important reproductive rights developments

Due to the work of Brazilian feminists, and other groups, the reproductive rights landscape has altered drastically since the 1980s. Reproductive rights were previously understood as referring only to the rights to healthcare afforded to pregnant women and mothers (Guilhem and Azevedo, 2007, p. 68), prioritised in line with the cultural veneration of motherhood, discussed in Chapter Two. However, these rights are now far more comprehensive, including: gynaecology, family planning⁴⁷, cancer prevention, and the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, amongst other areas (ibid., pp. 70-71). Key to this alteration was the emergence of a “human rights” framework in Brazil, due in part to the work of feminist movements. Reproductive rights became firmly rooted in these new human rights discourses, for example, with the concept of *integralidade*, where the woman ‘should be seen as an individual, a holder of rights, and perceived as a whole, not reduced to a reproductive body’ (d’Oliveira, 1999, p. 108, my translation). Valuing women’s health beyond the maternal afforded greater space and value to adolescent women, post-menopausal women, and women who were either infertile or had chosen to remain childless - a much more inclusive conception of the role of Brazilian women. This change in understanding resulted in the establishment in 1983 of *PAISM*, the *Programa de Assistência Integral à Saúde da Mulher* (Comprehensive Women’s Health Programme). This programme integrated prenatal care, STD screening and treatment, infertility services, “family planning” education, and contraceptive services amongst other aspects (Harmeling, 1999, p. 2). This new, holistic model, which emphasised autonomy and choice, was praised as ‘one of the few examples anywhere of a government program with a feminist perspective’ (García-Moreno and

⁴⁷ The term “family planning” has been heavily critiqued, but is used in this study because the service offered by Brazilian health-posts is called exactly that - “*planejamento familiar*”.

Claro, 1994, p. 49). However, the programme has been viewed elsewhere as simply a pragmatic initiative – the large-scale integration of women into the Brazilian workforce made large families problematic and necessitated better healthcare for the new workers.

In 1996, the Family Planning Law was introduced, to ‘regulate provision of family planning and legalize sterilization with a view towards providing all women with access to a wide variety of contraceptive options’ (Caetano and Potter, 2004, p. 79). This law emphasised informed choice, and women’s agency, an approach which presupposes access to relevant information, services and technologies (Vianna and Carrara, 2008, p. 32). However, State provision was not uniform, and the private sector was entirely unregulated, and inequality of access and inadequacy of information meant women were offered “constrained choices” vis-à-vis their reproductive health. Although policy advanced further in 2005, with attempts to ‘broaden the provision of reversible birth-control methods by the public health system’ (Diniz Alves, 2009, p. 301), and in 2007 to provide free contraception to all men and women of reproductive age (ibid.), despite these policy changes, ‘aspects of the economic, political, social and cultural order serve as obstacles for the full access to enjoyment of these rights’ (Rede Feminista de Saúde, 2007, p. 3). Therefore, although certain policy developments in the last forty years have indicated ‘a very strong commitment to producing and implementing human rights... this commitment is constantly threatened by deep social, racial, ethnic and gender inequalities’ (Vianna and Carrara, 2008, p. 30): the promise of autonomy and free, informed choice cannot be realised without deeper, structural change to create greater equality in Brazil.

Key reproductive rights debates

Certain issues have been, and continue to be, key to the reproductive rights agenda

in Brazil. Three of these are discussed here: teenage pregnancy; HIV/AIDS; and abortion. As well as being primary concerns for Brazilian reproductive rights activists and scholars, they were the reproductive rights issues most commonly raised by the participants in this study.

From the statistics, teenage pregnancy would seem a large and growing “problem”⁴⁸ in Latin America: according to Näslund-Hadley and Binstock (2010) ‘[Latin America and the Caribbean] is the only region in the world that has seen an increase in adolescent fertility over the past 30 years’ (p. 2) – although overall fertility has declined, the number of 15-19 year olds giving birth is still increasing, and is surpassed only by numbers in Africa.⁴⁹ In Brazil, the problem has been termed an “epidemic” (Gonçalves, et al., 2011, p. 201): fertility rates in the 15–19 age group are rising, though all other rates are falling (Heilborn and Cabral, 2011, p. 2). In 2014, World Bank figures indicated a rate of 67 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19, compared with 64 in Argentina, 48 in Chile, 52 in Colombia and 50 in Peru (The World Bank, 2014a). For comparison, the UK had a rate of 15 per 1,000 women and the US of 24 (ibid). As mentioned earlier, almost one-third of Brazil’s teen mothers are in the Northeast (IBGE, 2009).

In Lençóis, interviews with two local nurses and a representative of the Health Department at municipal level showed disagreement on the subject of teenage pregnancy. The latter, in particular, vehemently denied any problem, claiming very low rates of teenage pregnancy in the town, due to the proactive work of his department –

⁴⁸ There is much debate about whether teenage pregnancy is always a “problem” (e.g. Heilborn and Cabral, 2011). Certainly the young women in this study disrupted this simplistic assumption, with accounts of positive or mixed experiences. However, in-depth exploration of this issue is not possible in the constraints of this thesis.

⁴⁹ Although scholars such as Hosie (2007) have described the “problem” of adolescent fertility in the UK, which sees higher rates than much of Europe, figures from the Office of National Statistics (2014) suggest that the adolescent conception rate in England and Wales fell by 48% between 1998 and 2013.

which directly contradicted my observations and the reports of both the young women in this study and the teachers interviewed. None of the professionals were able to provide exact numbers of teenage pregnancy cases, and requests for figures made to the Health Department were blocked, both in person and via email. Municipal data, however, shows that 20.9% of births were to women under 20 in 2013, down from 32.9% in 2001 (Portal ODM, 2014). Despite this decrease, this number of young mothers is still described as ‘worrying’ (ibid.).

In terms of the policy in place to combat this “problem”, the focus has mainly been on keeping young women in school, through incentives such as the *Bolsa Família*⁵⁰ programme, and on media campaigns promoting condom use and highlighting the challenges of adolescent pregnancy, such as figure 8, below. Sex education initiatives fit into this broader landscape of efforts to reduce teenage pregnancy.



Figure 8 - Premature pregnancy is no joke (26/06/2015)

⁵⁰ See pp. 101-103.

Secondly, the Brazilian National STD/AIDS Programme, developed in 1986, is based on 'a balanced approach of prevention, treatment, care and protection of human rights' (Greco and Simão, 2007, p. S38). It takes a multi-pronged approach, including strategies to destigmatise the issue and reduce discrimination, campaigns for prevention (including a concerted media effort), free and universal treatment programmes, and harm-reduction measures. Sex education has been mobilised in line with these efforts. This approach has clearly been successful: the World Bank had predicted there would be over a million people living with HIV/AIDS in Brazil by the year 2000, but in 2006 estimates were around 600,000 (Greco and Simão, 2007, p. S39). In addition, mortality rates fell by 50% between 1998 and 2005 (Berkman, et al., 2005, p. 1162). However, whilst AIDS rates in the Southeast region are falling, the other regions have all seen increases in the number of people living with AIDS per 100,000 people: from 7.5 to 13.9 in the case of the Northeast (Departamento de DST, Aids e Hepatites Virais, 2013).

The Brazilian response to HIV/AIDS has been lauded on the world stage (Malta and Beyrer, 2013), for its commitment to universal access to antiretroviral (ARV) treatment, which acknowledges the human rights of all citizens, including those in excluded social groups. In 2005, Brazil resisted pressures from the US to accept conditional funding for HIV/AIDS programmes that failed to cater to sex workers and men who have sex with men (MSM), instead continuing to target those groups with national programmes. However, concerns are now being expressed that Brazil is backtracking on these earlier commitments. In 2012, a campaign focusing on MSM was withdrawn, followed in 2013 by the withdrawal of the campaign "I'm happy being a prostitute", developed in collaboration with sex workers, which aimed to reduce HIV within this demographic (Frayssinet, 2013). Fears are rife within activist and scientific communities that Brazil is undoing the good done by its progressive HIV/AIDS policy

(Malta and Beyrer, 2013).

Finally, abortion is illegal in Brazil in all but three situations: when the pregnancy is a result of rape; if the mother's life is at risk; and, since recently, in the case of encephalitis causing severe foetal deformity.⁵¹ Having an illegal abortion can result in a prison sentence of up to three years. As a result of these strict limitations, in 2008 only 3230 legal abortions were provided on the *Sistema Único de Saúde* (SUS), the Brazilian public health service (Diniz, d'Oliveira and Lansky, 2012, p. 97), whilst there are an estimated 1.4 million clandestine abortions per year (Guedes, 2000, p. 66), with many resulting in hospitalisation, or even death. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, it is likely these figures are an underestimate. Despite shocking figures, and high-profile deaths of women such as Jandira dos Santos Cruz⁵², the majority of the population are still anti-abortion and do not want a change in the law. Even President Dilma, who before her 2010 election favoured the legalisation of abortion, has remained conservative on the issue, probably due to its political sensitivity: indeed the silence surrounding the subject in the run-up to the 2014 elections caused outrage amongst activists (Carneiro, 2014). However, the Federal Council of Medicine supports the legalisation of terminations up to the twelfth week of pregnancy, due to the number of women suffering complications from unsafe procedures (*BBC News*, 2013a).

With such significant public health issues on the political agenda, and the controversy connected with them, the Brazilian State must pursue a fine balance between improving and maintaining public health, and avoiding what might be interpreted as undue interference into family and personal affairs. The State has implemented a

⁵¹ It remains to be seen the impact the Zika virus will have on abortion legislation.

⁵² Jandira died during a clandestine abortion, and the abortionists amputated her fingers and limbs, removed her dental arch, and burned her body to prevent her identification and the detection of their illegal clinic (Carneiro, 2014).

range of policies to manage sexuality-related issues, with the aim of reducing or avoiding the reproductive health issues described above – legislation prohibiting abortion, multi-pronged national HIV/AIDS policy, and targeted media campaigns about adolescent pregnancy. It could be argued that sex education also represents a mechanism through which the State attempts to manage and regulate sexuality, with the intent to avoid/reduce “negative” outcomes. With this in mind, the following section explores the place of sex education in the Brazilian National Curriculum.

Sex Education in the National Curriculum

This section looks at sex education policy in Brazil, beginning with a historical view of its development. Although there have been important policy moments before and since, this section focuses on the inclusion of sex education as a cross-cutting theme in the PCNs in 1997. It is arguably this policy change which impacted, and continues to impact, most significantly on sex education in Brazilian schools. Therefore, this section outlines the policy and the criticisms it has received since its implementation.

Before exploring sex education policy, it is important to consider terminology. There is a preference in much of the literature for the term *Orientação Sexual* (Sexual Orientation) rather than *Educação Sexual* (Sexual Education): it is in these terms that sex education features in the PCNs. This is intended to distinguish between the orientation/guidance received in schools, and the basis of sex education which ought to still be focused in the home (Altmann, 2006, p. 2). However, I have chosen to retain the term “sex education” as it is the closest fit in English, but also to avoid confusion, given the English language understanding of “sexual orientation”, which is increasingly mirrored in the Brazilian context: “the term “sexual orientation” has been widely used as sexual diversity, designating homosexuality, heterosexuality or bisexuality, and less for educational and developmental activities about sexuality’ (Sfair, Bittar and Lopes, 2015, p. 628, my translation).

There have been debates about the place of sex education in the Brazilian National Curriculum since the 1920s (da Fonseca, Gomes and Teixeira, 2010), prompted by concerns over the spread of STDs such as syphilis. In 1928, National Congress approved a motion to include sex education in schools, however, this initiative was blocked by conservative factions of society (Sfair, Bittar and Lopes, 2015). In the 1960s, changing attitudes to sexuality, together with the work of social movements influenced some schools in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Belo Horizonte to introduce sex education into their curricula. However, conservative backlash at the start of the Brazilian dictatorship led to the interruption of many of these programmes, and the suspension or dismissal of teachers and school management (Oliveira, 2009). After around fifteen years' stagnation, the sex education debate resurfaced in the 1970s, connected to both the feminist movement for sexual and reproductive rights, and to the democratic movement against the dictatorship. In this context, in 1978 the Federal Council of Education approved the inclusion of sex education into the curriculum for what is now *Ensino Fundamental* and *Ensino Médio*⁵³, in a discipline called "Health Education" which focused on anatomical, biological and medical issues, and did not touch on behaviours or values (Sfair, Bittar and Lopes, 2015, p. 624). Pro-sex education movements gained momentum in the 1980s, due to public concern about increasing numbers of teenage pregnancies, and about the HIV/AIDS epidemic (da Fonseca, Gomes and Teixeira, 2010). Due in no small part to the feminist, pro-democracy and HIV/AIDS movements, the PCNs were introduced in 1997.

Since then, several newer initiatives have also been introduced. In 2003, the SPE was established through a partnership between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education and Culture, with a specific focus on HIV prevention (Queen,

⁵³ Primary/middle school and secondary/high school.

2013). Not firmly implemented until 2006, the SPE 'signified an important strategy for the Ministry of Health in the fight against STDs and AIDS, spreading information and distributing condoms to the population' (Sfair, Bittar and Lopes, 2015, p. 629, my translation). It also represents the growth of the healthcare sector as a driving force within school-based sex education, discussed later in this chapter. Finally, in 2011, the Education and Culture Commission rejected a proposed change to the Family Planning Law of 1996, which would have legally obliged municipal and state education systems to include sex education in the curricula for all private and public schools (Equipe Voluntária Brasil, 2011). Such implementation would have established sex education as a mandatory part of school curriculum, in contrast with its current ambiguous status.

The PCNs

As described above, until 1996, sex education – where it existed – came as part of “Health Education” within the Natural Sciences, particularly Biology. Conversely, the PCNs, which came into effect in 1997, established sex education as one of several *temas transversais* (cross-cutting themes), together with ethics, health, the environment and cultural plurality. The “cross-cutting themes” were selected as those which were ‘fundamental and urgent problems in social life’ (Altmann, 2013, p. 74, my translation), with sex education included due to the rising teenage pregnancy rate and the risk of HIV/AIDS (ibid.). The PCNs advised that, because of their intense social reach, these “cross-cutting themes” should be elaborated differently from conventional disciplinary teaching, as ‘their complexity means that no subject area in isolation would be sufficient to cover [these topics]’ (Brasil, 1998, p. 26, my translation). The PCNs determined that sex education be delivered in a cross-curricular way, by teachers of all disciplines, whenever the subject might arise, and that it be revisited whenever necessary throughout the school career, in line with

students' development. This approach recognised, for the first time in Brazil, that a biological explanation of sex and reproduction was not sufficient, and that it is necessary to focus on emotional, social and historical aspects, amongst others (da Fonseca, Gomes and Teixeira, 2010, p. 331). According to the PCNs, a cross-cutting approach to sex education would help young people to respect diversity, acknowledge the right to pleasure, know their bodies, value health, break down taboos and stereotypes, critique "masculinity" and "femininity" as socially constructed, express themselves, recognise the importance of consent, protect themselves from coercion and exploitation, be proactive with regards to STDs/HIV/AIDS, adopt safe sex practices, avoid unwanted pregnancy, and make responsible decisions (Brasil, 1997, pp. 311-312). The guidelines even give suggestions as to how individual school subjects could work on topics related to sexuality within their lessons. For example, on the topic of AIDS, the PCNs suggest that Natural Sciences cover forms of transmission and prevention, Portuguese Language examines the coverage of AIDS in literary texts, magazines and newspapers, History explores comparative studies of different epidemics, whilst in Maths, students research statistics about the epidemic and produce graphs and tables, in Geography they explore the most affected regions nationally and internationally, in the Arts they paint scenes or act theatrical pieces showing the human experience of the disease, and in Physical Education they study the necessary precautions against HIV contractions through blood contact (Brasil, 1997).

The PCNs divide the sex education curriculum into three segments – the human body (including feelings, sensations, psychological, biological and social dimensions, the mechanisms of conception, pregnancy and childbirth, as well as developmental differences between men and women), gender relations (including sex/gender, and masculine and feminine identities construction) and STD/AIDS Prevention. However,

the PCNs also highlight the potential for more varied discussion: ‘the discussion of controversial and delicate topics, like masturbation, sexual initiation, “ficar” and “namoro”, homosexuality, abortion, sexual dysfunction, prostitution and pornography, within a democratic and pluralist perspective, can contribute a lot to the well-being of children, teenagers and young people in living their sexualities now and in the future’ (Brasil, 1997, p. 293, my translation). It is important to note that the very inclusion of sexuality within the PCNs could be interpreted as progressive, as it indicates the importance of this topic to young people’s lives and to society more generally: ‘with the PCNs, sexuality gains legitimacy in being covered by means of the cross-cutting theme “sex education”, given that these guidelines consider that school should cover this subject because it is fundamental in people’s lives’ (Leão and Ribeiro, 2012, p. 30, my translation).

Although the PCNs have been praised for their holistic approach to sexuality and their intent to cover a variety of topics, the reality of sex education in Brazil is wholly different: ‘while (not infrequently) superb on paper, the politics (sic) may not effect substantive change in people’s lives, either because the policies remain unknown or unfunded, or because the policies encounter resistance by institutions and other social actors’ (Mountian, 2014, p. 8).

Various criticisms have been levelled at the PCNs. One major issue is that they are still only guidelines; there is no legal requirement for schools to deliver sex education (UNICEF, 2005; França, 2006). In addition, it is the teacher’s responsibility to assess the level of maturity and prior knowledge of the class, and to use these as a guide to the depth he/she should go into on each topic (França, 2006, p. 1458), making the process dependent on individual teacher will and commitment. This non-mandatory status, reiterated in 2011 by the rejection of proposals to make sex education compulsory, means that students can still progress through their entire education

without receiving sex education. It also means that, where sex education is provided, there is no official framework against which lessons can be compared and monitored.

Secondly, the definition of sexuality provided within the guidelines is too 'vague and imprecise' (da Silva, 2015, p. 80, my translation). The simple definition given is that sexuality is 'something inherent to life and to health, which is expressed by human beings from birth until death' (Brasil, 1997, p. 287, my translation). Clearly, this definition aims to be inclusive, and to move away from reductive and essentialist biological understandings, however, some scholars feel that this results in 'a definition which covers everything and ends up meaning nothing' (Saviani, 2008, p. 63, my translation).

The PCNs have also been criticised as they place a great deal of responsibility and pressure onto teachers in the provision of sex education, particularly in later school years.⁵⁴ The PCNs advise that sex education be delivered by students' usual classroom teachers, due to the level of comfort, trust and intimacy required for a detailed discussion of confusions, questions and fears (França, 2006, p. 1459): teachers are expected to provide sex education which is holistic, accepting, and open, regardless of their own life experiences in a society where sexuality is taboo. Therefore, the PCNs stress the importance of providing teachers with adequate training to allow them to fulfil this (Brasil, 1997). However, studies have shown that whilst the pressure and responsibility placed on teachers endure, many schools have neither sufficiently-trained teachers nor the minimum necessary conditions to incorporate sex education (Cevallos, 2006) – indeed, the majority of teachers receive no training in delivering sex education lessons (França, 2006, p. 1457). Teachers themselves perceive myriad difficulties: lack of specialised training, limitations posed

⁵⁴ See p. 99.

by interdisciplinary teaching, misunderstandings between staff, lack of structure, lack of materials, disinterest, and fear of discussing the necessary topics (Altmann, 2006, p. 7), whilst others experience difficulties adapting to the rapid cultural changes and influences in society (childhood.org, 2015). Many teachers feel so uncomfortable or underprepared to take on such a discussion, that they rely on inviting healthcare professionals into school to give sex education *palestras*⁵⁵, resulting in educational interventions which are often strongly normative (da Silva, 2015, pp. 81–82).

Although the *palestra* format might act as a useful complement to cross-curricular sex education, it was never intended to be its main component. Altmann (2006) reiterates this drawback, stating that it results in the kind of single-disciplinary (usually biological) approach to sex education which the PCNs were designed to avoid (2006, p. 7).

In addition, despite the fact that, with the introduction of the PCNs, schools no longer had to obtain parental permission to teach sex education (childhood.org, 2015), at various moments the PCNs reiterate the ultimate authority of the family in this issue.⁵⁶ They make clear that sex education should not conflict with the values of students' families (Brasil, 1997), stating, for example, that 'the work of the school... does not substitute nor compete with the role of the family, rather it complements it' (ibid., p. 299, my translation). However, critics have highlighted that, in ceding ultimate authority to the family on the issue of sexuality, the PCNs create a situation where it is unacceptable to challenge discriminatory or dangerous family views and/or practices: it would be illegitimate to criticise, for example, the submission of women to men founded in religious beliefs, and try to promote gender equality. According to the PCNs, '[sex education] should simply broaden "the range of

⁵⁵ Presentations or workshops, usually given on a one-off basis.

⁵⁶ See Chapter Seven.

knowledges and options so that each student can choose their own course” (Brasil, 1997), as if the possibilities for intervention are restricted only to the presentation of different opinions’ (da Silva, 2015, p. 82, my translation).

Another substantial criticism of the PCNs is that, despite seemingly genuine attempts to do otherwise, the guidelines continue to promote a restricted and restrictive biological understanding of sexuality. Challenging the biological approach to sex education was one of the principal motivations of the PCNs (Altmann, 2013, p. 77), suggesting instead an approach which ‘considers all the dimensions of sexuality: biological, mental and sociocultural, as well as its political implications’ (Brasil, 1997, p. 295, my translation). However, the PCNs zone sex education coverage into three “blocks”: (1) the body: the matrix of sexuality; (2) gender relations; and (3) STDs/AIDS. The weighting of this division – with two anatomical/biological “blocks” and one sociocultural - has been considered ‘a biologising treatment of the topic’ (da Silva, 2015, p. 83, my translation). Others have highlighted that the policy focuses extensively on the coverage of the third “block”, STDs/AIDS, to the detriment of the others, particularly the “block” which refers to gender relations. Leão and Ribeiro (2012) emphasise that doing so results in an understanding of sexuality restricted to the biological, and of sex education as ‘an informative and regulatory activity’ (2012, p. 32, my translation). Sex education in Brazil is strongly influenced by a biomedical focus, in which topics like prevention of STDs and teenage pregnancies, as well as the biological changes in adolescence are emphasised (Sayão, 1997), and issues of social construction of sexuality, sexual diversity and respect for difference are missing, which contradicts the all-embracing approach nominally favoured by the PCNs (da Silva, 2014, p. 1420). It could be argued that the interdisciplinary focus within the PCNs has been superseded by the introduction of the SPE, which, as mentioned earlier, has an explicit focus on the reduction of HIV/AIDS. This

dominance of healthcare priorities over and above broader education in sexuality could reflect the dominance of sex education policy documents coming from the Department of Health, and the prevalence of references to education for *prevenção* above other types of sexuality education (Sfair, Bittar and Lopes, 2015).⁵⁷ Even though the PCNs still represent the main educational guidelines on how sex education should be implemented, the place of the Health Department as a driving force on this issue, and the prevalence of the *palestra* as a main sex education format⁵⁸, could help explain why biological, biomedical and public health foci predominate.

Two final criticisms of the PCN approach to sex education are linked, as both deal with the challenges of interdisciplinarity. First, the approach is deemed inconsistent because it calls for a designated space for sex education from the *quinta série* (roughly equating to the first year of secondary school in the UK). In addition to the continuation of the cross-curricular approach, the PCNs call for the systematisation of sex education, as a weekly hour-long session either within the existing timetable, or as an extra-curricular activity (Brasil, 1997, p. 308). Whilst younger students might use this opportunity to discuss concerns over puberty and changes to their bodies, as they get older this space can be used to discuss subjects like abortion, virginity, homosexuality, pornography, prostitution etc. (ibid.). Such a systematised approach seems at odds with the holistic and cross-cutting approach upon which the PCNs hinge, seemingly put in place to act as a safety net to cover the subject in case the interdisciplinary approach should fail. Secondly, implementing an interdisciplinary approach to sex education coverage is seen as extremely challenging. Critics have

⁵⁷ Interestingly, education receives slightly greater financing from the Brazilian government at 6.1% of GDP (*Globo*, 2014) compared with 3.6% of the GDP which is spent on health (Caoli, 2015). However, the number of students means that the country's spend per head is only around 1/3 of the OECD average (*Globo*, 2014).

⁵⁸ See Chapter Five.

identified that such an approach seems to translate to “project work”: ‘[i]n principle this is not a problem, but quickly becomes one, when the topics are covered exclusively and inevitably by projects’ (do Bomfim, et al., 2013, p. 44, my translation). There appears to be an inherent lack of fit between an interdisciplinary approach to sex education and the strict disciplinary environment of the school – the topic, which should be everybody’s responsibility, becomes the responsibility of no one at all. To rectify this, interdisciplinarity would need to be woven more firmly into the fabric of the school, not imposed upon the day-to-day running, purely for the teaching of the “cross-cutting themes”, as do Bomfim et al. (2013) state: ‘It seems that trans- and interdisciplinarity are not present in planning, in the curriculum, in the interface between disciplines. So, we can reiterate here that, in studying the official documents of formal education: the “cross-cutting themes” were left behind in the 1990s!’ (2013, p. 44, my translation).

To conclude this brief analysis of sex education policy developments, and the particular focus on the PCNs, it could be said that the guidelines include some extremely progressive approaches, ideas and definitions:

By including sex education as a “cross-cutting theme”, you can cope with the demands of students, cover sexuality and sex in a more natural way, without a rigid protocol, getting closer to the realities of teenagers/young people and encouraging them to reflect on their behaviour, to make plans, to respect their bodies, the bodies of others, and sexual diversity. (Sfair, Bittar and Lopes, 2015, p. 630, my translation)

However, the vagueness, non-mandatory status, and lack of attention to the practicalities involved in implementing these progressive guidelines mean that the PCNs represent somewhat of a lost opportunity. Much of this ambiguity has been attributed to the need to balance healthcare provision with appeasing conservative factions in society, be that from Catholic or Evangelical groups (Mountian, 2014, p.

8). This may explain, in part, why the landscape of Brazilian sex education includes progressive policy, with lagging implementation, as da Silva argues: ‘after over 15 years, the confrontations between what can and cannot be said in schools set the pace at which the implementation of sex education is progressing (2014, p. 1419)

The place of sex education in the Brazilian National Curriculum, then, is only part of the story. Although the policy itself, fruit of the work of the Brazilian feminist movement amongst others, has been understood to reflect progressive attitudes to sexuality and gender, as well as a productive framework for teaching and learning, the realities of its implementation produce a far more complex picture. This, in combination with wider State commitment to *prevenção* through the SPE and the greater role of the Department for Health in establishing the sex education agenda, result in a sex education reality which is less than ideal.

The Bolsa Família Programme

Before completing this review of the relevant policy landscape, a brief summary of the *Bolsa Família* programme is necessary. This programme was mentioned on several occasions by the young women in this study, as linked to the “problem” of teenage pregnancy.

The *Bolsa Família* is a CCT with the aim of ‘reduc[ing] poverty in the short-term by providing poor families with cash and improv[ing] human capital in the longer-term by encouraging behaviors (sic) related to health, nutrition, and education’ (Shei, et al., 2014, p. 1). Created in 2003 by then-President Lula da Silva, the programme was the amalgamation of four existing social CCT programmes, intended to streamline these programmes, reducing inefficiency and increasing transparency. The *Bolsa Família* is based on three main principles: ‘(1) the expansion of healthcare, education and nutritional services through conditional mechanisms; (2) the integration of cash transfer programmes with the rest of the social protection system; and (3) the

reduction of poverty through the transfer of cash to selected households' (Sánchez-Ancochea and Mattei, 2011, pp. 303-304). The programme was ratified in 2004, with the passing of Federal Law 10.836.

The *Bolsa Família* classifies as “poor” any family with a monthly income of between R\$77 (around £12.75) and R\$154 (£25.50) per person, and “extremely poor” those earning less than R\$77 per person. “Extremely poor” families are particularly targeted by the programme, however, “poor” families also qualify if they have family members who are pregnant or breastfeeding, or aged 0–17 (Caixa, n.d.). The basic benefit payment is R\$77, but variable payments are available in addition to this: R\$35 (£5.80) per child under 15; R\$35 per pregnant woman; R\$35 per child under 6 months; R\$42 (£6.95) per teenager aged 16 or 17 (maximum of two). Families are limited to five variable payments, capped at R\$175 (£28.95) plus two variable payments for adolescents. Finally, there is an “Overcoming Extreme Poverty” benefit, which is calculated according to the payments a family already receives. The maximum any family can receive is R\$336 (£55.60) per month (Caixa, n.d.). These payments are made preferentially to women and ‘are directly credited to beneficiaries’ electronic benefit cards conditional on compliance with health and education conditionalities’ (Shei, et al., 2014, p. 2). These include: 85% school attendance for children aged 6–15; 75% school attendance for adolescents aged 16–17; compliance with the immunisation schedule and regular growth monitoring visits for children aged 0–7; attendance at all scheduled pre-natal appointments for pregnant women; participation in educational activities on breastfeeding and nutrition, aimed at nursing mothers; and regular check-ups for all women aged 14–44 (Caixa, n.d.).

The *Bolsa Família* now reaches 13.8 million Brazilian families (Portal Brasil, 2015), meaning that almost one-quarter of the Brazilian population benefits from the

programme (Watts, 2013). In August 2015, R\$2.3 billion of payments (around £380 million) were made, at an average of R\$166.34 per family (around £27.50) (ibid.). Due in part to the *Bolsa Família* and its predecessors, income inequality fell by almost 4.6% between 1995 and 2004 (The World Bank, 2013), and the proportion of Brazilians living in extreme poverty declined from 8.8% to 3.6% between 2002 and 2012, a third of which experts attribute to the *Bolsa Família* programme (Watts, 2013). The CCT programme has been lauded as a model of poverty reduction for use around the world, with some suggesting it is Brazil's 'most successful export' (ibid.). However, it has faced significant criticism. No evaluative programme was put in place when *Bolsa Família* was initiated, meaning its impact is difficult to measure, and so potentially subject to political manipulation (Shei, et al., 2014, p. 2). The programme's coverage is much denser in the Northeast, where almost seven millions families benefit from the scheme (Portal Brasil, 2015). This has led to accusations of laziness and benefit scrounging, directed at *nordestinos*: such as from São Paulo lawyer Gisela Novaes do Canto who, in the aftermath of the 2014 Presidential elections was widely reported as having said that '[w]hilst the *nordestinos* lie in their hammocks, awaiting their *Bolsa Família* payments, the South is working to support this country' (Campos, 2014, n.p.). Other criticisms include doubts over the justness the programme's conditions: 'attaching provisos penalises the most vulnerable families, because they are the ones who face the greatest difficulties in complying with the demands' (Cavalcanti, Costa and da Silva, 2013, p. 104, my translation). In addition, several scholars have indicated that the programme's successes cannot continue to grow unless fundamental improvements are made to Brazil's healthcare and education systems (e.g. Sánchez-Ancochea and Mattei, 2011).

This chapter has briefly summarised the geographical, economic, social and cultural context of this study, in order to situate the participants' experiences and accounts.

The summary of the relevant policy landscape of municipalisation, reproductive rights issues, sex education policy and implementation, and CCT programmes has hopefully provided a backdrop for the more specific focus on sex education in the coming chapters.

Chapter 4. Methodology

This chapter explores the methodological approach and rationale of this study. It is guided by the belief that knowledges produced in research are intrinsically linked to the research process:

the choices that researchers make, the practicalities that need to be considered when doing research and the process of actually doing the research are all likely to affect not only the dynamics of particular research relationships and the research process, but also the research “product(s)”: the “findings”, the “results”, the “knowledge”. (Letherby, 2003, p. 100)

Therefore, this chapter examines the decisions made and the actions taken throughout the study, from conception to write-up. It does so with as much honesty and reflexivity as possible about my own positionality, challenges and experiences, acknowledging, as Letherby argues in a later work, that ‘research is a subjective, power-laden, emotional, embodied experience... it requires the constant, critical interrogation of our personhood – both intellectual and personal’ (2013, p. 80)

The chapter begins by situating the research according to my epistemology, specifically my understanding of how knowledges are (co-)produced; exploring the decision to opt for a feminist, qualitative approach. It then examines more specifically the principal research method employed – the semi-structured interview – and how this method fits with the broader methodological standpoint. The chapter then considers the research design and the decisions made leading up to the fieldwork period, specifically: the location of the study; the challenges of researching in a second language; the rationale for the research sample; the development and use of the interview guide; and the ethical review process. It then explores the fieldwork itself: recruitment; interview practice; the employment of other data sources; and the process of leaving the field. The fieldwork section concludes with what I

have called a “critical reflection” on the work done in the field, where I consider issues of power, positionality, and the insider/outsider dynamic, and how these issues may have impacted on the knowledges produced within this study. The next section examines the analysis and write-up of the data produced in the field, describing the process from transcription and translation, to manual and computer analysis, to write-up, and explaining the rationale for decisions made during that process. Finally, this chapter reflects on some of the key ethical considerations arising throughout this study.

In line with my feminist approach, I have attempted to be as honest and reflexive as possible about the research process. This approach was driven by the belief, shared with other researchers, that fieldwork is too often presented as a straightforward and unemotional process: ‘Readers are seldom provided an in-depth view of the inevitable wrinkles in the messy process of conducting research... it is important for all researchers – from the emergent to the seasoned – to share our experiences in the field and to learn from one another’ (Rubinstein-Ávila, 2009, p. 1). Therefore, this chapter, at times, becomes quite a personal account of my decisions and struggles both in and outside the field.

Before commencing a discussion of decisions and actions within this research, it is important to explore why I made those decisions, which necessitates the consideration of my research epistemology: my ‘philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledges are possible’ (Maynard, 1994, p. 10). I begin with a discussion of feminist research praxis, and then explore what this might mean for a sensitive research methodology. Finally, I discuss how a dedication to such approaches led to the selection of my primary research method: qualitative, semi-structured interviews.

Feminist Research Praxis

From my research topic, one might infer that I intended to employ a feminist perspective; however, this should not be taken for granted. Research by a woman, about women's lives, is not sufficient to make research "feminist"; nor is all feminist research done about or with women (Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994). In her guide to feminist research, Letherby (2003) highlighted several criteria for feminist researchers: giving attention to the significance of gender; challenging the concept of "objectivity" which assumes that knowledge can be "collected" in an uncontaminated way; valuing the personal/private as worthy of study; developing non-exploitative research relationships; and valuing reflexivity and emotion as sources of insight (2003, p. 73). Criteria such as these have guided me through the selection of my methods, to my ethical approach, to the inclusion of reflexive practice throughout the writing of this chapter.

Feminist understandings of how knowledge is (co-)produced resonate strongly with my own beliefs. Feminists reject the idea of any absolute "truth" or "knowledge", positing instead that 'knowledge is situated and perspectival, and that there are multiple standpoints from which knowledge is produced' (Hekman, 1997, p. 342). They believe that valuing the experiences and lives of marginalised peoples within heavily stratified societies can 'provide starting points for thought... from which humans' relations with each other and the natural world can become visible' (Harding, 1993, p. 54). This allows for the positioning of 'women's lived experience as sources of knowledge' (Campbell and Wasco, 2000, p. 775). Feminists also reject the understanding that knowledge is somehow "out there" in the field, to be found and "collected". Instead, they regard knowledge as co-created (Finlay, 2002, p. 534) and understand research as the collaborative production of a truth, in 'dialogical process' (England, 1994, p. 84) with those who participate in one's research. Such

an approach encourages the stance taken within this research, that women are the authority on their own experience, and the best way to access those experiences is in dialogue with the women themselves; promoting the use of qualitative, dialogic research methods, as discussed below. Positioning participants as co-producers of knowledge in this way respects the knowledge and experience of individuals. Such an understanding should not, however, mask the hierarchical nature of the research relationship: indeed it should prompt reflection about the power dynamics inherent in such relationships, and how the researcher's social position impacts on the knowledges created, as I discuss later in this chapter.

Finally, feminists believe that research should be 'explicitly political' (Huncileby, 1998, p. 27). Although I acknowledge the limitations of what my work can reasonably achieve, the motivations for this research project came from a desire for change⁵⁹: 'feminists do not want only to learn about reality, but they also want to help change [it]' (Wasserfall, 1993, p. 26). It was with these epistemological conditions in mind, that I approached my methodological decision-making.

Doing Research "Sensitively"

Given that my research topic could be considered sensitive, I felt it was important to consider how feminist research ethics might be applied to sensitive research topics, in a methodology for "research done sensitively".

Sensitive research has been defined in many different ways. Johnson and Macleod Clarke (2003) identified as sensitive any research which has 'the potential to arouse emotional responses' (2003, p. 421), whilst Lee and Renzetti (1993), defined it as research concerned with "deviance" or social control, which impinges on the vested interests of powerful persons or explores the exercise of coercion/domination, or

⁵⁹ See Chapter One.

which deals with sacred objects/spaces/rituals etc. (1993, p. 5). More broadly, Sampson, Bloor and Fincham (2008) classify as sensitive any research which is intrusive. Given these definitions, it is clear how my research might be considered sensitive: it could potentially arouse emotional responses by inducing participants to recall times of particular happiness, unhappiness or vulnerability; it occurs in a context where sexuality is taboo and subject to social control, meaning discussion violates social norms; and it could be interpreted as intruding into a person's sexuality, commonly deemed a "private matter".

However, thinking of research as "sensitive" can produce anxiety and could potentially prompt researchers *not* to undertake a given project. Rather than conceptualise my research in this potentially negative way, I prefer to think about "research done sensitively", according to a framework based on ethical, flexible and reflexive research. In her research on mature women with bulimia, Robertson (2000) identifies an ethical framework of informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, anonymity, fulfilment of promises, non-maleficence and beneficence (pp. 532-533), to which I would add 'acknowledgement of the "emotion work" undertaken in fieldwork'.⁶⁰ Other scholars have emphasised the importance of flexibility and adaptability from the researcher when conducting research on sensitive topics, as they must think on their feet and find strategies to manage issues as they arise (McCosker, Barnard and Gerber, 2001, p. 10). Finally, a sensitive researcher must aim for reflexivity throughout the research process, a process which can be understood to include 'thinking critically about what you are doing and why, confronting and often challenging your own assumptions, and recognizing the extent to which your thoughts, actions and decisions shape how you research and what you see' (Mason, 2002, p. 5). It is clear how these imperatives to "research done

⁶⁰ See pp. 145-146.

sensitively” fit with the broader feminist philosophy behind this research. These commitments led me to consider the kind of research I would conduct, in practical terms: in short, the methods I would employ in the production of my data.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews

Letherby (2003) states that ‘[r]esearch from a feminist methodological standpoint involves the researcher taking women’s experience seriously’ (2003, p. 69), therefore it was vital for me to employ a methodology which would foreground those experiences and privilege the voices of the women I interviewed; prompting the use of qualitative research methods, principally the semi-structured interview. Although quantitative research has contributed to the study of sensitive topics, and there are feminist scholars who work with quantitative methods (see Robson, 2011, pp. 384–385), a qualitative approach seemed best suited to the epistemological priorities outlined above.⁶¹ There were several motivations for opting for qualitative research methods. In particular, the flexibility offered by qualitative approaches would allow me to interact with participants as individuals, each with uniquely situated knowledges and experiences to share. Qualitative methods are also ‘particularly well suited to exploring issues that hold some complexity’ (Snape and Spencer, 2003, p. 5), making them ideal for the study of young people’s sexual learning processes. A qualitative approach is also considered particularly useful in exploratory work, where little research already exists (Patton, 2015), as in the case of this study, as it leaves the topic open for unforeseen issues and perspectives.

Based on my understandings of how knowledges are produced within the research context, I determined that the most fitting method for my research was semi-structured interviews. Focus groups were also considered: I had used them before,

⁶¹ The assumption that feminist research always employs qualitative, face-to-face research methods has been critiqued (e.g. Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994).

to some success, within my Masters project, and other studies have shown their usefulness in sexuality research, as they can 'provide conditions under which people feel comfortable discussing sexual experiences and encourage people to talk about sex' (Frith, 2000, p. 277). However, given the extent of the local taboo surrounding sexuality, and concerns about confidentiality and trust in such a close-knit community, combined with the difficulties I faced organising focus groups in Lençóis previously, I deemed this method unsuitable for this particular study. There would also be challenges with using participant observation methods: due to the considerable taboo, topics such as sexuality and sex education do not frequently arise in day-to-day conversations, making it unlikely that I would be able to observe an adequate number of "naturally occurring" interactions to complete my study.

However, the decision to utilise semi-structured interviews was not taken by a process of elimination of other methods. Given my interest in not only experiences of sex education but also in the *meaning* ascribed to these lessons and the information received in them, I strongly felt that the best way to research this topic was to ask young women directly. Semi-structured interviews represent a strong contribution to the feminist research project. They situate the participant as the "expert" on their own lives, which 'can be empowering and illuminating to participants, who are able to reflect and speak about their lives in a way not normally available to them' (Lowes and Gill, 2006, p. 592). They also adhere to feminist beliefs of knowledge as produced in collaboration between researcher and participant, as they represent 'interdependent relationships that involve interaction between the researcher and participant' (Perry, Thurston and Green, 2004, p. 140). A *semi-structured* approach was chosen above either a structured or an open style, in order to give the study direction and focus, whilst allowing for clarification of points and the inclusion of participants' ideas, perspectives, and vocabulary. Such an approach is particularly

useful for exploratory work, as meanings can be probed, and interesting narratives explored in greater depth (Durant and Carey, 2000). These factors made semi-structured interviews the ideal method for this study.

Research Design and Decision-Making

Commitment to sensitive, feminist research praxis was influential during the design of this research, and prompted me to reflect on decisions made throughout. This section discusses considerations regarding location, second language use, the research sample, production and use of the interview guide, and the ethical review process.

One of the first important decisions when designing my research was location. Having lived and worked in Lençóis for six months in 2009-2010 and again for a month in 2012, I worried that the town and townspeople's previous knowledge of me might impact negatively on my research. In my previous life in the town, I was a 21 year-old student, there to volunteer in a local children's project, but also to learn Portuguese, get a great tan, and have an amazing time – nothing out of the ordinary, but not the same things now on my agenda as a researcher. I was concerned that locals would assume I was there "*só pra curtir*"⁶², and that I would not be taken seriously. Perhaps I needed a new fieldsite, so that I could begin afresh with fewer preconceptions.

However, my concerns were balanced with the practical benefits of my previous experience of the town. I was aware of the organisations and institutions I would need to access; I had some contacts who would help me and introduce me to others; and, most importantly, I had a network of friends to support me. Even simple things such as knowing my way around would contribute to a much smoother transition. As

⁶² Just to have a good time.

location was not predetermined by my research questions, it seemed logical to minimise the difficulties I would likely already face in researching a taboo topic in a small-town environment. I therefore opted to continue with Lençóis as the location for the research. I frequently commented in my fieldwork diaries the benefits of this decision:

7th February 2014

Getting the four interviews at Grãos⁶³ today makes me really glad I picked Lençóis as my base. This process has been difficult enough with my friends to help me, my existing knowledge of where I might go for help, and my knowledge of the geography and culture of the town... Imagine if I had gone somewhere new, without friends to help me “correr atrás” (pursue it) and had to start from scratch, in both sourcing information and understanding place and population?.. And that would have been even harder as – in addition to orienting myself – I would have had to build a social life and struggle to make friends.

This decision, made early-on in the research process, affected both the fieldwork experience and the data co-produced with my participants to a very great extent.

A second, more practical concern was language. Wherever I selected as my fieldwork site, conducting fieldwork in my second language was going to present challenges, thus I needed to decide how to manage this dimension. My first degree was in Spanish and Portuguese, but it was my prior experience in Brazil that gave me my substantial knowledge of and fluency in Brazilian Portuguese, giving me the confidence to conduct this fieldwork without an interpreter. This was important because none of my participants spoke English, so all interviews would be conducted

⁶³ The *Associação Grãos de Luz e Griô*, known locally as *Grãos*, is an NGO which works to strengthen education, culture and sustainable development in rural and peripheral communities in the municipality. It runs tours celebrating local knowledge, educational courses based around oral traditions, workshops for children in music, art, handicrafts and drama, and training programmes for young people, discussed in Chapter Eight.

in Portuguese, then transcribed and translated. There is nothing wrong with employing a local interpreter where necessary, but given the sensitive topic, the possibility of another body in the room and subsequent concerns over confidentiality, especially given the community propensity for gossip⁶⁴, meant employing an interpreter could potentially make the challenges of recruitment even more acute. Other studies have discussed some of the difficulties in using an interpreter within fieldwork (e.g. Temple and Edwards, 2002, in the UK; Berman and Tyyskä, 2010, in Canada; Ingvarsdotter, Johnsdotter and Östman, 2010, in Sweden), although such studies tend to focus on the impact on outputs rather than on the research relationship.

I was initially concerned about the impact non-native Portuguese would have on my ability to build rapport with my participants. Although my language skills are very good, I would not be able to catch every joke, understand every cultural reference, or pick up on every nuance in the way a native Brazilian would. Listening back to interview recordings, it is apparent that some things *were* missed, though this happened infrequently and did not affect my overall understanding. Nor did it substantially affect rapport – in fact, there were moments when my mistakes and slip-ups appeared to endear me to my participants, or put them at ease when discussing topics about which they felt they were not knowledgeable. Indeed, the fact that I, a *gringa*⁶⁵, had bothered to learn Portuguese, particularly because I spoke it well, with a Northeast accent and a reasonable command of youth slang, made it easier to connect with my participants and create a comfortable and respectful research atmosphere. As Spivak (1992) argues '[r]ather than imagining that women

⁶⁴ See Chapter Seven.

⁶⁵ A foreign, Anglophone woman, originally used for US women, before expanding to encompass British, Australian and South African women. In my fieldsite, the term was used indiscriminately for any white foreigner.

automatically have something identifiable in common, why not say, humbly and practically, my first obligation in understanding solidarity is to learn her mother-tongue' (1992, p. 190).

The sample

A further consideration was the research sample. In the original funding proposal for this project, I planned to interview 25–30 heterosexual women aged 18–20, aiming for an even split between single women and those married/in steady relationships. The primary criterion for inclusion in the study was experience of at least one formal session of school-based sex education. This requirement was due to the direction and focus of the study: although young women without formal sex education would doubtless make interesting and important contributions, a key interest was in the interplay between young women and the State, with sex education policy acting as a prism to expose this relationship. By limiting my study to only those women who had been subject to State interventions into their sexual lives, I would be better placed to examine how appropriate, useful and well-suited the young women perceive such interventions to be, and how far they see themselves and their needs reflected in policy and delivery. I also limited my sample to those who received sex education in Lençóis. Some women living in the town had moved there from other parts of Brazil, and so would have had very different experiences from those of *lençoense* women. Although healthcare and education policy is issued at federal level, it is implemented at state and municipal level⁶⁶ and, as a result, public services are often delivered inconsistently across the country, with the North and Northeast commonly experiencing the worst/most patchy provision (Collins, Araujo and Barbosa, 2000, p. 123). It was important, therefore, to ensure my participants had experienced similar effects of this inconsistency.

⁶⁶ See Chapter Three.

These two recruitment criteria – receipt of formal sex education, and the location of that education – were fairly straightforward decisions. However, some of the other criteria for my sample proved more problematic, for example, age, relationship status and sexuality (see *Appendix A* for basic information on the eventual participants).

As more consideration was given to potential recruitment challenges, the age bracket for participation was extended to include women aged 18–24. During fieldwork, as discussed below, participants were largely recruited through opportunistic methods, namely snowballing, which involve ‘the researcher taking advantage of unforeseen opportunities as they arise during the course of fieldwork, adopting a flexible approach to meld the sample around the fieldwork context as it unfolds’ (Ritchie, Lewis and Elam, 2003, p. 81). This, combined with recruitment difficulties, meant that I was reluctant to turn away women who did not fit my original sample specification: if a woman had heard about the project through a friend, but did not fit the age bracket, I did not wish to invalidate her experiences by declining her an interview. I therefore decided to extend the age bracket once again, to 18–29. I felt that, because all the women were reflecting on past experiences of sexual learning, the core of the study would be unaffected. On the contrary, the diversity of experience would only be augmented, as the older women would have been less likely to have experienced the effects of the introduction of the PCNs, whilst the younger women in the sample would have experienced their education after the implementation of the SPE.⁶⁷ I also felt this diversity would extend to their experiences of “informal” sources of sexual learning, including the media and “the street”.

The eventual age bracket 18-29 allowed for the participation of all the women who

⁶⁷ In reality, this relationship was less linear, given the tendency to move in and out of formal education due to work and childcare pressures.

approached me, except those under the age of 18. Adulthood legally begins at 18 in Brazil, so the inclusion of younger women would have required parental permission, potentially leading to problematic questions from parents as to a young woman's sexual experience/activity. Several women aged 16 or 17 did express interest in the project, however, I had to thank them for their interest and decline their participation.

A further consideration for the sample was the participants' relationship status. Over time, this was deemed less important, so I decided to aim for diversity in the sample, rather than attempting to recruit according to a 50:50 ratio of single women and those in relationships. I felt this approach would enrich my study, and help to reveal how sex education works with the realities of women's lives given the idea that a 'single woman must always say no and a married woman must never say no' (Paiva, 1993, p. 100) to sex. This approach resulted in a mixed sample, with three young women describing themselves as "married", thirteen as "in a relationship" and eleven as "single". This target of diversity was also true of recruiting women with and without children: no ratio was set as a target, and only six of the twenty-seven participants were mothers, all of whom had their first child when they were aged below twenty.

Additionally, the sexuality of the women in the research sample was an important issue: recruiting only heterosexual women raised practical and ethical questions. Whilst I feel strongly that lesbian and bisexual women are hugely underrepresented in academic research on Brazil⁶⁸, this was a study on heterosexual femininities, and needed to be bounded as such. Restricting my sample to heterosexual women would allow me to examine the reception and use of sex education alongside the heavily gendered power dynamics of Brazilian heterosexual relationships.⁶⁹ Despite

⁶⁸ Lesbianism is still very much a taboo in a way that male homosexuality is not: gay men's experiences have been heavily researched (Parker, 1991, 1999; Klein, 1999; Green, 2001), and lesbians mostly neglected (Allen, 2012, p. 18).

⁶⁹ See Chapter Two.

this focus, I did not wish to include the word “heterosexual” during recruitment for fear of further marginalising lesbian and bisexual *lençoense* women, already a stigmatised group. Nor did I wish to force women to assume a fixed identity, if they felt their sexuality was more fluid. Therefore, all women were invited to contact me, and in the preliminary conversations about the research all twenty-seven women mentioned relationships/experiences with men, indicating that they would have something to contribute to a discussion of heterosexual femininities in the town. This open and flexible approach meant that I was privy to the perspectives of some women who might have excluded themselves from the study had I recruited more rigidly: one participant had experimented sexually with a close female friend, whilst two others were rumoured to be in a relationship, although this was not disclosed in the interviews.

Interview guide

With semi-structured interviews forming my main research method, it was important to produce an interview guide around which to shape the interviews (Bryman, 2012). This guide went through several iterations, in discussion with my supervisors, including a move from a chronological approach to a thematic one, based around three themes: where participants learned about sex, the format and content of school-based sex education, and their experiences and suggestions for future programmes.

Given my distance from the fieldsite during the planning stages, no pilot interviews were carried out, however, I did conduct two rehearsal interviews with young British women. This somewhat artificial process guided me as to the timings of the interviews and also highlighted some questions which might work well, or not so well, though their translation to Portuguese and the transition to a different cultural setting made this difficult to gauge. These rehearsals also provided me with interview

practice, and allowed me to improve my interview technique: for example, I have a tendency to fill silences, and this process helped me to hold back and give participants more time to consider their answers before I assume they require further information.

Eventually, after translating the guide into Portuguese and carefully reflecting on its cultural appropriateness and the formality of its language, the guide was produced which was taken into the field (see *Appendix B*). However, this was by no means the end of the process: because qualitative research is, and should be, a flexible process, questions were frequently added and omitted during fieldwork. For example, several of the young women raised issues about young men and young women's differing motivations for sexual activity – that men want pleasure and women want love – and also around male refusal to use condoms, so I incorporated questions on these topics into subsequent interviews. I also omitted or altered questions which were not working well – for example, I included a question which specifically asked what topics and content young women would like to see included in State-sanctioned sex education, as participants tended to discuss changes to the format, frequency, and age of delivery. The need for such flexibility is stressed by Britten (1995) in her work on qualitative interviewing for medical practitioners, where she highlights the importance of adapting the interview guide as one learns more about the research topic (1995, p. 252).

The guide was never intended to be a structured list of questions, however, in early interviews I found myself sticking rigidly to it. This was probably because of my inexperience and nerves: the interview guide represented a comfort blanket from which I was reluctant to stray. However, as my confidence grew, I felt more comfortable using the guide for its intended purpose – to give shape to the interviews and to act as a prompt if I lost my thread. The atmosphere in the interviews, and the

quality of the data both improved vastly once more flexibility was created in the process.

Ethical Process

Before embarking on fieldwork, it was vital to obtain all the relevant permissions from my university, including Ethical Approval. This proved a challenging process, as it seemed to me that many of the mechanisms and procedures do not adequately cater for research carried out in culturally diverse, non-Anglophone, international contexts. For example, the production of multiple “official”-looking information and debriefing sheets and consent forms tended to worry my participants, putting them on edge and making them feel that they did not “know enough” to participate in my research. As a result, I found myself walking a fine line between abiding by the stipulations of the ethical approval, and facilitating the comfort and ease of my participants. Much of the information about consent and participant rights was given orally: although I provided participants with an information sheet in Brazilian Portuguese, and obtained written consent (see *Appendices C and D*), I tried to keep the written information on the sheets to a minimum and went into greater depth in discussion with each individual. I also prefaced these discussions with reassurance that the forms were “nothing to worry about” and were simply a bureaucratic requirement for my studies. Other studies have also highlighted the untranslatability of institutional ethical procedures in developing contexts (e.g. Creed-Kanashiro et al., 2005, in Peru; Tindana, Kass and Akweongo, 2006, in Ghana; Sultana, 2007, in Bangladesh). This is not to say that I took the ethical protections of my participants lightly. However, I did feel that the ethical approval process prompts researchers to consider ethics as “open and shut” once the approval is issued, rather than to see it as intrinsic to the entire research process. To counter this, I reflect in greater depth on some of the ethical considerations of my research later in this chapter.

Fieldwork

Having considered and reconsidered the design of my research, I was faced with the reality of conducting nine months fieldwork on the other side of the world. I quickly realised that the best laid plans must be adapted and altered in the face of the realities and specificities of the field, and that as a researcher I would need to be flexible and decisive enough to make the required changes.

In terms of recruitment of participants, I approached the field prepared to be patient. I knew it would be unreasonable to rush into my fieldsite and expect women to immediately open up to me about topics rarely discussed in the public sphere. I intended to invest time in becoming known to the community, spending time in places where I would be visible to other women, building rapport with them and, hopefully, eventually trust. However, I was also conscious of striking the right balance, believing that some women would feel more comfortable talking to me about personal issues for the precise reason that I am not a part of their community, as discussed later in this chapter. This outsider status may make me “safer”, as I am unconnected to the usual channels of community gossip.

I entered the field with a recruitment plan, and several back-ups. I had anticipated that recruitment might be difficult: Brazilian women are often encouraged to remain or appear naïve about sex and their bodies in order to avoid being labelled promiscuous (Paiva, 1993), and so taking part in this research could potentially put reputations at risk. I therefore planned to approach recruitment from several fronts, to increase the likelihood of participation. A major access issue is that *lençoense* women tend to be far less visible in public arenas like the street and bars than are men⁷⁰, making them difficult to find and talk to, short of knocking on their doors. In order to overcome this

⁷⁰ See Chapter Two.

obstacle, I planned to target organisations in which young women participated – for example, the local mother-and-baby group – and establish contact. With the leaders' permission, I would attend meetings and events to allow members to get to know me, and eventually give a short recruitment briefing, telling members about the research and encouraging them to participate. I anticipated that the majority of participants would be recruited through snowballing – where women who had already participated recommend the study to their friends and pass on names of friends/relatives as potential participants. Much of the success or failure of the research would therefore depend on “word of mouth”: if one woman participated in the research and had a good experience, in a close-knit community like Lençóis word would quickly spread, making her friends and family more likely to participate, and so on. Finally, I set up a Facebook recruitment page (see *Appendix E*), with information about the project and my contact details for further information. I posted updates and calls for participation on this group, and shared the group on other local discussion groups and pages.

Despite my varied approach, take-up was slow. The mother-and-baby group I had hoped to work with had been dissolved, and early involvement with a group for pregnant women at the Social Welfare Reference Centre, *CRAS*⁷¹, led me to believe many of the women were in vulnerable and difficult situations, which it would be coercive of me to exploit by approaching them to participate in my research.⁷²

Similarly, my attendance at *Grãos*' “Love, Sex and Relationships” sessions⁷³ yielded only one interview. The Facebook group, of which I had had high hopes, given the intense Facebook usage of *lençoense* young people⁷⁴, prompted a handful of women

⁷¹ The *Centro de Referência de Assistência Social* provides a variety of services, including sessions for retired people, activities for children and young people, and support sessions for pregnant women.

⁷² For example, one young woman was seven months pregnant with her third child and had received no pre-natal care.

⁷³ See Chapter Eight.

⁷⁴ See Chapter Seven.

to get in touch, however, many ceased responding after the initial contact. This method resulted in just two interviews.

As I had anticipated, the vast majority of participants came to the study through snowballing (see flowchart in *Appendix F*). One young woman in particular was extremely dedicated in advertising my study to friends, classmates and cousins. Although this recruitment tactic would eventually become successful, by half-way through my fieldwork period I had interviewed just eight women. One possible explanation for my difficulties recruiting participants was my firm “outsider” status. In Lençóis, *gringas* are met with some suspicion, as it is commonly felt that they are sexually forward and in pursuit of local men. This mistrust is hardly conducive to successful research relationships, particularly for sensitive topics. This issue, which I call the “*gringa* problem”, is discussed in-depth later in the chapter. Regardless of the reasons behind these difficulties, I found the challenges of recruitment extremely difficult to cope with, and often found myself doubting my capabilities as a researcher, and the likelihood of ever completing the fieldwork:

12th November 2013

I feel like a failure, I'm here to do one job – get 30 interviews – and can't even do that. I feel like I shouldn't be doing a PhD at all, I'm not up to it. I've been trying so hard and just not getting anywhere, I feel like I'm doing everything I can.

In light of the slow up-take, I considered new recruitment strategies, such as leaflets and posters and even extending the study to other small towns in the region.

However, interest then began to pick up and, through a combination of personal perseverance and the support of friends, family and supervisors back home, and my friends in Lençóis, I was able to recruit enough participants that saturation was reached by the time the time came to fly home.

It is important to comment here on the use of incentives to encourage participation. Each participant received a gift bag containing three or four small-value cosmetic items, and I also offered to pay travel costs, when a woman travelled by moto-taxi to the interview location, rather than coming on foot.⁷⁵ The cosmetics represented a “thank-you” for participating in the study, rather than an inducement to do so, and were chosen specifically because they would be deemed a “treat” for the young women, thus potentially less coercive than money or food vouchers, for example. Ragsdale and Anders gave a similar gift in their 1999 study in Belize, where nail polish was selected ‘as a culturally appropriate token of appreciation... The young women who took part in the study did not have easy access to these types of “extras” (cited in Fisher and Ragsdale, 2005, p. 16). I felt that women would be far more likely to participate in the study if I were to offer a financial token of appreciation, however, I worried that such a gesture could be misinterpreted. Although I feel that it would be fair to remunerate women for giving up their time, in light of other pressures of family, study, and paid work, as McDowell did in her longitudinal research with young men (2001), it could possibly have resulted in women participating purely for that reason.⁷⁶ The low socio-economic means of many of the young women in the town might mean that a financial incentive would represent compromised consent. I therefore decided to use the thank-you gift as planned – and many women were delighted with it!

The Interviews

Despite the challenges of recruitment, I managed to conduct twenty-seven semi-structured interviews, lasting between forty-five and ninety minutes. All but one were

⁷⁵ This rarely happened, due to the town’s small size.

⁷⁶ Participants have their own, varied motivations for taking part in research projects (Clark, 2010).

audio-recorded using a digital recorder⁷⁷, and notes were also made, highlighting non-verbal events and important themes. Before commencing the interviews, I discussed the information sheet and consent form with participants, answering any questions they had. I also asked them to fill out a form containing some basic biographical details. We then sat down together and began the interview, starting with some personal narrative before easing into the discussion of the various sources of sex education – the family, friends, the media, health-posts and the school. This reflects Britten's (1995) suggestion that '[i]t is usually best to start with questions that the interviewee can answer easily and then proceed to more difficult or sensitive topics' (p. 252). The interviews then focused on the nature of the sex education received in school, and finally moved on to the participant's opinions on how sex education might be improved. Despite this general format, each interview was different, with each woman focusing on those aspects they found most interesting or pertinent.

After eight interviews, my supervisors encouraged me to carry out some preliminary analysis, to explore the most salient themes arising from the interviews, and to highlight important silences in what the young women were saying and consider if there were ways to explore these issues more fully. This process also allowed me to take on board important issues raised by the women which did not form part of my initial interview guide and include questions on these issues in subsequent interviews. Finally, this preliminary analysis helped me to check my interview technique and free myself somewhat from the constraints of my interview guide. Data saturation was reached after twenty-seven interviews, allowing me to leave the field, as planned, after nine months.

⁷⁷ Juliette did not consent to the audio recording of her interview, so detailed notes were taken throughout, and as much captured *verbatim* as possible.

The location of the interviews had significant impact on their atmosphere and content. I always asked the young women to choose the location so they would feel comfortable, and thirteen of the twenty-seven women chose to be interviewed at my house (see chart of interview locations in *Appendix G*). This seemed to be because I lived alone, and thus could guarantee privacy which most of the women could not depend on receiving in their own homes. I was able to ensure (for the most part) that interviews would not be interrupted, and their family members need not know of their participation, a concern for some of the women; one woman even lied to her husband on the phone during her interview as to where she was. The concern for privacy appeared justified: in two of the four interviews carried out in participants' homes, the interview was interrupted on more than one occasion by family members, which caused one participant significant anxiety. Other participants elected to do their interviews in organisational settings: five interviews took place at *Grãos* and two at another NGO. These interviews generally worked well, as a private space was given over to the interview, and the space was less personal than my home or theirs. However, six of these seven women were employees at the organisations where the interviews took place, which meant they were liable to be interrupted by bosses or other employees: one interview had to be halted part-way through and resumed the next day for work reasons. Finally, three women chose to conduct their interviews in public places: one in the street near her house, so she could keep an eye on the neighbourhood children, and two in a snack bar near the bus station. Neither of these locations were ideal: both the participants and I were conscious of being overheard, so talk would pause if anybody passed by, and background noise made it challenging to hear and respond to what was being said. However, these were the only moments the women could make themselves available, so the best had to be made of the situation. It was interesting to note how location affected the dynamics

of the interview. In their own homes or places of work – their “home turf” – participants seemed more relaxed and took greater control of the direction of the interview than in those conducted in my home, something also noted by Bergen in her study with survivors of marital rape (1993).

Contextual information

In addition to the interviews, which constituted the primary data for this study, I also used other sources to enrich my understanding of the context and culture. Firstly, I had informal semi-structured conversations with two nurses, one of whom was interviewed twice, one representative from the Health Department and two middle school teachers. A joint discussion was also held with two teachers from the local high school. These conversations tended to occur in snatched moments between lessons, or between patients, so range between fifteen and thirty minutes in length. In them, the informants discussed the sex education currently provided by their institutions, possible changes or improvements which could be made, and also gave their opinions on other sources of young people’s sexual learning, e.g. the media, or peers. These brief conversations were useful for gaining a snapshot of sex education provision in the town, and also for comparing the young women’s accounts with more official perspectives.

Secondly, I observed two public sex education *palestras* given at *CRAS* by one of the nurses, and attended a series of sex education lessons at the local high school.⁷⁸ The *palestras* occurred on the same day in August 2013: one was directed at 7–17 year olds, and discussed personal and genital hygiene, whilst the second was restricted to those aged 10 and above, and discussed STDs.⁷⁹ The high school sex

⁷⁸ I also participated in sex education sessions within the *Grãos* youth training programme, see Chapter Eight.

⁷⁹ See Chapter Five.

education lessons began after *Carnaval*⁸⁰, just before the end of my fieldwork period, although I cannot say if they continued after I left. In these, the Arts teacher delivered the same session on “The Body” to three classes, and two weeks later, a further class on “Talking about Sex”, again to the three different groups. I attended two of the three classes each time. The students in these classes were aged from 14–18⁸¹, and there were usually more than thirty students in each class. In the first lesson, students had to examine and discuss portraits of human nudes. For homework, they had to find songs or poems about sex and write a critical piece about them. In the second session, the groups watched a film about life as an adolescent, with the teacher pausing the film for discussion. Students then had to practise public-speaking skills, including dialogue, debate and persuasion, whilst discussing sexuality issues. Half the class discussed a topic, whilst the second half critiqued their “performance” and then the groups swapped. Once again, this study is not based on these observations, which represent far too few sessions to claim that they do anything more than help me understand how sex education is “done” in Lençóis and better comprehend the narratives of my participants.

I also gathered images and posts from popular local Facebook discussion groups, which I use throughout this research as examples of local opinions and ideas about sexuality. I joined several large Facebook groups focused on *lençoense* life, and saved all images and posts posted during my fieldwork period which related to sex and sexuality. These were coded thematically, and are used within this research to illustrate popular local responses to sexuality issues. I limit inclusion to only those images and posts which garnered “likes” and comments from other users, to ensure

⁸⁰ Carnival, five days of festivities, traditionally to mark the start of Lent, now the most famous Brazilian party season.

⁸¹ The wide age-range is due to the frequency with which students repeat school years.

at least minimal social consensus/interest in the post.

Another important source of contextual information were sexual health leaflets. At the public *palestras* and sex education classes I attended, I gathered copies of all leaflets distributed to students. During my discussions with local nurses, I asked them for copies of the materials they would usually offer to a young person during a “family planning” consultation. Also, at my meeting with the Health Department representative, I requested any materials they had available for distribution to young people, and collected all the leaflets which referred to sexual health and/or sexuality available in the waiting area of the Health Department building. By taking this approach, I believe I gathered a good proportion of all those sexual health leaflets made available to young *lençoenses* by institutional sources – those they can collect without interaction with a healthcare professional, those given out as standard in an educational context and those which they must directly request. This method gave me a total of 28 leaflets, four of which were duplicated in more than one context. Although no systematic discourse analysis was undertaken of these leaflets, they were useful for contextualising my findings, and offering an institutional perspective. Even more importantly, they gave me direct access to standard materials available to young women, and an opportunity to see the gap between what institutions offer on paper, and the realities described by my participants.

Finally, I kept fieldwork diaries in which I noted down events, issues, conversations, song lyrics, slang, rumours and observations which seemed pertinent to the discussion of sexuality in the *lençoense* context. Though in no way an ethnography, these fieldnotes contributed to my wider understanding of the place and culture in which my research is situated and I referred to these frequently whilst writing up my data.

Due to their contextual nature, these interviews, encounters and materials are not

quoted directly in this study in the way the data set is. Instead, I refer to them descriptively throughout to illustrate, contextualise and enrich the young women's accounts. They were immensely useful in checking my interpretations of the young women's comments and stories, and in encouraging me to think of sex education as a multi-faceted and complex process, not just restricted to classroom teaching.

Leaving the field

In line with feminist understandings of research as collaboration, thought had to be given as to how to bring my fieldwork respectfully to a close: 'Planning ahead and leaving enough time to accommodate our ethical and academic responsibilities alongside our personal desires is important and will enable us to feel more satisfaction upon our departure' (Kindon and Cupples, 2003, p. 231). After each interview, I thanked the women for their help and participation, and gave them their thank-you gift. Towards the end of the fieldwork, I posted in all the Facebook groups in which I had been active to let women know I was no longer recruiting, and again as I prepared to leave Lençóis to thank all participants again. I visited all the organisations within which I had worked, to thank the staff and say my goodbyes. I contacted two of the teachers for whom I had outstanding questions. And then I left. However, I was marked by my experiences, and felt a burden of responsibility to do justice to the stories my participants shared with me:

It is important to clarify from the outset that although we exit the field, we do not simply leave it behind... We take with us the physical and emotional reminders of the researcher-self, and we relive our fieldwork experiences many times during data analysis and through our attempts to disseminate our findings. (Hamilton, Dunnett and Downey, 2012, pp. 279-280)

Spending nine months doing fieldwork in a location where one already has experience, connections and friends is bound to be messier than indicated in research textbooks. I already knew two of the young women in my study socially

before this fieldwork period, and would go on to socialise with several others, given the small, close-knit nature of the town. I lived in *Bairro do Gato*⁸², the neighbourhood which was also home to the majority of my participants⁸³, so saw many of them almost daily as I shopped where they shopped, went to the same river, danced at the same parties, and attended organisations of which they were members (see *Appendix H* for summary of local collaborators - NGOs and other organisations). Two became close friends. Given these circumstances, the clean break so often advised for the research relationship was simply not feasible. In the majority of cases, I continued to be friendly whilst in Lençóis, but have had minimal contact since returning to the UK. However, I have kept in occasional contact with those two women I considered close friends, because it felt natural to do so, and wrong to do otherwise. There has long been debate in feminist research texts about the development of friendships in the field (see Oakley, 1981, also Coffey, 1999; Browne, 2003), with many highlighting the positive impacts for the research relationships and resulting data, but just as many warning of the potential for coercion and exploitation (e.g. Patai, 1991; Cotterill, 1992; Kirsch, 1999). In the light of these conflicting perspectives, I trusted my instincts with regards the extent to which I “befriended” my research participants, considering also the cultural meanings of friendship in my research context (Huisman, 2008).

Critical Reflection

Having discussed the practical and methodological elements to conducting my fieldwork, I felt it important to engage in some critical reflection on the research relationship, and the impact of my positionality relative to the women I interviewed. I have engaged in reflexivity in my account thus far, but I wished to dedicate some

⁸² Pseudonym.

⁸³ See map on p. 183.

time and space to this process here. This reflection is, of course, partial: 'Feminists can aim at reflexivity, in the sense of continuous critical reflection on the research processes we use to produce knowledge. These aims, however, are not necessarily (or ever?) realized as we might wish' (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994, p. 133).

My first consideration was issues of power. Whilst feminist methodologies attempt to reduce the hierarchical nature of research relationships (Liamputtong, 2007, p. 13), it would be naïve to believe this is easy, or even possible to fully achieve. As discussed, I selected qualitative research methods which privilege interaction between researcher and participant, and flexibility in the format, style and content of the interview, therefore acknowledging the knowledge outcomes as co-produced by my participants and myself. However, the balance of power is still firmly in my favour, given my social and educational privilege, discussed below. Most markedly, I was the one who would record our interviews as "data", which I would take away, translate into a language not spoken by the participants, and present in exchange for a PhD: I hold the power of representation.

However, the women in this study were by no means powerless, and as Letherby (2003) argues, it is patronising to assume otherwise (p. 116). At times during recruitment, I felt as though the women held all the power: women would get in touch expressing interest in the study and then never respond to my replies; they would organise an interview and I would wait patiently, only for them never to show up, or to send a text hours later saying something had "come up"; I would talk about my research to a group of women and their disinterest would be readily apparent. Although such expressions of power do not compare with the entrenched social power of racial and educational privilege, it is vital to remember that participants are not passive beings, but agents who choose to participate, or not, in research projects

(Clark, 2010).⁸⁴ Power is not concentrated in one place or person, it ‘is exercised from innumerable points in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations’ (Foucault, 1998 [1976], p. 94)

Secondly, I felt consideration of my positionality as a researcher was incredibly important to this study, given the impact I perceived it having both in terms of access and recruitment, and with regards to the types of knowledges produced. As a white, childless, middle-class English PhD student from an urban area, there was immense and undeniable social difference between my participants and me. Bahia is a predominantly Afro-Brazilian region⁸⁵, and the overwhelming majority of people in Lençóis are of Afro-Brazilian descent, reflected in my research sample. Although the majority of participants had finished school, only one had a higher education degree, and a couple had further education teaching qualifications. Most worked in the service industry linked to tourism, in bars, restaurants, or *pousadas*. All were from Lençóis, a small interior town, except Luiza and Fernanda who originally came from larger Bahian cities. Given this great social distance, it was important for me to consider how these differences might impact on my study. For brevity, I will explore just two elements of this social distance – gender and “race” – before moving on to explore what I call the “*gringa* problem”.

With regards to “race”, there is an assumption, identified by Rhodes (1994) and others, that a white researcher interviewing a black participant will produce distorted data and, therefore, that a black interviewer should be found (1994, p. 549). At times, I worried about the racial dynamic in the interviews, particularly given the entrenched racial privilege enjoyed by white(r) Brazilians, both nationally and in the

⁸⁴ This is not to deny that coercion and pressure are sometimes applied in research.

⁸⁵ See Chapter Three.

local *lençoense* context.⁸⁶ I quickly noticed that all the teachers, local government workers, and nurses with whom I came into contact were significantly whiter than the general population. I was concerned that, given my racial proximity to these authority figures, the young women in this study would associate me with them, and include me in the distrust directed at these figures⁸⁷, or sanitise their interview responses in line with what they might tell their teacher or nurse. Rhodes (1994) challenged assumptions over access and reliability of knowledges produced between white researcher and black participant: firstly, white interviewers may receive ‘information which [participants] would have assumed was the taken-for-granted knowledge of an insider’ (1994, p. 552), and; secondly, if a white interviewer *does* receive a different account, this may actually be useful, ‘it may well cast [information] in a new light’ (ibid., p. 548). Within my own research, although the racial dynamic was undeniable, I do not feel that it had a substantial impact on the research relationship. The bigger distance was represented by my status as *gringa*, as discussed later.

Whilst it is easy to focus on the social distance between my participants and myself, our shared experiences as young women could be perceived as narrowing that distance. The impact of researcher gender has been explored often (e.g. Riessman, 1987; Cotterill, 1992; Gill and Maclean, 2002; Sampson and Thomas, 2003; Lumsden, 2009), with a principal reflection being that one woman interviewing another does not necessarily make for a fruitful research relationship: ‘gender congruity is not enough to create shared meanings’ (Riessman, 1987, p. 183). This could be particularly true for my research, when other characteristics are so incongruous: ‘[w]hilst all women share important experiences as a consequence of their gender, it is not sufficient to override structural barriers of status, class, age,

⁸⁶ See Chapter Three.

⁸⁷ See Chapter Five.

race, and disability' (Cotterill, 1992, p. 595). Although I do not think the fact of both being women was enough to close the social distance between myself and my participants, similarities in experience did contribute to establishing rapport. On several occasions, discussing relationships with men led to a participant or myself commenting "A woman's life is hard!", usually with reference to having our hearts broken, being cheated on, or dealing with men's persistent sexual advances. Such statements were usually accompanied by knowing looks, laughter, and – on my part at least – a feeling of connection. Therefore, although shared gender alone is not enough to assume a positive research relationship, shared *experiences* of gender and heterosexual relationship dynamics can well represent common-ground.

It is my belief that the impacts of shared gender, distinct experiences of "race" and other factors were less significant than the impact of the most common reading of me, as a *gringa*. If the only connotations of the word *gringa* were foreignness, I would not have struggled with the term as I did – after all, as a white woman speaking fluent but non-native Portuguese in a predominantly Afro-Brazilian town, it was no secret that I was foreign. Unfortunately, the word has become increasingly loaded, and its use increasingly pejorative - giving me what I call the "*gringa* problem".

Gringas, on the whole, do not have good reputations in Latin America: 'the term "gringa" generally refers to a foreign white woman who is considered not to take enough care over her appearance, who will have sex with anyone, who is easy to deceive and who is easily parted from her money' (Willson, 1997, p. 31). The most damaging impact of the "*gringa* problem" was the suspicion it aroused amongst local women. It was common-knowledge in the town that many men preferred, or would only date, foreign women. This "preference" put foreign women in direct competition with local women, producing hostility: I was insulted in the street and suffered

(fictitious) gossip. Because they saw me as a *gringa*, and so as 'sexually promiscuous or "loose"' (Willson, 1997, p. 30), many local women positioned me as seeking sexual relations with local men, and therefore a potential threat. Several of my participants were keen to discover if I intended to find myself a local man, and seemed pleased when I told them otherwise:

Having experienced the "*gringa* problem" during previous visits to Lençóis, I had anticipated that it might cause difficulties recruiting participants and building rapport. I combatted this by talking often about my boyfriend back home - how much I missed him, how hard it was to be away from him for nine months, how we planned to get married and how excited I was for his visit – and when he arrived, I showed him around the town, introducing him to many members of the community. Whilst this did not entirely eliminate the "*gringa* problem", I believe it went some way to reducing its impact. In addition, I was extremely conscious of how I dressed and behaved.

Whilst in her work with Caribbean men, Joseph (2013) joined in with popular styles of dance and wore short shorts to encourage flirtation and therefore make contact with possible research participants, I was very careful not to dress or behave in a way which could be deemed provocative. Groes-Green (2009) describes a similar struggle over her reputation during fieldwork in Mozambique: 'I managed to keep a balance between "being part of the game" by dancing and having fun like the rest of the crowd and yet persistently rejecting sexual offers' (2009, p. 657). I also went out of my way to show the organisations I worked with that I was not just another *gringa*, passing through the town and contributing nothing to the community. I mostly did this through reciprocity – offering English lessons and translation work at one organisation, helping a community radio station at a second, and covering some youth-work sessions at a third. In combination with my efforts to reassure women, my public "good" behaviour, and my extended stay in the town, this work helped me

to build a reputation for myself which benefitted my research, rather than threatening it.

Finally, it was important to reflect on my insider/outsider status. It is apparent from my exploration of the “*gringa* problem” that I was largely seen as an outsider in Lençóis, and sometimes treated with hostility as a result. This was not uncommon in the town, where the constant flow of tourists means outsiders are often kept at arm’s length. It is incredibly hard to be fully accepted in the town: friends have told me you have to live there for at least a decade before you are considered a local, whilst one female friend from a town five hours away – very close in Brazilian terms – is still identified as *de fora*⁸⁸ after living in Lençóis for twelve years.

At times, as discussed, this “outsider” status was problematic for me, particularly when it came to issues of access and recruitment. However, in the interviews themselves it was often helpful. Many of the young women assumed I was ignorant about “the way things worked” in the town, so happily explained terms, slang, and issues in a way they might not have done for a local researcher. My genuine ignorance on some issues also endeared me to some participants: for example, Betina was reserved at the start of her interview, but warmed to me when she discovered my ignorance of the term *pós-love* (post-love) as a euphemism for the morning-after-pill, which she found extremely amusing. Some participants also found my “outsider” status comforting: more than one young woman told me that it was easier to open up to me because I was a stranger, so not involved in community politics, a tendency also identified by Letherby (2003, p. 129). This suggests that, for some participants at least, it was better that I was not socially “close” to them.

However, despite my “obvious” outsider status, I was more of an “insider” than it

⁸⁸ An outsider.

might first be assumed. I had prior experience of living in the town, local friends who divulged local gossip, and experience of local politics and local culture: I was no expert, but I had some understanding of how Lençóis “worked”. This contradiction shows that the insider/outsider divide is, like most dichotomies, artificial. Although the way I was perceived did have significant bearing on the recruitment process for this research, when it came to the interviews themselves, I found it easy to establish common-ground with many of the women – from our age, to our shared experiences of coming from a big family, to the pains of getting your heart broken! - allowing us to develop rapport, despite our clear differences. This was encouraged by my attitude to self-disclosure: in line with my feminist methodological standpoint, I tried to answer questions posed to me about my family life, comparisons between life in England and life in Lençóis, and my relationship with my partner and the frustrations of being apart from him for nine months. Although such exchanges were usually brief, given that the focus of the research was participants’ experiences and not mine, I felt that sharing something of myself with the young women was not only the respectful thing to do, given their disclosures, but would also benefit the research relationship in terms of enhanced rapport (Liamputtong, 2007, p. 72).

This critical reflection on three important dynamics of fieldwork has, hopefully, contextualised the process through which the data for this research was produced. Because, as discussed earlier, ‘the process of research is as importance (sic) as its outcome’ (Liamputtong, 2007, p. 10), the dynamics which influence that process must not only be acknowledged but also reflected upon, to try to illuminate how, and to what extent, they affect research outcomes. Whilst such reflection does not minimise the impacts of these dynamics, awareness of them is essential when analysing data, and drawing conclusions.

Analysis and Write-up

Dedicating a specific section to “analysis” is, in many ways, artificial. Analysis occurs throughout the research process: from the design, where questions are chosen, a sample decided upon and methods selected, to fieldwork, when some themes take precedence in the interviews whilst others wane in importance: ‘[i]t is an inherent and ongoing part of qualitative research’ (Spencer, Ritchie and O’Connor, 2003, p. 199) . This section, however, focuses on the formal analytical process which occurred after the data had been produced and collated.

As recruitment was initially a slow process, I was able to transcribe the majority of the interviews whilst in the field. This was beneficial, as I was attuned to the language and the local accent, facilitating the process. Twenty of the twenty-seven interviews were fully transcribed by my return to the UK, and the remaining six soon after.⁸⁹ It was important to me to transcribe the interviews as faithfully as possible, including participants’ pauses, utterances and relevant gestures, rather than “cleaning up” their accounts. According to Schegloff (1997) such an attempt to stay true to the actual speech privileges participants’ words and avoids peremptory assumptions as to their meanings, consistent with my feminist methodological standpoint.

I was also able to translate ten of the twenty-seven interviews whilst in the field, leaving the remaining seventeen to translate on my return. I decided to engage in this process in two separate stages because I felt the translation itself was a distinct phase of analysis: given my experience in the interviews, my observations and my local contextual knowledge, I was interpreting the Brazilian Portuguese words of my participants and finding the best fit in English: ‘it may be necessary to try to convey meaning using words other than literally translated equivalents’ (Temple, 1997, p.

⁸⁹ As discussed, one participant did not consent to audio recording.

610). This was particularly true when participants used slang terms about sex and sexual practice: it was only through context that one could determine the nuances of such accounts. I did feel, however, that I was the best-placed person to undertake this translation work because, as Temple (1997) argues, '[w]hen the translator and the researcher are different people the process of knowledge construction involves another layer' (1997, p. 614). Regarding transcription and translation as separate and meaningful phases of data analysis process prompted me to take responsibility for my interpretations of the language used by my participants, and the process of representation I undertook in turning their words into "useful" English-language quotations (Temple and Young, 2004).

Having transcribed and translated all twenty-seven interviews, I was then faced with the main phase of the analysis, completely daunted by the task of making sense of the wealth of data before me, common with qualitative research methods (Bryman, 2012). It seemed most natural, at first, to deal with hard copies of the transcripts, to allow me to immerse myself fully in the data. After reading and re-reading all the transcripts, I used highlighter pens to indicate key themes in each, then collated recurring themes. Once I felt comfortable with the thematic content of each interview, I uploaded the transcripts to NVivo, where I coded them again, refining from my original highlighted themes. Although for some researchers this two-stage process may seem unnecessary, the move from physical artefact to data management programme facilitated the intellectual move from examining each interview individually to exploring relevant themes across the whole sample. The organisation of the coded themes into parent nodes and sub-nodes began to give shape and logic to the data.

Analysis was also undertaken of my contextual material – lesson observations, context conversations and sex education materials, as well as Facebook posts, song

lyrics and fieldwork diary extracts – although this process was far less intensive than for the data set. These materials were also uploaded to NVivo and coded by most salient themes, helping me to store all my materials in one place, but also to access them easily to provide context to the relevant themes within my interview material.

It is important to note that, as with all research, the interpretation I make of the data (co)produced with my research participants is but one of myriad possible interpretations (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994). However, my interpretation is supported by having immersed myself in *lençoense* life and culture for nine months, and by drawing on contextual information from a range of other sources when analysing the interview material.

The process of writing up the data was closely imbricated with the analysis itself. I found that writing helped me to process and deepen my analysis, and eventually led to elements being omitted from or emphasised within the final thesis.

It has been important to me to write in a way which is accessible and easy to understand, and I have aimed for this throughout. It is difficult enough that the final product of this research is in English, whilst the data was co-produced and created in Portuguese, as it means none of my participants could read the outputs⁹⁰, even if they wanted to. Therefore, I have attempted to make my work readable for the widest Anglophone audience possible, though I acknowledge its readership is likely to be very small. This preference for an accessible, readable style seemed logical to me, given the hope of future applicability of my work to policy development:

‘Presumably we would like not only academics, but also professionals... to read and comment on our work. Paradoxically, in conforming to our implicit assumptions

⁹⁰ Although not the case for the women in this study, for other women in Lençóis, access even to a document written in Portuguese may prove challenging, given the high rates of illiteracy, discussed in Chapter Three.

regarding a scientific style of writing, our writing may well discourage other audiences from engaging it' (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2007, pp. 11-12).

According to the feminist principles driving this research, I have also attempted to foreground the voices of the women who participated in this study. I have quoted them often and extensively wherever possible and appropriate. These quotes have been formatted in a specific way. They appear in bold type and indented from the main body of the text, and are attributed to the participant from whose interview they are taken, identified by pseudonym and age. All italics used in the quotes indicate emphasis in the original, except in the case of quotes from Juliette's interview.

Because Juliette did not consent to an audio recording of her interview, despite note-taking and best efforts made on my part to remain true to her words, some segments might not be *verbatim*, and these sections appear in italics. In her case, then, emphasis is indicated by underlined text. Ellipses are used in two ways in the format of the quotes: a simple ellipsis - ... - is used to show a pause or hesitation by the speaker, whilst an ellipsis in parentheses – (...) – indicates that sections of the quote or conversation not directly relevant have been omitted.

Ethical Considerations

As mentioned previously, my research was approved by the University Ethics Board, and it also complied with British Sociological Association ethical standards.

However, I did not see my ethical commitment as in any way "completed" once my study received approval. Consequently, I wished to explore further some ongoing ethical considerations, from arriving in the field, through to write-up and submission: namely harm to participants and harm to the researcher.

As discussed earlier, my research could be deemed both socially and personally sensitive. At times this sensitivity was apparent: participants sometimes struggled to discuss topics they found "intimate", and some participants did appear to experience

some distress when discussing abortion or relationship breakdown. Although all attempts were made to minimise these kinds of direct harm to participants, I was conscious that harm might also be caused to my participants indirectly (Parkes, 2010), for example, the close-knit small-town nature of Lençóis meant that local people's actions and behaviours were closely scrutinised⁹¹, and public knowledge of a young woman's participation in a study on sexuality could impact on her reputation. This made confidentiality a principal ethical consideration. To protect my participants, all were allocated pseudonyms, as was the neighbourhood where much of the research took place. Other information which could serve to identify participants (e.g. children's names) was also omitted or changed. Biographical data and signed consent forms were stored securely and separately from transcripts at all times. Virtual versions of data were backed-up using the University password-protected RAS system, and all work was done on my personal, password-protected computer. Participants were informed as to the uses of all recordings, notes, and the eventual transcripts and reassured as to their anonymity within final research outputs.

I believe confidentiality concerns also contributed significantly to recruitment challenges. Elsewhere in the interviews, several women told me that teachers and healthcare workers could not be trusted to maintain confidentiality, and it was quite possible that similar concerns extended to me. I therefore relied heavily on snowballing for recruitment, allowing the young women in this community to vouch for me through word-of-mouth. In this way, they could relay to one another that I had been honest about the content of the interview, and that I was respecting confidentiality. This made for a very slow and often frustrating recruitment process,

⁹¹ See Chapters Five and Seven.

however it allowed me to prove my trustworthiness to potential participants.

Another indirect harm identified by Parkes (2010) in her study on violence in London and South Africa was that 'research may further disempower marginalised groups, through the imposition of the (adult, western) researcher's knowledge and values over the deficit "other"' (2010, p. 350). My fear was that I might, unwittingly, distort my participants' experiences and narratives by imposing my own 'cultural grammar' (Parker, 1999)⁹² over theirs in my analysis. One way to minimise this was to engage in reflexive practice, as I have attempted to do throughout this chapter, and question my own positionality and the assumptions I carry with me. Another was to adhere to my feminist principles of giving voice, and ensure that my participants' own stories and voices were privileged and included extensively, as recommended by Tolman, Hirschman and Impett (2005) rather than subjugated to my own. In addition, the contextual information gathered throughout the nine month fieldwork period was also extremely useful in checking my interpretations, and how these fit with the wider *lençoense* 'cultural grammar' (Parker, 1999).

When weighing up potential harm to participants, it is important to also consider potential benefits from their participation (Liamputtong, 2007), which other scholars have identified as: 'catharsis, self-acknowledgement, sense of purpose, self-awareness, empowerment, healing, and providing a voice' (Kavanaugh and Ayres, 1998, p. 92). Interviews often represent a rare opportunity to talk about important topics with someone who is genuinely interested and so participants often 'react positively – and in fact, many are grateful – for the interview experience' (Corbin and Morse, 2003, p. 336). When considering the justification of my research, I reminded myself that the study was done for a purpose – to add to existing knowledge about

⁹² See Chapter Two.

sex education in Northeast Brazil, and possibly contribute to making it more relevant to the needs of the young women at whom it is aimed. This means that any risk of harm, direct or indirect, was not risk for risk's own sake, but for a possible future benefit. As Parkes (2010) asked regarding the ethics of her own study, 'could an over-emphasis on "protecting" research participants from harm erase from the gaze of research important insights...?' (2010, p. 348). The most important thing, therefore, is for researchers to be alert to the specificities of each individual's participation, their needs and their reactions, and be prepared to respond in the case of potential harm.

Whilst the above considerations are paramount to carrying out ethical research which adheres to research standards and minimises the chance of harm to participants, these, and other discussions of ethics, have tended to minimise potential harm to the researcher. Given my own struggles in the field, I felt it important to engage with such ideas, which I explore using the concept of "emotion work".

It has been increasingly acknowledged that sensitive research, particularly qualitative interviewing, carries 'a potentially high cost for the health and well-being of researchers' (Sampson, Bloor and Fincham, 2008, p. 920). One such cost is that researchers are required to carry out extensive "emotion work": monitoring participants' emotions and intervening if harm is perceived; building rapport and trust with participants, whilst simultaneously maintaining the boundaries of the research relationship; gaining access in the first place; managing their own emotions and feelings of anxiety, isolation and inferiority; and leaving the field in a way which is respectful and non-damaging (Dickson-Swift, et al., 2007). Due to space constraints, I will consider only one example - my feelings of isolation in the field.

There were several elements which contributed to my feelings of isolation during fieldwork. My fieldsite has unpredictable internet connection, making contacting

friends, family and supervisors challenging and, at times, impossible. Similarly, the alteration in my relationship to my fieldsite and participants, from friend and volunteer to “serious” researcher, at times left me feeling isolated from my existing friendship networks. The research itself also contributed to these feelings: whenever a participant failed to show up for a scheduled interview I felt increasingly desperate, frustrated and alone. Several scholars have discussed the emotional, mental and physical consequences of “emotion work” (e.g. McCosker, Barnard and Gerber, 2001; Seear and McLean, 2008): for me these included stress, anxiety, sadness, increased homesickness, and insomnia. To combat these issues, Dickson-Swift et al. (2007) advocate “self care”: maintaining a peer network, developing a protocol for emotional safety; scheduling rest breaks during fieldwork; and conducting a debriefing on return (2007, p. 345).

This brief focus on “emotion work” could be interpreted as overly personal, even self-indulgent. However, I feel that such a focus not only fits with my commitment to explore my research process honestly and transparently, it is also consistent with the feminist desire to ‘acknowledge the “messiness” of the research process’ (Letherby, 2003, p. 6) and how this messiness impacts on research outcomes. Not only this, but taking the time to consider how the research affected me personally has made me more aware of the impact it may have had on my participants, prompting me to engage more fully in the ethical process: ‘exploring the emotional experiences of doing research on such sensitive topics is a productive and meaningful project... It can help to foster intellectual clarity and a deeper understanding of the issue(s) being studied, the research participants, and the researchers themselves’ (Blakely, 2007, p. 59).

Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to use my methodological commitment to sensitive, feminist qualitative research to guide me in an examination of the research

process, from conception and design, to fieldwork, analysis, write-up and ethics.

This commitment not only influenced the methods I selected and the ethical stance I took, it also prompted me to reflect upon issues of power and positionality within the research process. Furthermore, it drove me to write my research experiences in a way which is transparent, honest, reflexive and personal, which I hope I have managed to achieve here.

This chapter has explored in-depth how the data for this study was co-produced within the research relationships between myself and my participants. The following three data chapters explore what that data revealed about everyday sexual learning practices and processes in Lençóis, beginning with State-sanctioned sex education.

Chapter 5. *'They tell us the basics of the basics, just so they can say they talked about it'*: Perceptions of State-sanctioned Sex Education in Lençóis

This chapter explores the perceptions of the young women in this study of the sex education provided by the Brazilian State at its various levels, based on their experiences of school-based and health-post-based provision in Lençóis. The chapter begins by mapping State-sanctioned sex education in the town, focusing on the frequency, format and depth of provision, as well as class make-up, and age at delivery. It argues that sex education provision from State sources is inconsistent, demonstrated by the great variation in the young women's sex education experiences. Having established the sex education landscape, the chapter then explores participants' perceptions of the role of the State at its various levels⁹³ in this provision. This analysis highlights the importance of the municipalisation of health and education, discussed in Chapter Three, to the conceptualisation of sex education as a localised, everyday process, largely provided by individual actors, rather than higher State levels. This reality, combined with the, predominantly negative, perceptions of overall State action on sex education, underlines the importance of the local cultural, social and political context to the provision of sex education, and highlights the importance of other, non-State-sanctioned sources to remedying what is seen as inadequate provision. In light of these complexities, this chapter ends with an analysis of the perceived legitimacy of the State in intervening in young people's sexuality through the provision of sex education. It argues that State-sanctioned sex education is mostly seen as a legitimate action by the young women, provided that the State is seen as having young people's best interests in mind, and not simply financial goals or motivations.

⁹³ See Chapter Three.

This chapter focuses on sex education based on official guidelines issued at the federal level, therefore the term “State-sanctioned” is used throughout. This term was chosen in place of similar phrases such as “State-led” which would imply a more proactive stance by the State, when, in fact, there is significant dependence on local actors, and official guidelines are subject to substantial interpretation. This State-sanctioned education overlaps with what could be termed “informal” sexual learning⁹⁴, which occurs outside these school and health-post contexts. Similar divisions of sex education sources are described in other studies (e.g. Powell, 2008, on sex education from friends and family in Wales; Secor-Turner et al., 2011, on the link between sex education source and level of risk in the US), however, it should be noted that such divisions represent a false dichotomy, especially when one considers the complexity of everyday interaction.

In order to examine the role of the State in sexual learning processes, it is first necessary to conceptualise what and where the State is. Although the women in this study did, at times, talk about the wider structure of “*o estado*”⁹⁵ or pass comment on “*o governo*”⁹⁶ of current President Dilma Rousseff, they were far more likely to discuss the State where it intersected with their day-to-day lives, in the form of local government, and local State actors. Therefore, as well as moments where participants gave their opinion of “the State” more generally, this study analyses discussions about schools and health-posts as community institutions, and teachers and health professionals as State actors and the visible face of the State in participants’ lives. An analytical framework was developed which would be sensitive to this nuanced and localised understanding of the State, drawing on the works of Cooper (1995; 2002), Carabine (1996; 2004a; 2004b), Das and Poole (2004), and

⁹⁴ See Chapter Seven.

⁹⁵ The State.

⁹⁶ The government.

Canaday (2009).⁹⁷ This framework produced an understanding of the State as: multi-sited and its power as a network, not diluted at the “margins”; having multiple identities, reflecting its often multiple intentions and priorities; functioning on many levels, and embodied in the State actors with whom the young women come into contact on a daily basis; and present in the effects of social policy. This understanding was important for illuminating the role of the State in everyday *lençoense* sex education.

The State could be seen as functioning at four different intersecting levels within everyday life in Lençóis. At the federal/state level, policy is designed and implemented which affects the sexual lives of young *lençoense* women; including sex education policy, age of consent legislation and associated penalties, and HIV/AIDS policy. The federal/state levels are also responsible for devolving certain powers and funds to local and municipal governments for the provision of healthcare, education and other services.⁹⁸ At this local/municipal level, federal policy and law is implemented, and the allocated funds distributed and used. Local/regional initiatives may be introduced, for example, sexual health campaigns in festival season. At the community level, schools and health-posts put policy into practice, and deliver the programmes and campaigns initiated by local and federal governments. And, finally, at the individual level, State actors such as teachers and healthcare professionals carry out the day-to-day work in these policy areas, such as delivering sex education or “family planning” to the population. It is with these individual State actors that the population interacts; these individuals represent the face of the State in the lives of *lençoenses*. This structuring of responsibility and authority is due, in part, to the Brazilian federal system, described in Chapter Three. This chapter explores how well

⁹⁷ See Chapter Two.

⁹⁸ See Chapter Three.

the State is perceived to be functioning at its various levels in its provision of sex education, as well as considering the relative importance accorded to each State level by the young women in this study.

It is important to mention that participants did not always clearly distinguish between State levels in their accounts. In making this distinction, it was, therefore, useful to look at the language employed by participants: times when they referred to “o governo” or “o estado” were understood to be references to federal/state levels, whilst mentions of “a prefeitura”⁹⁹ referred to local/municipal government. Debates were classified as being about community institutions where they referred to schools, hospitals, and health-posts, and as being about individual State actors where teachers, doctors and nurses were discussed. Although federal and state levels are clearly different, it was often impossible to determine from participant narratives to which of these levels discussions referred, hence the combination of the two for the purposes of this analysis.

Mapping State-sanctioned provision

Having established where and how the State is present in *lençoense* life, this chapter now details the sex education provided by the State through schools and health-posts, according to the young women in this study, before further examining this provision later in the chapter.

School-based sex education

Participant accounts showed significant variation in school-based sex education experiences, but these experiences roughly form three groups. One-third of the women expressed reasonable satisfaction with the sex education received, as illustrated by Gabriela’s quote below, in which she compliments the creative use of a

⁹⁹ Local/municipal government.

play by a visiting group. One-third acknowledged that their school had tried to work on the topic, but that the information was too biological, inappropriately timed, or that they would have liked more, as highlighted by Carolina, who recalled having biology lessons, supplemented with a single *palestra*. The other third felt that school-based sex education had been almost non-existent, as exemplified by Susana, who remembered one “tiny” Biology class which covered the topic.

One time there was also a play, which, erm, showed... A girl had gotten pregnant, and she told, she told her boyfriend and her boyfriend was like “No, you have to get rid of it” (...) It was a really great play, it talked about all the details... (Gabriela, 18)

Because normally, in school, sex is *reaaally* limited. They, in, in the period I was studying, the, the school only talked about anatomy (...) Extremely rarely, we had a *palestra* which taught us how to use condoms. From what I remember, we only had one. (Carolina, 29)

I remember that we had a class, in Biology. About sex education. But it was a really tiny thing.

N – Really tiny?

Nothing that I can really remember. But I remember that we had one. (Susana, 24)

In short, two-thirds of the young women in this study were dissatisfied with their school-based sex education in some way. This contrasts sharply with studies such as Gondim et al.’s (2015) Brazilian study, in which 70% of participants reported good access to sex education, more closely reflecting the work of Abtibol et al. (2015) and Pirotta et al. (2015), also in Brazil, who found school-based sex education to be limited and in need of improvement. The variation in participant experiences suggests that the implementation of PCNs on sex education¹⁰⁰ was inconsistent, highlighting a gap between policy and practice similar to that identified by Farrelly,

¹⁰⁰ See Chapter Three.

O'Brien and Prain (2007) in their analysis of Australian curricula: 'curriculum policy does not necessarily translate neatly into practice... just getting the curriculum documents "right" will not automatically "fix" sexuality education' (2007, p. 64). This mirrors the *lençoense* case, where, although the PCNs offer official guidelines to sex educators, these are not mandatory¹⁰¹, and are therefore likely to be subject to significant interpretation on the part of local actors.

Session frequency was not the only consideration for participants when evaluating their school-based sex education; timing was also considered important. Generally, those who experienced sex education aged twelve or thirteen, felt this was the "right age" for sex education, whilst the majority of those who reported receiving their sex education aged fourteen or above felt that sex education should have come earlier. Usually, the "right age" seemed to be gender-neutral, as both young men and young women were seen to be going through physical, hormonal and emotional changes which required information and support:

...Let me see... I was about fifteen.

N – Mmmhmm. And is that a good age to start talking about this?

I think so (...) A girl has, becomes a *moça* as they say, right, at twelve, isn't that right? And boys are already wise, right, by that age. So, at fifteen, maybe that could even be a little bit late. (Michele, 19)

However, one-quarter of participants identified a need for earlier sex education due to what they perceived to be changing sexual norms for young women. They frequently expressed the understanding that young women aged twelve or thirteen, or even younger, experience raging hormones, and are increasingly sexually active:

I think at thirteen [sex education]'s worth doing, because like (...) here, the girls are, their hormones are on over-drive... They're already starting, like, having sex really young... And so, I think it's good, this

¹⁰¹ See Chapter Three.

thing about showing them in school, at the right age. (Janaina, 21)

Indeed, one or two felt the earlier sex education came, the better. Early sex education interventions, the timing of which was not universally agreed upon but usually seemed to refer to sex education before the age of fourteen, were considered by the majority of participants as important for reducing teenage pregnancy:

...as girls are getting pregnant even younger than [sixteen], I think that yes, yes it is. It could even come younger! (...) the earlier they talk about it, the more they're going to, you're going to prevent. (Rayssa, 24)

However, a handful of participants felt that implementing sex education earlier than it is currently being delivered could be problematic, as children develop at different rates, thus some would not be “ready” to learn about sex at younger ages. There were also frequent concerns expressed about how parents would react to the implementation of earlier sex education, given their resistance to the topic, discussed later.

Gender was also felt to contribute to the quality of the sex education received; both with regards to the gender of the sex educator, and to classroom make-up. Fourteen young women discussed the importance of the gender of the sex educator to feelings of comfort within the lessons. Of these, eleven expressed preference for a female sex educator, whilst the remaining three expressed no preference:

Maybe, [a female teacher] might be better, right? Women have a better way of explaining things, because men, they also – I liked my teacher, but he got a bit embarrassed and such. But I think that, that if it were a woman, it might be better. (Gina, 18)

I think that the curiosities, and everything, I think they're the same for women and for men, and, so... I think that, for me, personally, there'd be no problem, if I were to talk about this topic, with a man or with a woman, right? (Priscila, 27)

In terms of class make-up, all the young women in this study had received sex education in mixed-gender groups, and all reported the benefits of this. However, two participants also perceived potential advantages in separating classes by gender for certain topics:

I think they should be together. But I also think they should separate them. Because women with women, you feel more at ease... And men with men, feel more at ease. If they talk about a boy's cock in front of the girls, sometimes the girls fall about laughing, sometimes it produces shyness, and talking about a girl's vagina with boys present, I think that it really affects them so (...) if it were about preference, I would prefer it separated. (Patrizia, 24)

It is important to note that the potential to alter such elements of sex education is significantly constrained by the realities of the Brazilian school system. Participants pointed out that the majority of teaching staff are women, minimising the likelihood of a male sex educator. Also, all lessons are taught to mixed-gender groups: indeed, one sex educator was adamant that separating groups by gender is something only religious schools would do.¹⁰²

Finally, considerable concerns were raised about the content of school-based sex education. Two-thirds of the young women in this study identified a strong biological and prevention focus – an emphasis which could well reflect earlier discussions regarding the public-health focus of much sex education policy (Sfair, Bittar and Lopes, 2015) – with half this number explicitly stating this was too limited. In addition to this concern, over half the participants reported that the content of school-based sex education was not complete or in-depth enough, and stated that they felt they had missed out on important subject matter. The topic most frequently described as

¹⁰² Solutions might include, for example, small single-gender group discussions within the wider class.

“missing” or lacking was pleasure, with almost half the young women mentioning this topic:

...they don't talk about [pleasure]... I think that that should come into sex education, right? When they're talking about the man and the woman, what the man feels, why a woman feels such-and-such, right? (Joana, 23)

Several participants felt that schools ought to cover relationships, and a handful also thought that homosexuality should receive greater coverage:

I think [relationships should be covered], because some girls, they are *reeeeally* – either they are innocent, or they've had a lot of practice... Because they fall for the boys' chat, like, really easily. And then later, when she loses her virginity to him, after two or three days, he's not interested in her anymore. (Ana, 19)

[Talking about homosexuality in school]'s tough, because people here, they're really prejudiced – they think that couples should be just a man with a woman (...) It should be taught, because then maybe people would be a bit more open-minded. Not necessarily accept it, but not be disgusted by it. (Juliette, 19)

Finally, a couple of the young women wished for discussions of the feelings and emotions associated with sex. Sexual learning about those topics deemed “missing” from school-based sex education will be explored in greater depth later in this study. However, the accounts of several participants established that limitations perceived in school-based sex education led to young people supplementing this provision with sexual learning from other sources:

There was one really good teacher, she used to talk about [sex and sexuality], that was Dália. She talked about it. Also Laura, a Portuguese teacher... She always gives out texts, but that's not, it's not (...) like, not enough to help us understand. I think that the street helps us to understand better. (Daniela, 19)

This use of a variety of sources to gain information on a wide range of topics reflects Thomson and Scott's (1991) argument that young people gather information about sex and sexuality from a web of different sources, due to the reductive nature of much school-based sex education. Although their study is now 25 years old, this insight is clearly still relevant today.

In terms of lesson format, *palestras* were identified by participants as the most common form of sex education delivery¹⁰³, a trend which reflects the importance of the role of the Department of Health in directing sex education policy (Sfair, Bittar and Lopes, 2015). The prevalence of this sex education format is likely linked to the personal difficulties faced by many teachers in approaching the subject¹⁰⁴, and the lack of training and resources made available by the State at the national level.¹⁰⁵ Their discomfort has been identified as resulting in them inviting outside "experts" to deliver sessions in their stead, and '[w]ith this, they open the school doors to the actions of professionals without specific training in education, especially health professionals, who often present naturalising and/or normalising conceptions of sexual activity' (da Silva, 2015, pp. 81–82, my translation). This potentially goes some way to explaining the predominance of prevention messages identified within school-based sex education; if that education is commonly being delivered by healthcare professionals, it is perhaps unsurprising that it would focus on HIV/AIDS and teenage pregnancy prevention, and include less on embodied, emotional, and social aspects.

A quarter of participants praised *palestras* as an opportunity for young people to hear an authoritative voice on sexuality. In these narratives, nurses, doctors, and

¹⁰³ For the discussion of alternatives – namely the creation of a sex education discipline – see pp. 171-172.

¹⁰⁴ See pp. 197-198.

¹⁰⁵ See p. 173.

gynaecologists were seen as preferable sex educators to teachers, a preference also identified by Allen (2005), in her New Zealand study, and Goicolea et al. (2010) in their work in Ecuador. In this study, preference for doctors and nurses was usually attributed to their degree of study, specialisation, and experience in the area:

It would be good to have nurses, because they have more, right, they are more knowledgeable (...) Because teachers, they're there teaching, like, what's within their scope, like, right? And nurses and doctors, no. Because they're already talking about the kinds of contraception you should take, that sort of thing. (Rebeca, 18)

Such comments suggest their specialised training makes information provided by doctors and nurses more legitimate, positioning healthcare professionals as appropriate sources for learning, especially about contraceptive methods, anatomy, and "risks" such as pregnancy or STDs. This was supported by the teachers interviewed in Russo and Arreguy's 2015 study in Rio de Janeiro, who felt sex education should be imparted by an educator with extensive biological knowledge.

Accounts such as Rebeca's may indicate that, for some participants at least, *palestras* form a positive part of school-based sex education; however, they were viewed as problematic in other ways. *Palestras* are, by their very nature, infrequent, leading several young women to criticise this format and the associated risk of leaving students uninformed:

...if that student, erm, shall we say... (pause) who has a doubt, misses school that day, he goes *the whole rest of the year without understanding* what happened. (Marcela, 23)

Susana was more critical of *palestras* than any other participant, arguing that, being infrequent and out-of-the-ordinary, *palestras* create an understanding of sex as similarly out-of-the-ordinary, and a cause for embarrassment or shame:

...if they'd thought about what young people really need, they would

have implemented something more *frequent*, more effective, more permanent. Not something that happens once a year, as if that were enough – it isn't! (...) Not clearing up doubts in one day, because those doubts aren't going to be cleared up! With someone you don't know, with whom you don't have any trust, in a year-group where everyone laughs at each other, all because it's something that happens once a year, so for everyone it's a novelty. Everyone gets embarrassed. (Susana, 24)

Of the twenty-two participants who discussed *palestras*, over half found them positive, whilst the rest agreed that the embarrassment they caused was prohibitive to learning. The lack of comfort perceived by some would seem to highlight *palestras* as an unsuitable sex education format, however, it also suggests they are not irredeemable: perhaps if *palestras* occurred with greater frequency, for example, in a scheduled series, or if they were integrated into a wider sex education programme, this discomfort/embarrassment could be combatted. For this to function, schools and health-posts would need to work together to ensure that *palestras* complemented the work done in schools and vice-versa, which no participant described as being current practice. Rather, *palestras* were viewed as being approached as independent tasks, happening infrequently, and separate from the overall work of the school:

...we were in the classroom, and they stopped the lesson, they talked to us, when they'd finished, they left, and we continued with our lesson. Just that! (...) the teachers in that case should have continued, right, picked up the topic, no, but they left, that's it, it's finished, that subject's over, let's get back to the lesson. (Patrizia, 24)

Patrizia's comments, and those of a handful of other participants, indicate that *palestras* did not tend to be integrated into wider school-based sex education, complementing the work of teachers with the voice of medical professionals. This lack of integration could potentially lead to students receiving mixed messages about the importance of sex education, or missing out on topics they might deem important.

Sex education from health-posts

Having summarised the role of schools, this section examines the work of health-posts. The school-based *palestra* is one example of health-led sex education, however, there were other forms: *palestras* in other locations; contraceptive and sexual health information within “family planning” consultations; informational leaflets; and the presence of an information tent during important festivities.

The first sex education sessions I attended were two *palestras* given by a local nurse at CRAS. During the latter of the two sessions, described in Chapter Four, the nurse worked through what she called the “main” STDs, describing the infection, symptoms and routes of contraction, accompanied by graphic images of male and female genitalia exhibiting extreme symptoms. In a later discussion, she explained that this STD session was the most requested *palestra*, delivered in schools, NGOs and other institutions.¹⁰⁶

Despite the availability of such sessions, only three participants described having attended a *palestra* outside school. Additionally, one-quarter mentioned that the introduction of public *palestras*, open to the wider community, would contribute positively to young people’s sexual learning, suggesting a possible lack of awareness of this aspect of provision.¹⁰⁷ This might indicate inefficient communication between the health-posts and young people, regarding the services on offer to them:

...doing *palestras* that aren’t at school [would be good] (...) You could have a meeting with them, just between them, the young people, and... Give them all this information, tell them they can go there, that their name won’t be made public, and that they will explain the, the, the things, the methods, the, the information, and your name won’t be

¹⁰⁶ The focus on this issue could reflect the priorities of the SPE, discussed in Chapter Three.

¹⁰⁷ This might not be the only reason for not discussing such sessions. Participants may also have worried that interest in non-school-based sex education might suggest interest in sexual activity. Similarly, they might not have attended existing sessions out of fear of exposure or gossip.

made public. Because I think that that is the biggest fear. Becoming a subject of gossip in town. (Ana, 19)

Ana's comment about the risk of gossip faced when pursuing sex education also highlights the social factors which intervene in its provision, discussed in greater detail in Chapter Seven.

Another form of health-based sex education was "family planning" consultations. Around one-quarter of participants described receiving some form of sex education, however minimal, at their local health-post, although a handful described health-post provision as limited to giving out contraception and contraceptive advice:

There's a nurse that we, when we go there to get information, we ask, he explains (...) He just explains how we have to use the contraception, if, how many days we need to take it. (Daniela, 19)

Of the nineteen women who did not describe receiving sex education at the health-post, around half explained that the obstacles facing young people in accessing this sort of education were simply too great. Several women felt that the main obstacle was embarrassment:

They're embarrassed. Lots don't go. You see? They don't go (...) I know because I was afraid, I was embarrassed. So I think that's what happens. With other people too. (Joana, 23)

However, a small handful of participants described formal or bureaucratic barriers to young people's health-post education, such as requiring a health-care "card", or needing to be accompanied by someone aged over-18; neither of which were specified as requirements in discussions with the nurses themselves. Once again, this indicates a potential lack of communication between health-posts and the community they intend to serve: for some young women, misunderstandings over "barriers" to health-post care were enough to prevent attendance. This hints at a

perception that health-posts *could* be a useful source of sex education, but that they are not delivering the kinds of services desired by the young women in this study, or they are not successfully combatting the barriers young people perceive in attending.

A further aspect of health-based sex education was the distribution of informational leaflets. Such leaflets were made available at health-posts and the Health Department, but were also given out during public *palestras*, at festival times, and during the sex education sessions observed in this research.¹⁰⁸ These leaflets were discussed by almost half the young women in this study:

From what I know, about the health-posts, what they have are just some leaflets, which they have available there (...) the majority of the time, they're about the need to protect yourself, to use a condom, and about the dangers of diseases. Sexually transmitted diseases. (Elena, 25)

As Elena identified, the majority of the leaflets I collected as part of this research had a “prevention” focus.¹⁰⁹ Most common was a series, produced by the Brazilian Society for Family Welfare (BEMFAM)¹¹⁰, which explained contraceptive methods: the monthly and quarterly contraceptive injections; the pill; the IUD; vasectomy; and behavioural contraceptive methods. This series, distributed nationally, seemed to be designed for a general audience, not specifically for young people. Other leaflets, produced by the Ministry of Health and the federal government, had a similar prevention focus, and a range of leaflets produced by the Bahian state government, in conjunction with other organisations, mainly focused on HIV/AIDS.

¹⁰⁸ See Chapter Four for collection methodology.

¹⁰⁹ One leaflet about pleasure is discussed in Chapter Six.

¹¹⁰ Founded in 1965, BEMFAM is a not-for-profit organisation which works on human rights, education and sexual and reproductive health issues. It focuses on young people aged 10–24, and those living with HIV/AIDS.

The federal level also produced resources with a specific youth focus, principally the “*Caderneta de Saúde do Adolescente*” (Adolescent Health Booklet). With different versions for boys and girls, these nationally-circulated booklets situated sexual health and sexuality information in a wider teenage health context, alongside information about healthy eating, vaccinations and spots. The Bahian government also produced several leaflets targeted at young people, including “*Lição de atitude*” (A Lesson in Attitude), aimed at both young men and women, and two gender-specific leaflets “*Algumas coisas são importantes para as mulheres*” (Some things are important for women), shaped like a pink handbag (see *figure 9*), and “*Camisinha é a melhor jogada*” (Condoms are the best play) shaped like a football (see *figure 10*).¹¹¹ The two contain very similar information about the importance of condom use, the risks of STDs, and what to do in the case of unprotected sex.



Figure 9 - Bahian government sexual health leaflet aimed at young women

¹¹¹ This leaflet is not explicitly directed at young men, however, the Health Department representative who gave it to me indicated that this was the case.

However, in “Some things are important for women”, this advice is couched in terms of “freedom”, “right to choose” and “responsibility”¹¹², whilst in “Condoms are the best play”, football imagery is invoked, for example, “scoring an own goal against your health”.

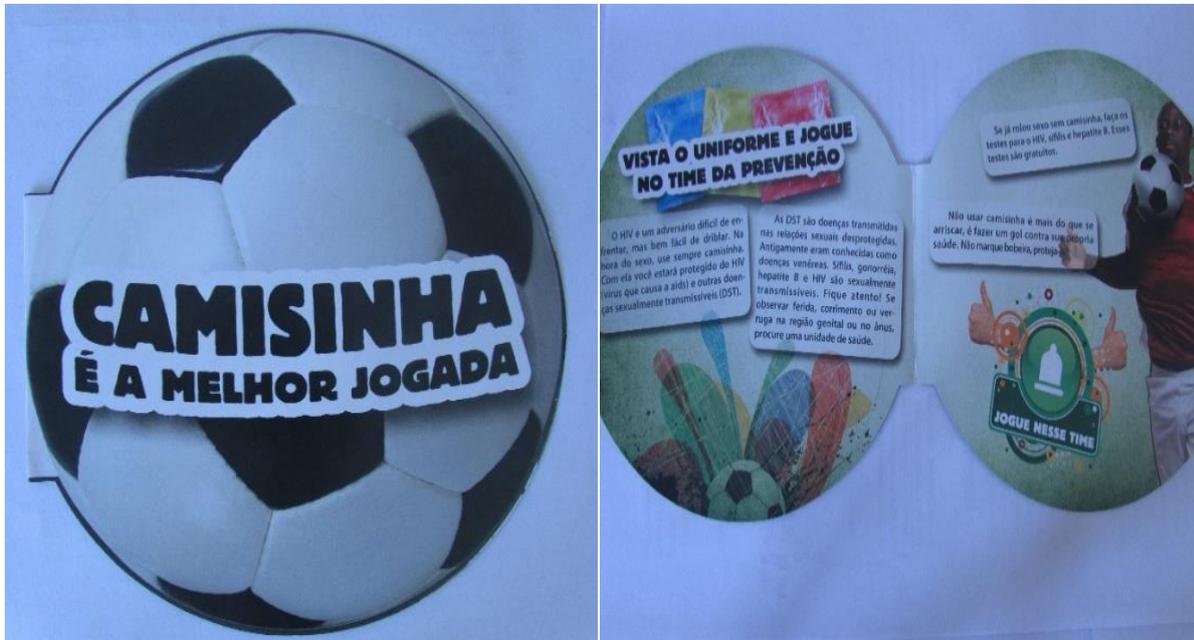


Figure 10 - Bahian government sexual health leaflet aimed at young men

Leaflets promoting contraception can represent interesting lenses into wider healthcare discourses and, according to Makoni’s 2012 analysis of Zimbabwean contraceptive brochures, ‘may offer insight into how and why ideas about women, health experts, medicine, and the politics of reproduction are socially constructed’ (p. 403). For example, the importance of condom use was firmly reiterated within the leaflets, positioning it as vital to the country’s sexual health agenda. However, other more problematic ideologies were also detected: I was surprised to see nurses distributing a leaflet on behavioural contraceptive methods (see figure 11).¹¹³ The leaflet claims that by using a *tabelinha* (monitoring your cycle), examining your *muco cervical* (cervical mucus/discharge) and using the *método da temperatura* (taking

¹¹² See discussion of the feminisation of contraceptive responsibility in Chapter Six.

¹¹³ Similar to the rhythm method.

your temperature), you can calculate your fertile days and avoid sex on those days; with no mention of the fact that one's cycle can be unpredictable or disrupted by stress or illness.

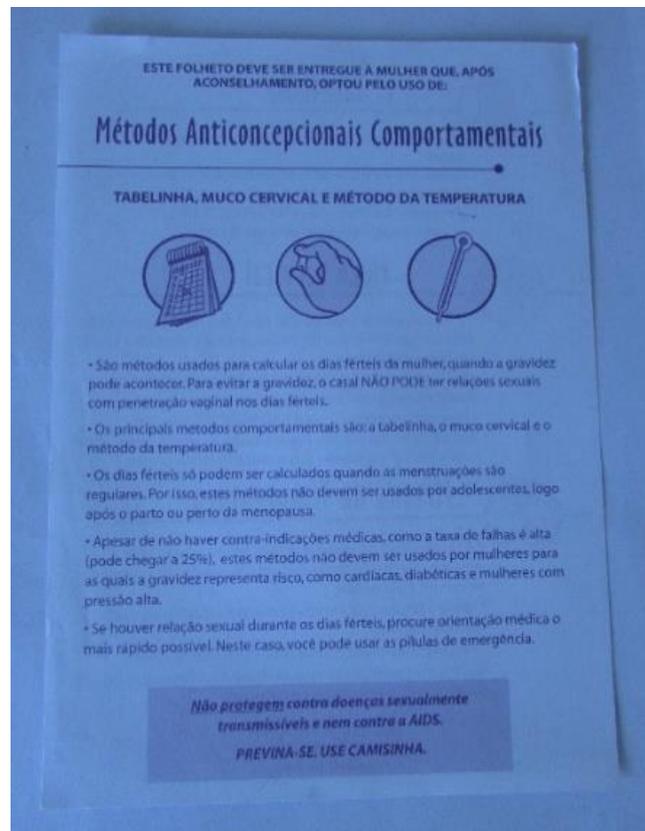


Figure 11 - BEMFAM leaflet describing behavioural contraceptive methods

Although the leaflet does state a 25% failure rate, the very inclusion of this method alongside the pill, the monthly and quarterly contraceptive injections and so forth, legitimises a form of contraception long considered unscientific.¹¹⁴ Indeed, a teacher from a local middle school expressed shock at the inclusion of such a leaflet within the materials provided by nurses: she explained that she told students in the clearest possible terms that such methods are not reliable, and that there is a dedicated section in the textbook she uses called “Rhythm: a risky method”. She expressed concerns, that, in receiving such information from their local nurse, the students

¹¹⁴ The UK Family Planning Association (FPA) also distributes a leaflet on “Natural Family Planning”, however, it is much more explicit about the efficacy and risks of such methods.

would feel conflicted and end up considering an unreliable contraceptive method. Such inconsistencies reflect Cooper's (2002) argument that State institutions, far from being coherent in their practices, 'operate in different ways' (p. 238).

This particular teacher felt there must be a religious agenda behind the inclusion of such methods. Although this could not be ascertained in this case, recent events in Brazil suggest the influence of certain religious groups over sex education content. In 2004, the federal government announced the programme "*Brasil sem Homofobia*" (Brazil without Homophobia), developed to combat violence and discrimination against the LGBT community (Soares, 2015). However, a campaign was launched against the "Schools without Homophobia" element, scheduled for implementation in 2011, which argued that the programme aimed to stimulate homosexuality and promiscuity in children (ibid.). The project was suspended, and is still a subject of immense debate today. One frequently-stated reason for the withdrawal of this project, and its veto by President Dilma Rousseff, was pressure from the Evangelical faction of Brazilian Congress (Alves Lima, 2012). This example shows the immense influence religious groups can have over sexuality issues in the country.

Despite such considerations, several participants deemed health-post leaflets important to young people's sexual learning, primarily because they represented something which could be taken away and read in one's own time, without the embarrassment of personal interaction:

I think that [leaflets]'re the best way for young people (...) there's nobody there telling them face-to-face, so they can be there reading, there's nobody there making them embarrassed, right? They'll read them normally, and they'll, definitely, get the different information the leaflets have in them. (Jussiara, 18)

The final form of health-based sex education discussed by participants was the placement of informative posters and an information desk during key local festivities

– the Lençóis Festival (in October), the Festival of *Senhor dos Passos* (in January) and *Carnaval* (February/March). According to one-third of participants, the information desk supplies condoms and leaflets to revellers, and is staffed by health-post workers, who answer any questions which might arise. Around a quarter of participants defined this work as the only kind of outreach/campaign work done by health-posts:

...with the health-post, it's like this. They only do things when there's some kind of party, a big party, like Festival, that kind of thing. They have a place, just, just to give out condoms to people, and that's it. (Erina, 24)

The connection between times of festivity and increased sex education and contraception provision is an interesting one. *Carnaval*, in particular, is famed for being a time of sexual freedom and promiscuity, highlighted by *figure 12*, taken from a local Facebook discussion group.



Figure 12 - "During Carnaval, the girls go wild and the guys get some... In November the girls give birth and the guys disappear." Posted 01/03/2014

This apparent association between festivities and increased rates of unprotected sex has traditionally been a cause for concern for the Brazilian State, due to perceived

heightened risks of STD transmission and unwanted pregnancy. This has commonly resulted in heavily publicised and well-funded campaigns, including the promise to distribute 73 million condoms during *Carnaval* in 2013.

Contrary to this, and to participants' accounts, in 2013-2014, I attended all three of the major festivities mentioned and saw only the slightest evidence of health-post presence – there was no information desk on any night I was present, and a poster was seen on only one occasion, towards the end of *Senhor dos Passos* in January 2014. This poster, which read “Life is better without AIDS. Use a condom”, was smaller than A3, and attached to the stall furthest from the stage, visible only as party-goers left the festivities. Perhaps the year of the research was an exception, or perhaps there were other reasons for this, however, the State's very public commitment to sexual health during periods like *Carnaval*, did not seem to be carried out on the ground in this particular town.

Perceptions of the role of the State

This brief summary of the State-sanctioned sex education experienced by the young women in this study has highlighted the variability of experience within the sample, and also the tension between what the State purportedly provides, and what the young women report having received, a tension already seen in the discussion of the PCNs in Chapter Three. This section explores more deeply participants' perceptions of State (in)action in the area of sex education and sexual health, and argues that a largely negative view of the State leads to an understanding of sex education as a localised, everyday process, supported mainly by individual State actors, and reliant, to a great degree, upon “informal” sources.

Federal/state levels

This section begins by analysing State (in)action on sex education at the federal/state level. Accessing participant opinions and perspectives on national and

state level policy, politics and actions was very difficult. Explicit questions about “the State” or “the government” were often unsuccessful, with participants claiming a lack of knowledge about such subjects. This seemed to be in-keeping with an overall lack of awareness of national politics, and an apparent lack of interest in politics of any kind, observed during the fieldwork period. Most of the young people with whom I came into contact during the research seemed rather resigned to the current political situation; they frequently described politicians at all levels as corrupt and dishonest, but felt that little could be done to change this. This echoes Schmidt’s 2003 findings in Rio Grande do Sul, that most citizens ‘distrust political agents, parties and institutions; have median interest in politics... and exhibit relatively low levels of political information’ (2003, p. 50, my translation). On several occasions, local young people claimed that they only engaged with politics around election time, when candidates would offer financial incentives in return for electoral support¹¹⁵, in an echo of the traditional *clientelism* often associated with Latin American politics (Ames, Baker and Rennó, 2008). The rest of the time, politics tended to be outside their everyday realities and concerns. This was particularly striking at one of the most politically active moments of Brazil’s recent history, in the run-up to the 2014 World Cup (Chin and Leal, 2014).

A couple of participants in this study, however, were extremely vocal about their dissatisfaction with State action/policy, for example Susana, until recently a student in Salvador:

I’m really against the government, like, about most... I’m very opposed to a lot of things, you see? (...) I think that our country is going through so much, it’s right in our faces that what’s happening is shitty, and no one does a thing. Things that could be done really easily. For example,

¹¹⁵ For example, members of a local sporting group described trips to neighbouring states funded by local would-be politicians.

education (...) Not just sex education, which is what we've been discussing, but education in general, right? (Susana, 24)

Though damning, such broader discussions of federal government (in)action were rare. However, criticisms of the State at federal/state level *did* occur in the discussion of the provision of adequate sex education. Three main concerns were raised: that national policy positions sex education as non-compulsory, giving schools/teachers the option to dodge the topic; that there was a failure on the part of higher State levels to provide teachers with the necessary training and resources to allow them to carry out this work; and that the conception of sexuality within sex education was too narrow.

One of the main problems perceived by participants was that national policy does not position school sex education as a mandatory part of the curriculum. As discussed in Chapter Three, the PCNs suggest that sex education feature as a cross-cutting theme, addressed by staff of all disciplines, but do not make it a formal curricular obligation. Moreover in 2011, a proposal to make sex education compulsory for all private and public schools was rejected by the Education and Culture Commission (Equipe Voluntária Brasil, 2011). Although none of the participants referred to the PCNs directly, around one-fifth stressed this loophole in provision as a major failure of the State:

...there's no, no, no rule to say "Oh, there has to be this here"... There's no obligation, they don't position it as an obligation. (Marcela, 23)

This omission was viewed as giving other State levels the option to ignore or omit sex education. What began as a federal failure to make sex education compulsory then becomes a weakness at the community level as schools fail to take the subject seriously; schools were commonly perceived as taking a "tick box" approach, with

several participants expressing the belief that schools were only paying lip-service to sex education, in order to fulfil the criteria of discussing the topic, however briefly:

...they skim the surface, but they don't, they don't go deeper into the topic. It's just like that, on the surface, just so they can say they talked about it... They tell us the basics of the basics, just so they can say they talked about it. (Erina, 24)

According to many participants, the solution to this problem was to enshrine sex education into the formal curriculum, by implementing a specific sex education discipline. This would remove the element of choice from sex education teaching, and ensure consistent cover, but stands in stark contrast to the interdisciplinary approach promoted in the PCNs. The young women in this study made various suggestions as to the form this new discipline should take: an hour a week in a similar format to other schools subjects; a combination of classroom work and palestras; more of a question-and-answer format with a teacher who was comfortable teaching such sessions; varied formats including plays and special seminars. This range highlights a diversity of opinions over the ideal frequency, depth and activities:

I think it could be once a fortnight, a sex education discipline... I think it could have, erm, within this discipline, dynamic activities, games, bring everything together in, right, in some kind of harmony, in a comfortable space, for them to be able to talk about the topic. (Susana, 24)

I think it would be to have a subject, like, as we have 3 lessons, 4 lessons a week of Portuguese, we could have one lesson a week on, on this matter. And then *palestras* too. To see if annoying people to death with the subject will make them wise up, you know?! (laughs) (Gabriela, 18)

In terms of content, topics mentioned for incorporation in this new discipline included respect, relationships, feelings, virginity loss, experiences of pregnancy, gender

roles, feminism, *ficar* and fertility. One young woman in particular had a very idealistic view of how sex education should be, although she acknowledged she might be “asking too much”:

I think that, maybe I'm also asking too much, right? (...) maybe what I want would be too much, involving everything – sexuality, the psychological perspective, the sociological one, the view of society, society, the town on this. But I think it would be interesting, right? (Priscila, 27)

Regardless of the detail of this new discipline, participants' desire for this formalisation of the inclusion of sex education in the curriculum indicates the importance they placed on the subject, in comparison to the lack of interest they perceived as coming from the State. This suggests an inherent conflict, at the policy level, between what young *lençoense* women want from school-based sex education, and what they currently receive.

It was not just with regards to sex education policy that the State at federal/state level was criticised; a handful of participants stated that schools *want* to teach sex education, but that they do not receive the appropriate support from the government in terms of resources, training, and lesson-planning guidance, a problem also discussed in Chapter Three. Elena, a former teacher, described her experience of colleagues trying to implement a sex education programme. After overcoming the obstacle of parental consent¹¹⁶, the lessons went ahead, but Elena evaluated them as follows:

So it was something which I thought was great, and it would perhaps be even better if we had more materials, and more training even (...) I believe that no one had any extra training, they don't get additional training, about this. (Elena, 25)

¹¹⁶ See Chapter Seven.

In accounts such as these, teachers are seen as limited in their capacity to improve sex education by the inaction of higher/national State levels. The establishment of a sex education discipline was seen by one or two participants as a potential solution to this problem also: if sex education were made compulsory, the government would be forced to provide training and resources to allow for its teaching, as better-trained and equipped teachers would be necessary for this new model.

Finally, the conceptualisation of sexuality within sex education was raised as a concern. As discussed throughout this chapter, the content of school-based sex education was frequently criticised, with half these women explicitly describing it as too limited. It was commonly stated that a broader, more holistic view was needed, including issues such as feelings/emotions and pleasure, amongst others, seen as “missing” in current school-based sex education. Mostly, the responsibility for this narrow approach was accorded to the teachers themselves, in the personal challenges they faced teaching other aspects, or to the schools, in the pressures they experienced from parents. In addition, the constraints of the education system were also highlighted, for example, the lack of available class time to dedicate to such topics. One participant, however, implicated the State in this narrow conceptualisation of sexuality:

I think that the government, they need to open more doors, right? Be showing more about sexuality (...) Because I think that school have very little knowledge of sexuality, the only thing that, that they have is getting to know your body, and the other person’s body, right, the, the female, the feminine sex and the masculine sex, and... and sometimes contraception. But is that all sexuality is? Why not bring more, more content which shows more about sexuality, right? The pleasure of life? (Alice, 28)

Although unique in this criticism, Alice's comments suggest that institutional change may be needed in how sex is understood, to allow for the inclusion of broader content at the community institution/individual State actor level. However, the apparent precedence of the SPE and public health approach within current sex education practice could suggest that the State understanding of sexuality has narrowed rather than broadened in recent years.

In terms of the federal/state role in sex education provision, then, around half the young women in this study identified what they perceived as major flaws. In comparison, few positive assessments were made of the Brazilian State, particularly federal/state levels. Where sex education successes were discussed, these were commonly attributed to an individual teacher, never to the whole school, and certainly not to a broader State power. This is not to say that no positive elements were the result of higher-level State action, however, this study is based on the perceptions and understandings of the young women interviewed, in which participants rarely attributed sex education successes to the State.

Health-post services

It was not just in the area of sex education provision that federal/state levels received criticism from participants. When it came to sexual health services, information and advice outside the classroom context, the State was, once again, accused of doing very little in terms of provision:

Because I don't see [the government] doing anything, you know? The only thing I know that they do is distribute the pill, right, which – the contraceptive pill – and condoms. I don't see them, like, erm, doing things that would make young people interested in knowing more about diseases, erm, informing themselves more... (Gabriela, 18)

An earlier section described some participants' belief that schools were teaching very basic sex education, merely so they could say they were fulfilling their responsibility. This idea was echoed by other participants with regards to sexual health provision, through the notion that the State, in giving out contraception, thinks it is doing enough:

N - And the government itself, what are they doing to help out in this?
(laughs) To be frank, I can't see that they're doing anything!.. Just in the matter of sending, like, condoms, right, contraception to health posts, that all I see... Only that! (Rayssa, 24)

These accounts express some young women's belief that the State feels its role in sex education and sexual health is restricted to providing limited biological information, and proportioning basic contraceptive services. They also suggest, however, that the young women disagree with this understanding of the scope of State responsibility, and feel the State should play a broader role.

Although in these examples concerns over provision were expressed as broad failures of "*o estado*" or "*o governo*", it is, in fact, local governments who are responsible for sexual health and family planning services, as discussed in Chapter Three. However, this municipalisation of primary care services is in itself a federal decision – devolving responsibility to the *prefeitura* does not absolve the federal government of further responsibility. It has been a major criticism of health-care decentralisation in Latin America that responsibility for provision is often transferred from central government to localities without the necessary budget for that provision (Homedes and Ugalde, 2005). This criticism was implicit in discussions with a Health Department representative, who stressed that to work in public health in Brazil, one needs to be creative, and think about ways to tackle public health issues with little or no money. With these budgetary constraints in mind, the following section looks at

the local/municipal levels of the State, and their role in the sex education and sexual health of young *lençoense* women.

Local/municipal levels

It soon became clear that the young women in this study were more interested and confident in discussing local/municipal levels of State action than federal/state levels. Throughout the interviews, participants referred consistently to the local government, the *prefeitura*, when asked about State provision, and about matters related to the day-to-day governance of lives in Lençóis. It could be said, therefore, that the *prefeitura* represents the Brazilian State in the imaginary and the lived experience of participants. Social problems were mostly analysed on a local level, attributed a local cause and seen as best resolved with a local solution: local/municipal levels seemed a far more relevant State presence than did federal/state levels. Only one or two of the women interviewed really spoke to the relationship between the State levels, and the hierarchy of demands and responsibilities¹¹⁷, and it was not uncommon for the *prefeitura* to be discussed as though it were an isolated, independent institution. This could, perhaps, be interpreted as the kind of localised understanding of State power, developed in Chapter Two.

Although not something discussed by participants, this localised focus could be due to what some scholars argue are feelings of regional exceptionalism. For example, Pinho uses the term 'the Idea of Bahia', which he understands to mean 'the "feeling" of difference that Bahians have from the rest of the country, and the world' (1998, n.p., my translation). This 'feeling of difference' and strong regional attachment could be due to the exclusion and prejudice directed at *nordestinos* in general, and Bahians in particular, discussed in Chapter Three, but might also be connected to the work of

¹¹⁷ See Patrizia on contraceptive supply and demand (pp. 178-179) and Alice on contraceptive choice (p. 179).

the tourism industry in constructing a unique “Bahian identity” of hospitality, happiness, friendliness and sensuality, to draw visitors to the region (Techio, et al., 2015). Although such studies refer to state identity, ideas of regional exceptionalism could still be relevant here: the construction of, and commitment to “Bahian-ness”, or *nordestino* or *lençoense* identity over “Brazilian-ness” could potentially contribute to explaining why the young women in this study were far more comfortable discussing the State at a local, rather than a national level.

Discussions of local State provision of sex education and sexual health services were largely critical, with several participants attributing the failings they experienced in this provision to the *prefeitura*:

...one month they have [contraception], there at the health-post, next month they don't. It's not something, like, *certain*, to be able to, for low-income people to depend on (...) Often, it's lacking, yeah. There are no condoms, they don't, they don't put in IUDs, there are no diaphragms, things that in other towns, even under the *SUS*, they have (...) I think it all comes from the *prefeitura*, right? From their interest, because they're not interested, education is terrible in all subjects, [sex education] would be the last subject, the last sort of information that I think they would worry about having in schools, putting into schools. (Luiza, 28)

In this extract, Luiza blamed the *prefeitura* for failures in the provision of both sex education and contraceptive services. Whereas the majority of participants made the link between local government and healthcare provision, fewer women expressed the view that local government were responsible for education – despite this also being largely decentralised in Brazil. Failures in school-based sex education tended to be attributed to federal failures in policy and resource provision, or to the community institution itself, the school. When it came to sexual health services delivered through the health-posts, however, many more women were critical of the *prefeitura*

and its role in unreliable provision, echoing Ferraz, Finan and Moreira's findings that 'Brazil's local governments bare (sic) much of the blame for this poor performance' (2012, p. 715). The main criticism raised by participants was that the local government was failing to play its part in linking the community and the federal government, vital because '[t]he [Family Health Programme] is a federal program that is implemented at the municipality level. Implementation therefore requires coordination across different spheres of government' (Rocha and Soares, 2010, p. 129). The local/municipal government was seen by several participants as responsible for ensuring that the federal government provides the health-posts with everything they need to offer adequate sexual health services, and it was the *prefeitura's* perceived failure to bridge this gap which garnered the most criticism. A handful of participants indicated that women in Lençóis often visit the health-post to pick up their contraceptive pill, or receive their contraceptive injection, to find that there are none in stock, a reality also confirmed by a visit to the Health Department just before the end of the fieldwork period, when they were experiencing numerous complaints due to a complete lack of contraception in the town's health-posts. Although I was reassured that this was an extraordinary occurrence, and that the supply of contraception usually runs "*tudo certinho*" (absolutely fine), the young women in this study highlighted it as a common problem. When this happens, women must go to the pharmacy and purchase what is needed, take an alternative form of contraception (with the associated disruption to contraceptive cover) or go without:

It's erm, the community post who doesn't make it freely available, right, which is the post we have here, which is maintained by the *prefeitura*, and the resources come from there, from Salvador, from the city, from the capital, they come for the whole *lençoense* community, except that it doesn't come, sometimes the quantity that the, the, the town needs

doesn't arrive (...) And sometimes it happens that the medicine arrives today, and tomorrow you go there and it's all gone. (Patrizia, 24)

In this comment, Patrizia identified the *prefeitura* as responsible for maintaining the community health-post. She acknowledged that the resources themselves come from the higher State levels – in this case Bahia state – but that there is sometimes a failure in obtaining enough for the town's needs. The implication, therefore, is that the *prefeitura* is failing in its responsibilities to the town.

Another criticism was the lack of contraceptive choice, which was again seen to represent the local government's failure to bridge the gap between federal and community levels. When asked about the most popular contraceptive methods in town, Alice described what she saw as very restricted choice between the pill and condoms, explaining:

The [intrauterine device], that's for more experienced women, right, that they insert it for, the government doesn't make it available for just anyone. The same with the diaphragm. Right? Not everywhere has it, because the government doesn't, doesn't, doesn't, doesn't make it available... And it's even worse with the female condom (...) the, the local public power doesn't claim it from the state power, you see, and the state power, from the federal powers, even less so. So, I think that it's the job of the local powers to seek it out (...) To give more options, because what, we only have two choices?! (Alice, 28)

Alice's identification of this lack of choice highlights the discrepancy between the sexual and reproductive health options offered on paper, and those available in reality. Whilst the leaflets collected for this research showed a range of contraceptive options – monthly and quarterly injections, vasectomy, the contraceptive pill, the IUD, behavioural contraceptive methods, male and female condoms, the diaphragm, and female sterilisation – Alice's account makes it apparent that most of these were not

viable options for *lençoense* women; their contraceptive choice was limited to male condoms or the pill.

In this account, Alice also established a hierarchical chain of responsibility, a top-down model in which local powers must pursue the state power for adequate contraception, who in turn must demand it from the federal level. This understanding mirrors Cooper's (1995) problematisation of the idea of the State as any kind of unified body, highlighting instead its separate functioning parts which must work together to achieve the kinds of sexual health services desired by participants. This is interesting, because it attributes the perceived failures of the *prefeitura* beyond disinterest or neglect, as seen in other criticisms, and onto a broader systemic failure in provision. One woman, Fernanda, reflected on the tendency to blame the *prefeitura* for local problems. Discussing the reduction of teenage pregnancy in Lençóis, she saw any improvement as requiring the collaboration of all stakeholders:

I think that maybe it's... lack of interest. From the nurses, the teachers, the head teachers – I think it's lack of interest. From the *prefeitura*, right? Here we blame the *prefeitura* for everything (both laugh) It's the *prefeitura's* fault! I think that it's all those bodies, it's for them to say "No, we've got high pregnancy rates, high rates of underage girls getting pregnant, what's happening? Let's do something." (Fernanda, 28)

Here, Fernanda suggested that the *prefeitura* alone is not responsible for perceived failures in sex education and sexual health services, stating instead the importance of cooperation between all the lower levels of the State: local, community and individual State actors. Interestingly, Fernanda does not highlight any need to increase the role of the federal/state levels in this issue. This statement also signifies the limitations of the *prefeitura's* capacities: it cannot, on its own, be responsible for

adequate provision across the whole town, other stakeholders are vital to this process.

Community and individual levels

As mentioned throughout this chapter, this study's analysis of the role of the State in *lençoense* sex education is not limited to formal mechanisms of government. The framework laid out in Chapter Two prompted the examination of *lençoense* people's interactions with the State in their everyday lives, which is conceptualised in two ways: through community institutions and through individual State actors.

The work of Das and Poole (2004) was particularly useful in allowing for the analysis of the State at this everyday level, by encouraging those studying the State to shift their gaze to what Das calls 'the margins and recesses of everyday life' (2004, p. 227) and to look at the network of State power in a different way. In this research context, as one moves down the scales of State action, contact between State and population increases. Many *lençoense* people only come into contact with federal/state levels through law and policy, conversely, the local/municipal State apparatus are located in the town, the *prefeita*¹¹⁸ and other workers are from, and live in, the town, and elements of their work are visible to the local population. This visibility and interaction increases at the level of community institutions, as locals enter these institutions and are subject to their programmes, campaigns and work on a daily basis. This becomes more personalised still at the level of individual State actors, with whom local people interact one-on-one and who they may well know socially outside their official capacities. This increased familiarity does not necessarily denote importance – a federal law may well have much greater impact on a person's life than the actions of an individual teacher – however, it does increase

¹¹⁸ Head of local government, similar to "mayor".

the immediacy of the relationship with the State, and its relevance to their daily lives and experiences. In some cases it may also give the State a “face”, or at least a locus, for blame or for praise. In any case, it is apparent that the State *is* functioning within the ‘margins and recesses’ (Das, 2004, p. 227) of *lençoense* everyday life.

The local-level, everyday scales of the State are particularly pertinent given Lençóis’ small geographical scale and close-knit social make-up. *Figure 13* shows the important landmarks to this study: the *Bairro do Gato* neighbourhood, where most participants lived, and where one of the local middle schools is located; the two health-posts (A and B) and the Health Department discussed in this research; the local high school; the *prefeitura*, and the handful of streets making up the “town centre”. Everything is within walking distance – from *Bairro do Gato* to the centre, either of the health-posts or the high school in under ten minutes, a similar time from the neighbourhood to the river. This close geography is compounded by a close-knit community where “everybody knows everybody”, and keeping secrets is almost impossible.¹¹⁹ The extent to which State bodies are ‘enmeshed’ in local worlds (Das and Poole, 2004, p. 22) within the *lençoense* context prompted the conceptualisation of schools and health-posts as “community institutions”.

Community Institutions

Health-posts and schools are two State institutions embedded in local worlds, staffed by local people and influenced by community norms and values. Despite both being funded and administered by the Brazilian State, only one or two participants explicitly referred to these institutions as State organs.

¹¹⁹ See Chapter Seven.



Figure 13 - Map of Lençóis, adapted from a tourist brochure, to show key landmarks

Their status as such was acknowledged in other ways, such as through comments that the State should make sex education compulsory, that it is failing to provide adequate training and/or resources for sex education delivery, or that health-posts are failed by higher State levels in the provision of sufficient contraception.

However, the lack of direct connections made between these institutions and the broader State prompted an alternative conceptualisation.

The rationale for the term “community institutions” comes both from observations of the role of these institutions in everyday *lençoense* life, and from their position vis-à-vis the broader Brazilian State. Whilst other State levels might appear far-removed from local day-to-day experience, schools and health-posts are firmly embedded in everyday life. In addition to their location, discussed above (see *figure 13*), the staff of these institutions live locally, and are part of community life more broadly: indeed one woman in this study used to be a teacher, another was in teacher-training, and a third worked as a community health agent¹²⁰, henceforth CHA, attached to a local health-post. Finally, all the participants in this study interacted with these institutions on a regular basis: a daily basis if they were still studying.

As well as being an indisputable part of the everyday functioning of the community, mechanisms brought in as part of municipalisation, described in Chapter Three, created space for Brazilian communities to participate in the administration of local State institutions. In the case of schools, this was through school councils, comprising parents, students and teachers, which have administrative and financial authority over the running of the school (Carvalho and Jeria, 1999; Gorostiaga

¹²⁰ Introduced in 1991, CHAs are part of an initiative to improve primary care and community health where it is particularly poor, e.g. the Northeast. CHAs are from the community and act as intermediaries between the State and that community (Ministério da Saúde, 2000).

Derqui, 2001; Borges, 2007). In the case of health-posts, several states and municipalities have participatory budgets, where a proportion of the healthcare budget is allocated by popular vote (Victora, et al., 2011, p. 2044), and many have health councils which allow for community consultation on healthcare priorities (Coelho, 2004, p. 34). In addition, CHAs have been described as playing ‘an essential role in connecting people to needed services and in transferring the advocacy capacity to their constituencies’ (Pérez and Martínez, 2008, p. 12). Therefore, these community institutions can be seen as bringing State and population into much closer contact. Although these formal participatory aspects were not discussed by participants, awareness of this potential for participation may contribute to the perception of these institutions as “of the community” as opposed to abstract State organs.

Despite the lack of reference to such formal mechanisms, community interaction with schools and health-posts was discussed by young women in this study. Around one-third of participants described how parental opposition to school-based sex education in general, or to the inclusion of certain topics, had an impact on that education: their participation was seen as directly affecting provision.¹²¹ Elena described how, in her previous capacity as a primary school teacher, she and her colleagues had attempted to implement sex education, but were met with resistance:

...before we started, we had a meeting with the parents, and there were some parents who didn't want it (...) “No, my child is too young to be talking about this, to know about this” (...) following the parents' complaints, we excluded those classes which had parents who didn't want it, and we left just those classes where the parents had, had supported it, who thought we should do it. (Elena, 25)

¹²¹ This also shows the importance of parental authority on sexuality issues, discussed in Chapter Seven.

Elena's experience demonstrates that, despite there being no requirement for parental permission for sex education since the introduction of the PCNs, parents were consulted over school actions and policies and their concerns taken on board, indicating the school as an institution with true community links.

With regards to health-posts, one young woman, Daiane, reported how a group of students had been dissatisfied with the single *palestra* offered and had gone to the Health Department to request further sessions. This could be interpreted as them expressing a sense of entitlement over healthcare provision, and the desire to be consulted regarding its delivery:

...there was a group who went to the office to ask for more *palestras*, but we only had that one (...)

N – And what did they say in the office?

That they'd see. But then, that time, a year went by, and another, and another, and I ended up finishing school.

N – (laughing) And nothing?

Nothing (both laugh). (Daiane, 19)

This example, however, highlights that community participation is not always fruitful; the students' request was ignored, or at least was not fulfilled while Daiane remained at the school. It is important to note, then, that schools and health-posts were not equally regarded as community institutions, and that this participation seemed to favour parents' requests and desires, rather than those of students. Whilst the concerns of the community seem to have been taken on board by schools in the planning and delivery of school-based sex education, attempts at participation with the health-posts were reported as less successful, which could well link to the differentiated municipalisation of health and education, giving schools freer rein in decision-making, as discussed in Chapter Three.

It would seem, from this summary and from observations made in the town, that what justifies the classification of schools and health-posts as community institutions is the extent to which they are 'enmeshed' (Das and Poole, 2004, p. 22) within local community life. This could include the level of involvement and integration of staff members, the amount of interaction between the institution and community members and the degree of inclusion felt by locals in how the institution is run. In Lençóis, although both schools and health-posts can be considered 'enmeshed' to an extent, the young people in this study seemed to feel that schools were more likely to be influenced by the opinions and demands of the community; as demonstrated by the perceived impact of parental opposition on sex education content. Health-posts, on the other hand, were more likely to be portrayed as stand-offish, with the complaints and demands of the population less likely to be taken on board.

These community institutions played an important role in the sex education processes of the young people in this study. As discussed earlier in the chapter, participants described sparse and insufficient sex education, and several explanations apportioned the blame for this directly to schools: for not making demands of higher State levels, for giving priority to other aspects of students' education, and for conceding to parental opposition. Earlier, it was posited that sex education's non-mandatory status gave the impression that it was an unimportant issue and one which could be dealt with in a cursory fashion, or even ignored;¹²² relieving schools of any pressure to provide sex education. Discussing the UK context, Carabine (2004a) points out that the great attention paid to issues around sexuality in law and policy highlights their significance (p. 23): they must be important to be discussed and legislated in such detail. However, in the Brazilian

¹²² See pp. 170-171.

context, the federal government's decision not to make sex education mandatory could be seen as sending a message to other State levels that the subject is not important enough to prioritise within teaching plans. Another interpretation, however, would echo the problematic place of sexuality in the private/public divide, discussed in Chapter Two: if sexuality is regarded as a private matter, intervention such as compulsory sex education in schools may be considered beyond the State's remit.¹²³ By making the subject non-mandatory, the State could potentially be interpreted as leaving it up to individual schools to assess how well State intervention in the form of school-based sex education would be tolerated in their communities, given their superior local knowledge.

Many young women seemed to believe that schools ought to do more to demand the implementation of sex education:

**I think that if the schools demanded more, I think if they demanded it, were switched on, said "Well, we want to work on this, let's make it happen" I think that they should, they should make more effort in this matter of making that demand. So, the schools doing their part in demanding it, the government send it, but if you don't demand it, how is the government going to know that the schools are interested?
(Patrizia, 24)**

Comments such as this raise debate over who is, and who should be, the main driving force behind sex education. The deliberate flexibility inherent in the PCNs places the onus firmly onto schools to determine when and how to cover the topic of sexuality, in what depth, and with what frequency. This makes schools the driving force, despite the other constraints they face. Participants were aware of these constraints, and sometimes attributed the perceived failings of school-based sex

¹²³ See pp. 40-43.

education to these other, institutional factors. A handful of women expressed the belief that sex education was not a priority when compared with other compulsory subjects:

[Our teacher] mostly skipped that topic.

N – And why's that, do you think?

I think that it was because she has to cover the whole book (...) She just gave a few, right, bits, but it was very little... Because she wanted to get through the whole book. (Gabriela, 18)

Others indicated an awareness of pressures to prepare students for the world of work. Priscila, for example, demonstrated the belief that teachers ignored sex education and other topics seen as less pressing, in favour of those which would prepare students for "reality":

...but there are subjects to be covered for you, for you to be thinking about the *vestibular*¹²⁴ very soon, so they go in-depth on other things, right? To prepare the person for the realities of work, and I don't know what, and so, sometimes you end up losing a bit of [sex education]. (Priscila, 27)

By far the most commonly-cited reason for limited sex education was parental opposition, and it is in this aspect that the schools' status as community institutions has the greatest impact. Because schools – more than federal, state or even local government levels – are deeply socially-embedded and face the local population on a daily basis, they come in for much more direct criticism when implementing certain policies. Their position as community institutions would seem to suggest that people in Lençóis expect their opinions and concerns about education to be taken seriously, and that schools do take on-board community feeling. Despite the fact that since

¹²⁴ End-of-school exam, the result of which is used in university applications.

the implementation of the PCNs, schools need no longer obtain parental permission for sex education, several participants identified that schools often avoided the topic to avoid complaints from parents who might feel the school had overstepped the mark in teaching their children about sex.¹²⁵

Once again, this dynamic could be seen to reflect the consideration of sexuality as a “private” or “family” matter, discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter Seven.

Over one-third of participants felt that more frequent, more in-depth sex education, or sex education delivered at a younger age, would prompt opposition from parents, who would feel that their children were being taught inappropriately in school:

I think that they think, erm... like this “Oh, they’re too young for this” and such, you see? I think that even because of... because of society’s view... Of students of, shall we say, thirteen, fourteen years old, coming home, talking to their ignorant “daddy” in inverted commas, about these things, and that dad not, not being happy that the school is teaching them. (Marcela, 23)

This perceived parental reaction was most commonly raised as a concern in the discussion of certain sex education topics, those considered particularly “heavy”.

These included topics such as pleasure, but was mostly raised in connection with the discussion of LGBT issues and experiences:

...a lot of parents are old-fashioned and prejudiced about this topic... And I don’t know, they might be afraid, of talking about that in, in, in the classroom and a student goes home and tells their dad, and their dad misunderstands, and goes there, to the school, saying “Why are you teaching this subject to, to my kid, he’s too young!” (Janaina, 21)

¹²⁵ All State levels would likely value parental support in this matter, given that parents, not students, make up the electorate.

It is interesting that, in these accounts, it is the father, in the figure of the ‘ignorant “daddy”’, who is positioned as the person who would most strongly object to the teaching of sex education, and the one most likely to complain. Despite the fact that most participants identified sex education in the home as largely the mother’s job¹²⁶, the father still seems to represent the ultimate figure of family authority, thus the one who protests most vocally when that authority is understood to have been infringed upon by the State. This could be interpreted as demonstrating a persistent link between private patriarchal structures, represented by the father, and public patriarchal mechanisms like school-based sex education, as per Walby’s (1990a) conceptualisation.

In explaining parental opposition, several women identified parental fear that knowledge about sex would breed curiosity, and thus the desire to practise sex:¹²⁷

...with some parents, when teachers talk about sex, even if...shall we say... they heard it at school, the parents go down the school, they go to the school to complain!

N – Really?

“You spoke to my child about sex?!” “You’re inducing my daughter to have sex! She’ll get pregnant, are you mad?!” And it’s the opposite, right? (Maria, 24)

Interestingly, when comparing these two examples, a clear gender difference can be seen. In Janaina’s account, fathers were seen as concerned about their sons learning about LGBT identities and relationships, perhaps out of fear such learning would influence their sons to “be gay”. Conversely, Maria’s comments highlight

¹²⁶ See Chapter Seven.

¹²⁷ See Chapter Seven.

parental fears over their daughter's chastity, and the risk of her becoming pregnant due to the receipt of inappropriate information.

Other reasons were also given for this opposition but, regardless of the reasons behind it, parental opposition was a major factor in the schools' avoidance/restriction of sex education. In a way, this is reinforced within the PCNs themselves, which continue to acknowledge the ultimate authority of the family within sex education, as discussed in Chapter Three.

It was not just schools whose role as community institutions was seen to affect sexuality and sexual health provision. Criticisms were also levelled at health-posts for failing to capitalise on the educational potential coming from their superior knowledge of the subject matter. As discussed previously, one-third of the women in this study positioned health-posts, and health professionals, as extremely authoritative on sexual matters within *lençoense* culture, suggesting a certain amount of social capital which could be traded upon. This respect for medical knowledge, coupled with the close imbrication of health-post and community, would suggest great potential for the health-post in the sexual learning processes of young *lençoenses*. Yet, participants seemed to feel that medical professionals failed to capitalise on their relative authority on sexual matters, rather they were prepared to do the bare minimum required by their jobs:

I think that the health-posts, yes, they advise you, the minimum, just to use condoms, but like, they don't tell you any more, they don't explain further, they don't tell you about other precautions, which you have to have, like, but they, the only thing they do here in Lençóis is, erm, give out condoms. It's very little. (Gina, 18)

Whilst many young people reported good experiences at health-posts, at least in terms of accessing contraceptive information and methods, health-posts were often

seen as content to let young people come to them, rather than reaching out or raising awareness. This would seem to contradict both the defined role of CHAs, tasked with linking the health-post and the community, and the narrative of one Health Department representative, who described health professionals as very active, both in schools and the wider community, seeking out young people who were becoming sexually active and encouraging them to visit the health-post for guidance.

This exploration of schools and health-posts as community institutions suggests that those elements of the State which come into direct contact with local populations are considered to have a great deal of potential, but might also be at greater risk of criticism. In the case of schools, fears over objections they might potentially face from parents were described by participants as being enough to affect decisions made about sex education delivery, resulting in a tendency to avoid or delay it, or limit its scope to “safer” subjects, such as only those directly affecting a young person’s health. This shows how the relationship between the State and its subjects can affect State practices. The criticisms levelled at health-posts, however, do not appear to have had similar impacts on their practices: no participant described a time when concerns had been taken on-board by health-posts, and they continued to be described as far-removed from the local reality, despite formal mechanisms such as CHAs, intended to forge closer links.

Individual State Actors

This study also explored views about the role of individual State actors in sex education. It might not seem productive to analyse the State at this micro-level, as when these State actors are situated within the wider structure of the State, they may seem relatively powerless. However, the works of Cooper (1995; 2002), Das and

Poole (2004), and Canaday (2009), discussed in Chapter Two, demonstrate how illuminating such analysis can be. Individual State actors such as teachers, school management, local government workers and healthcare professionals are the living embodiment of the State, and can come to represent State attitudes and policies in their very person. Canaday emphasises that the State is legible in the practices of officials of all levels (2009, p. 5): a particularly closed-minded or judgemental individual could mirror a more regulatory State, whilst a helpful and open individual might signal similar tendencies in the wider State apparatuses they represent. Similarly, one cannot forget the individual's capacity to act as "the face" of the State – a positive interaction with a State actor might improve public perception of the State as a whole, whilst a negative experience could do just the opposite. It is important to remember, of course, that an individual actor might be entirely at odds with other scales of the State, despite connections between them: they may act despite the State, or beyond it, in acts of 'resistance to political hegemonising impulses' (Cooper, 2002, p. 238). The personal biography of each State actor, their position in the community outside of work, and numerous other pressures might influence their interactions with the public, meaning they must be considered as having multiple identities – those of individual, family member and community member to name a few – alongside that of State actor.

This analysis of individual State actors focuses predominantly on teachers and nurses. In Latin America, teachers have, historically, played a crucial social role: 'Teachers are instruments of the historical memory of the popular sector, administrators of social programmes, grassroots organizers and researchers. In brief, in Latin America they are key agents of community development.' (Coraggio, 1994, p. 4). This would suggest that the potential of individual teachers to further

sex education aims (whatever forms these might take) should not be underestimated. Indeed, some very positive experiences were reported by participants about certain teachers, which is particularly telling given the lack of positive assessments of contributions made at other State levels. However, these positive experiences were situated within a wider context of distrust of individual State actors, which may have had implications for perceptions of the State more broadly: for example, experiences where individuals have failed to preserve confidentiality may lead to distrust of the State as a whole. This section draws on the idea of teachers and nurses as individual State actors to explore sex education as an independent teacher initiative; experiences of perceived disinterest from teachers and health-post workers; and a lack of trust in individual State actors, given the degree to which they are socially 'enmeshed' within local community life.

Given the non-mandatory status of the PCNs, over one-third of participants reported that it fell to individual teachers to take the initiative to teach sex education. This meant that the amount of sex education received – if any was received at all – was wholly dependent on whether or not students were “lucky” enough to have a teacher interested in addressing the subject, or who felt some responsibility or obligation to do so:

If you're lucky enough to have a teacher who bothers to deal with the subject, that's good, but when you don't, you're sort of left high and dry. (Ana, 19)

There was certainly little of the universal interdisciplinary coverage suggested by the PCNs; in fact, only one participant described having experienced such an approach.

This idea of sex education being based purely on teacher initiative was echoed by the teachers themselves. From discussions with four local teachers¹²⁸, it was clear that sex education was something they opted to teach, not a requirement from their schools. The two middle-school teachers both expressed regret that they had not done more on the subject: indeed the female teacher emailed over lesson plans for a scheme of work on sex and sexuality carried out after the fieldwork period, having been inspired by discussions in this research.¹²⁹ This indicates how the vagueness of the PCNs, combined with the municipalisation of education, contributes to the understanding of sex education, on the part of both sex educators and participants, as an individual initiative, rather than a co-ordinated national programme;

Because sex education in schools was largely perceived as based on individual initiative, those teachers who did cover the topic received praise from the young women in this study:

I think that she felt that necessity, you see? To work with the students, and I think it was... that it really woke us up, right? I think that “Let’s do something different, let’s talk about” You see? And it was cool! I liked it!

N – Aha. So, it wasn’t, like the headteacher who made her do it, it was her herself?

No. It was her. From her part. She felt the necessity to do it with the students. You see? To work on it (...) she felt that necessity, I think it ought to happen, right? It was something positive. (Sara, 19)

¹²⁸ See Chapter Four.

¹²⁹ This programme included sessions on puberty, (teenage) maternity and paternity, contraceptive methods, abortion (including role-play about the decision-making process), STDs (including the study of experiences of AIDS, viewed through songs and poetry), masculinity and femininity (using the film *Billy Elliot* as a stimulus), and homosexuality and bisexuality (using the film *Brokeback Mountain* as a stimulus).

They were seen as going out of their way to help their students, by engaging with a topic they perceived to be important. In this way, such teachers were viewed as working *outside* the structures of the State, based on their own personal commitments, in a way which mirrors Cooper's (2002) understandings of the various, not-always-unified, ways in which State apparatuses operate.

However, participants made it clear that most teachers did *not* choose to work on this topic. Several demonstrated sympathy and understanding for teachers, identifying that it was challenging for some for personal reasons, such as embarrassment, the taboo they experienced in their own upbringing, or because of their religion. However, a handful of young women were critical of the conservatism they felt was frequently demonstrated by school management and especially older teaching staff:

Normally they are, they are, they are teachers of, of, of ordinary subjects... Who have limited vision... Who pass on that vision which, which, which actually makes the situation worse! They pass on a vision of, of, of, of, that what the person speaking is doing is wrong. Having doubts. (Marcela, 23)

In this example, these State actors may be seen to represent a State which is rigid and judgemental, and which positions sex as wrong, showing the importance of individual actors in contributing to wider understandings of sex and sexuality. It seems then, that rather than those individual teachers who *did* cover sex education being seen as the "face" of the State as suggested by Canaday (2009), or in some way representative of a wider, proactive State, they were far more likely to be seen as exceptions, working outside of broader State intentions, due to their own personal motivations and individual initiative.

Other explanations were given for the lack of engagement with sex education topics by individual teachers. A handful of participants voiced the opinion that teachers felt there was “no point” providing sex education – they saw it as a waste of time, viewed students as a “lost cause”, or perceived them to be already too knowledgeable on the subject:

The teachers think it’s a waste of time, them being there, warning. Some of them must think “Oh, they already know too much! I don’t think there’s anything to teach them...” (Luiza, 28)

...lots of them think that there is no solution, or there’s no way to change, there’s no point... I think that, erm, lots of teachers, erm, erm... (pause) They position it as... as though it were a lost cause? (Marcela, 23)

Participant narratives suggested the young women also felt healthcare workers were disinterested in sex education. The previous section discussed the relative inactivity of health-posts and, although there could be myriad reasons for this lack of focus on sex education, many young women interpreted this in a very negative way. For example, Patrizia provided an individualised explanation for this inactivity, positioning individual healthcare workers as lazy and happy to sit back and do nothing whilst still earning their pay-check:

...when you go to the health-post, there’s a tonne of people sat down doing nothing!.. So, it’s like, they’re earning their salaries, but they’ve got nothing to do?! They don’t do anything! (...) we’d all like to earn a salary, for doing nothing, right? (Patrizia, 24)

Whether teachers and healthcare workers avoid the topic of sex and sexuality due to disinterest, or because of other, institutional or cultural forces is almost immaterial. The reality is that many of the young women in this study *perceived* these State actors as disinterested in sex education, as viewing the topic as pointless or

irrelevant, and as not prioritising the subject, when the young women themselves saw it as important. In line with Canaday's (2009) understanding of State actors as the face of the State, this could perhaps contribute to an overall image of a disinterested State.

Additionally, around one-quarter of participants voiced distrust towards State actors, mainly with reference to a lack of discretion on the part of teachers and nurses.

From their experiences in interaction with these actors, and from anecdotal evidence, several participants felt that these actors could not be trusted to maintain confidentiality, in a town where "everybody knows everybody". This culminated in the largest perceived flaw at the level of individual State actors – failure to create an atmosphere of trust:

We want to know, we want to exchange experience, we just don't want to do it in front of an adult that's part of our day-to-day lives. Here, everybody knows everybody, everybody knows who your mum is, who your dad is, and at school people are scared that someone will go and make a comment to their parents.

N – Oh, yeah?

That's already happened. (Juliette, 19)

...there were girls who were saying they wouldn't go for a smear with one nurse who was here in town at the time, because she was telling people the, the, the girls' problems. (Luiza, 28)

Such accounts suggest that concerns over the confidentiality of information shared in sex education lessons or sexual health consultations prevent openness. Other studies have highlighted the importance of trust in individual actors to the effectiveness of government programmes (e.g. Grootaert, 2001), suggesting that such distrust could be detrimental to the success of sex education initiatives in the town, especially within such a small and close-knit community.

This analysis of the contributions of individual State actors to sex education delivery and sexual health provision indicates that, where attempts are made to provide sex education, individual teachers were credited for these attempts, and their efforts were appreciated. However, this individualised understanding of sex education and sexual health provision can also lead to the individualised apportionment of blame, such as in Patrizia's assertion that health-post workers are lazy. The final point, regarding trust, confirms the importance of the extent to which an individual is 'enmeshed' in local worlds (Das and Poole, 2004, p. 22) to both their effectiveness and to the reception of their work. In Franco, Bennett and Kanfer's 2002 conceptual model of healthcare reform and health worker motivation, based on existing studies from a range of geographical locations, social embeddedness had positive impacts. It was seen to affect workers 'motivation to provide good service and their desire to be appreciated by their clients. In instances where there is a social relationship between patient and provider, providers may seek to provide more polite and empathetic treatment' (2002, p. 1263). However, in this study, community connections between teachers/health-post workers and young women were a cause for concern, and even distrust. This dynamic is possibly due to the prevalence of gossip practices in the town, identified time and again by the young women in this study, and explored further in Chapter Seven.

The legitimacy of State-sanctioned sex education

Despite disagreement over the ideal timing, depth and content of sex education, and despite the many criticisms directed at the various State levels, the young women in this study showed general consensus in support of greater State-sanctioned sex education. Although many had received very little State-sanctioned sex education at school – or perhaps because of this fact – participants tended to support its

inclusion, and wished for more sex education from school and health-posts: they felt the State had the authority to speak on this matter, so should do so more often. The majority of participants did not see the implementation of school- or health-post-based sex education as a State intervention in young people's lives, with around one-third describing State involvement in terms of helping young people. In a discussion of State-sanctioned sex education in general, Jussiara commented:

[The government] just want to *help*, right, in this case. Help you protect yourself properly so you don't get a serious disease. I don't think it's an intervention like that, no. (Jussiara, 18)

For the small handful of women who did discuss State involvement in terms of intervention, the intervention was seen as positive: the State was described as giving young people the advice they need to make better choices, raising awareness, and preventing negative outcomes. Although the term "intervention" was used, this could perhaps best be described as 'protective intervention' (Olsen, 1985), a form of selective intervention where, in exceptional circumstances, 'the state should intervene in the family to protect the interests of society and of the family members who may be at risk' (ibid., p. 838):

I think that [sex education] could be an intervention, but I think it's a positive intervention... The government affects so much, intervenes so much in our lives... Right? The people who get the *Bolsa Família*¹³⁰, they're seeing a government intervention, but it's a positive intervention... They're getting something good out of it, for them it's good. But yes, I think it's an intervention, but I believe it's a positive intervention, I think they're entering into the family in a positive way. (Susana, 24)

¹³⁰ See Chapter Three.

These accounts contribute to the production of an image of the Brazilian State acting in the best interests of the population, to avoid or mitigate negative outcomes. As a result, many participants expressed the belief that, if anything, greater State intervention is needed, given concerns over high rates of teenage pregnancy, for example.

Resistance to State intervention in matters of sexuality was usually positioned as limited to older generation *lençoenses*, who were more likely to take a traditional view of sexuality as a “private” or a “family” matter. A handful of participants recognised that some parents may see sex education provision as the State interfering with their child-raising, echoing Hilton (2001) who identified ‘confrontation with some parents, who do not see the need for government interference in what they perceive as a family, moral or religious matter’ (p. 40). Even though the young women themselves did not understand the State as intervening in their lives, one or two could see how their parents might interpret it in that way, and characterise State-sanctioned sex education as the State “sticking their noses in”:

...they’re going to think that they’re invading their lives, right? “Oh, they want to know too much about my life!” (...) some will accept it in that way, that form, as a good thing, and other will reject it, thinking that they’re trying to stick their noses in. (Patrizia, 24)

Although several other participants were adamant that parents would not let their own arrogance jeopardise the well-being of their children, attitudes such as those described by Patrizia acknowledge the traditional understanding of sex and sexuality as “private matters”, belonging only in the private domain; thus reiterating parental authority on the subject. This “private” status means that it is the family’s responsibility to educate, regulate and discipline, placing sex education beyond the

remit of the State. Elena explained this attitude as coming from the taboo around sex: the closed nature of the topic means people are unable to see sexuality as a matter of public concern or interest, instead believing it to be completely private; and so something the State should not involve itself with:

But maybe those people who see it in that way, as though, as though the government is interfering, it's because they've always seen it as a taboo. Right? They're not open-minded, maybe, to see that it's a subject like any other, that people need to know about... Maybe people see it like that... Because if you see it like any other topic, maybe they wouldn't, they wouldn't think about it that way, that, that people, that the government is invading the, the private lives of the population. (Elena, 25)

Elena's comment about sexuality being a subject like any other is interesting. Her point is that it should be discussed as openly as any other topic, but the social construction of sexuality as 'the consummate signifier of the private and the personal' (Carabine, 2004b, p. 165) makes that challenging. However, the absence of narratives where participants *themselves* identified State action such as sex education as intervention could be interpreted as linked to the opening-up of the topic of sexuality, and as demonstrating a less rigid understanding of the public/private divide. This could also be a reflection of a move from 'private patriarchy' to 'public patriarchy' (Walby, 1990a), discussed in Chapter Two.

There was, however, one instance when the young women in this study described State intervention in the arena of sexuality as illegitimate and inappropriate, and this was when the motives for this intervention were perceived as being financial, rather than protective. This could be interpreted as the State putting public motivations such as budget over and above the well-being of the individual, taking the "public"

status of sexuality too far. Several of the young women interviewed voiced the opinion that sex education and sexual health initiatives are only (or at least mainly) implemented by the State to curb “unhealthy” behaviours, in order to reduce demand on the healthcare system, and associated costs. The belief, expressed by Juliette below, was that the government invests in sex education to try to reduce the rates of teenage pregnancy and STDs, because high rates in these areas mean an increase in the number of people visiting healthcare facilities and receiving treatment, costing money and putting a strain on already over-stretched services:

I think the government wants to spend less money. It’s a lot more expensive for them if a young person gets AIDS, or if a girl gets pregnant. So, it’s more of a financial concern than a real worry about our health. (Juliette, 19)

Another financial motivation of the State, identified by a handful of young women in this study, was the desire to reduce welfare responsibilities. This critique was commonly couched in terms of the *Bolsa Família*, the belief being that the State imparts sex education in order to reduce teenage pregnancy, and therefore *Bolsa Família* expenditure, given that additional payments are made to families supporting babies and young children:

But, like, but nowadays, the government is seeing really high percentages of young girls getting pregnant... And with that, comes the question of the *Bolsa Família*, you understand?.. And I don’t know if they, like, pass on this information to, I think it’s to try and limit that a bit more (laughs). (Janaina, 21)

Here, Janaina expressed a rather cynical view of the State as attempting to control “problematic” behaviour – in this case teenage pregnancy and high birth rates – through sex education, not because this might be good for young people, but

because the financial burden of leaving the situation unchecked would be too great. Not all the young women in this study understood this to be the State's motivation. One woman disagreed with this premise on very specific grounds, claiming that the government wants more people, not fewer, on the CCT programme, because it furthers the dependency of the population, and maintains public support at election time:

If you have someone who is dependent upon you, you're always going to have them there, beneath you. You're going to subordinate them (...) if they haven't got that link anymore, the population aren't going to have any more obligations to them, because there won't be that exchange of "favours" in inverted commas, right? (...) So, I think that they aren't *at all* interested in having people with knowledge. It's like here, there's the *Bolsa Família*, *Bolsa Escola*, *Bolsa Gás*, so many *Bolsas*, you see? So, there's always going to be that dependence, and poor people, sometimes without any knowledge, are going to become more and more dependent. (Michele, 19)

Michele's concerns echo a persistent criticism of the *Bolsa Família* and similar CCT programmes, as exemplified by Hall (2008), who argues that the programme constitutes 'a relatively inexpensive yet highly effective mechanism for capturing votes' (2008, p. 814) which strengthens clientelism and creates a culture of dependence among the poor. Such critiques have been disputed elsewhere, with other scholars arguing that the *Bolsa Família* has contributed to social inclusion, enfranchisement, increased citizenship and political empowerment for the poor (e.g. Hunter and Sugiyama, 2010; Sánchez-Ancochea and Mattei, 2011).

Whilst some participants felt very strongly that the State was intervening in the arena of sexuality purely for financial motives, this was by no means a universal conviction: as previously discussed, many identified far more benevolent intentions from the

State, such as caring for the population, and helping young people avoid outcomes perceived as negative. Examining these different narratives, it is hard to see how the State can occupy such different positions in participant imaginaries. Cooper's work is useful here: she purports that the State has multiple identities which are mobilised at different times, to different ends – it might at one stage, or even simultaneously, be an international representative, a coercive force, a provider of welfare, or various other identities (1993). The concept of multiple State identities is useful in helping clarify how different young women in this study could have very different understandings of the role and intentions of the State, with some seeing it as motivated by the desire to save money, and others believing that the State truly wishes to help young people: both motivations, or neither, could be driving the State. It is clear that the line between these various understandings is a fine one. State action could easily be interpreted in various ways, depending on the perceived motivations behind that action, and the topic at issue. This could be connected to the extent to which sexuality is defined as a “private matter” – just as the public/private divide is discursively constructed, so too is the nature of the State. Those taking a more rigid view of the public/private divide, and positioning sexuality more firmly in the private domain – such as the parents of some participants – were more likely to see State action such as sex education as an inappropriate intervention. Coupled with this, participants were more likely to view more moderate State practices, such as sex education which was perceived to be aimed at helping young people avoid negative outcomes, as acceptable, even if the view was taken that sexuality was a “private matter”. However, the less the State's focus was seen as being on helping the population, the more inappropriately interventionist it was

perceived as being, and the less likely its actions were to be seen as legitimate.¹³¹

Conclusions

From the discussion in this chapter, it is clear that the young women in this study levelled significant criticism at the Brazilian State for its perceived (in)action regarding sex education. They reported varying degrees and quality of sex education from school and health-post sources, and heavily criticised all scales of the State for allowing what they perceived as insufficient and inadequate sex education. Indeed, they consistently expressed a desire for more State-sanctioned sex education from schools and health-posts.

The municipalisation process, discussed in Chapter Three, has had a serious impact on sex education and sexuality service provision, placing a major focus on local-level provision, but also muddying the hierarchy of responsibility for said provision. This seems to have resulted in sex education largely being experienced by the young women in this study as a local, everyday process, rather than a national-level issue. Certainly, for my participants, praise and blame were apportioned on an individualised, or at least a community-level basis, where those institutions and actors present in their day-to-day lives were seen as responsible for successful sex education, and equally for that deemed unsuitable or insufficient. Such localised sex education results in high variability in experience, and also depends greatly on the local social, cultural and political context. External pressures and personal difficulties often mean that this everyday provision is not enough to assist young *lençoense* women in their sexual learning, causing them to rely on “informal” sources of information, discussed in Chapter Seven.

¹³¹ It is important to mention that examples of the State intervening in a discriminatory fashion – for example, against LGBT citizens - were not discussed by the participants in this study.

It is important to highlight, however, that the four State levels do not operate discretely, and it is often difficult to determine which level(s) are at work at any given time. This was reflected in the difficulties experienced by participants in determining upon which State level responsibility for sexuality-related services rested most heavily, or deciding which level was most to blame when the chain of provision failed. This could be interpreted as leaving space for failure, or allowing State levels to “pass the buck”. The levels were clearly interrelated, often in far more complex ways than a simple hierarchy from federal to individual might suggest: as indicated by the fact that sex education successes were most commonly attributed to individual actors, suggesting their perceived power relative to other levels. Several participants highlighted that sex education and sexual health services are the responsibility of a whole network of individuals, and so divided the blame for perceived failures. The following quote from Michele, sums up much of the feeling around the State’s role in sex education and sexual health provision. The State, acting through its various levels and represented in the lives of the population by health-post staff and teachers, amongst others, is obliged to act on this subject, but is content to do the bare minimum – namely to distribute condoms – rather than looking more deeply at things which might help to change the situation:

I think the government is really weak. With regards to everything. And also in this. If they’re not coming in to give *palestras*? They speak through the health-posts, that it’s the obligation of the health-posts, the doctors, you see? The teachers’ obligation. But they don’t get involved. So, they give out condoms, and nothing else, and they think that that’s enough. (Michele, 19)

The reasons behind this reluctance might possibly be linked to the perceived legitimacy of State intervention into issues around sexuality – issues which have

traditionally been regarded as private or family concerns, discussed in Chapter Seven. Chapter Two discussed the private/public divide and explored the positioning of sexuality and related issues within that divide. Whether sexuality is seen as a private or a public matter has had a particular impact on the perceived legitimacy of State action on young people's sexual lives; for example, through the implementation of sex education programmes. This was exemplified through the debate amongst participants as to whether or not State-sanctioned sex education and sexual health services constituted an intervention into young people's lives, privacy, or the family domain.

This debate can be succinctly summed up by the following excerpt, in which Priscila describes how young people live their lives at the intersection of "public" and "private" – they are subject to parental control and authority, yet they are part of wider society, which has an interest in how they are raised and educated, and how they subsequently behave. Her comments help to illustrate how sexuality straddles the public/private divide – it is at once intensely personal and private, part of the domestic domain, and to be carried out "behind closed doors", and also a public health concern, a focus for public morality, and an issue with regards which wider society has a vested interest:

I think the government *does* have that role. Of interfering. It's not something that's simply personal, and for the family, just for the family – no! Not. No way. Because teenagers, they don't just belong to the space of their family, at home. They're part of that environment, at home, and everything outside it, right? (...) We're not alone in the world, we're – it's us and the world around us, right? So, there's no way it can be something *personal*, wholly of the family. There are things in sexuality which are private to you, but there are things which start to interfere in the whole shared environment, so it's a topic for

everybody. (Priscila, 27)

Here, Priscila challenges the idea that sex education is beyond the remit of the State, and argues that it should play an active role in young people's everyday sexual learning processes.

Beliefs such as Priscila's potentially explain the young women's frustrations regarding the sex education they received: the State was frequently believed to have the authority to educate young people about sex and sexuality, yet was consistently identified as flawed or inactive with regards to sex education. Given this picture of inadequate State-sanctioned sex education, it was important to look to the alternative sources of sexual learning employed by participants, explored in Chapter Seven. Prior to this, however, the following chapter examines the messages the young women reported receiving from State-sanctioned sex education, and the uses these were put to in their everyday lives, given the perceived authority of the State to speak on sexuality.

Chapter 6. ‘The only people who get pregnant are those who want to’: Themes of “risk and risk-reduction”, “responsibility” and “respectability” in State-sanctioned sex education

Having mapped the landscape of State-sanctioned sex education provision, and described participants’ perceptions of the role of the State in that provision, this chapter now explores the salient themes within State-sanctioned sex education, and the ways participants interpreted, used and subverted the messages they perceived within them. Within participant accounts of State-sanctioned sex education in Lençóis, three key themes were identified: “risk and risk-reduction”; “responsibility” and “respectability”. These themes did not function discretely, rather they worked to cement and support one another, as well as interacting with, and often being reinforced by, messages coming from “informal” sources. The prominence of these themes within State-sanctioned sex education sent particular gendered and (hetero)sexualised messages to the young women interviewed – namely that young women should be “responsible” sexual subjects who use contraception consistently, but also that they should avoid being seen as “too much” by excluding sexual intercourse from their practices of *ficar*, and by avoiding behaviours which could be read as “sexually forward”, such as carrying condoms. In this way, *lençoense* sex education could be interpreted as a mechanism of ‘public patriarchy’ (Walby, 1990a), designed to regulate young women’s sexualities.

Despite the prevalence of these sex education themes, none were accepted wholesale by the young women in this study, or by the teachers working with them: this chapter highlights some moments of resistance to these dominant themes, by teachers and by young women. Finally, it is illuminating to note the themes which are *not* present within sex education, and explore why this might be the case.

Therefore, this chapter concludes by examining the topic of pleasure and desire, identified as “missing” from State-sanctioned sex education by over half the participants.

The dominant themes within school-based sex education could be understood as contributing to wider State discourses on youth sexuality. Policy and State practices, including pedagogical and medical practices, are often strongly normative and it is important, therefore, to examine how these ‘implicitly and explicitly convey messages about appropriate and acceptable sexualities... constituting sexual norms’ (Carabine, 2004a, p. 3). Policy and educational discourses in areas such as sex education, and welfare have been seen as constructing the idea of the universality of heterosexuality, whilst also producing subject-positions such as the “unmarried mother”, or the “sexually active teenager” (ibid.), with which one can compare oneself and others. The mobilisation of the three identified themes within State-sanctioned sex education can therefore be seen as contributing to the discursive construction of both “appropriate” and “inappropriate” sexuality for young women in Lençóis.

State-sanctioned discourses of appropriate sexuality are based firmly within a heteronormative framework, as discussed in Chapter Two. Schools have been frequently analysed as heteronormative spaces, and school-based sex education tends to normalise and enforce heterosexuality (e.g. García, 2009 on the experiences of Latina youth in the US). Observations of sex education lessons in Lençóis¹³² seemed to confirm this: across the observed sex education sessions, LGBT issues were only mentioned once, in passing. This omission was also noted

¹³² See Chapter Four.

by several participants, although only a small handful felt there ought to be greater discussion of these topics. However, the heteronormative framework in which State-sanctioned sex education sits was not limited to the exclusion of LGBT experiences, but also speaks to the intersection of gender and sexuality. As Seidman (2005) states, heteronormativity ‘not only establishes a heterosexual/homosexual hierarchy but also creates hierarchies among heterosexualities, resulting in hegemonic and subordinate forms of heterosexuality’ (2005, p. 40). Speaking of heteronormativity in education and healthcare in the Brazilian context, Meyer et al. (2006) stated that ‘education and healthcare are two discursive [sic] practices that produce, up-date, transform and incessantly repeat, what women and men are, can or should be’ (2006, p. 9). This prompts the idea that teachers need to be more aware of the dynamics of gender and sexuality within the sex education classroom, as argued by Harrison and Ollis (2015).

In the *Iençoense* case, sex education was reported by one or two women as perpetuating the sexual double standard and reiterating heavily gendered sexual “norms” of male hypersexuality and unstoppable sexual desire, contrasted with female passivity and preference for love over sex:

N - And that [*palestra*], at *Afrânio Peixoto*¹³³, what was it about?

It was about, like, contraceptive methods, right? And, like, that women can't have sex with just any man. Right? With any old man who likes to pull women just to do it with them for pleasure... Without any kind of affection, or love, right? (Rebeca, 18)

It could also be interpreted as supporting the “coital imperative” (Jackson, 1984), discussed in Chapter Two. None of the participants recalled lessons discussing oral,

¹³³ Local museum, archive and auditorium where film screenings and public events were often held.

anal or non-penetrative sex, or mutual masturbation and only one or two reported any focus on masturbation, echoing similar findings in the UK context (e.g. Hirst, 2004; Ingham, 2005). These elements, reinforcing not just heterosexuality, but a specific, normative form thereof, were present in each of the identified sex education themes, but enacted differently within them.

Sex Education Themes

The following sections explore the themes “risk and risk-reduction”, “responsibility” and “respectability” present in school and health-based sex education, and how these themes provided a frame of learning for the young women in this study which contributed to their understandings of “appropriate” heterosexual femininity. These themes were developed from the young women’s accounts of their State-sanctioned sex education, and represent the ideas and topics which appeared most frequently and which were perceived as most influential or important in shaping their experiences.

“Risk and risk-reduction”

One of the most pervasive reported themes in State-sanctioned sex education constructed sex as risky to young women’s bodies, reputations and futures, through an overwhelming focus on the “negative” consequences of sexual activity: teenage pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted diseases. This echoes Moore (2012), who found that school-based sex education in Britain positions youth sexuality as fundamentally risky, and is driven by the perceived need to teach “healthy” behaviours and practices to minimise these “risks”. A handful of young women in this study described schools as employing fear tactics to highlight these risks and scare young people out of certain behaviours; which Susana described as “terrorising” them. According to participants, abortion and AIDS were portrayed in

sex education as the most severe threats: several of the young women described how HIV/AIDS was positioned as “deadly” in school-based sex education, whilst many reported the school’s warnings of the damaging consequences abortion has for a young woman’s body:

And [the Biology lessons] looked as well at the, the, the abortion side, the question of abortion... What are the consequences for you, that you could... you could have, right, from an abortion. Without wanting to, right, you end up destroying your body... Even though you manage to avoid having that child... You end up *completely* destroying your body from the inside. (Janaina, 21)

This focus on risk is quite possibly due to the role of the Ministry of Health as a driving force behind school-based sex education, identified by Sfair, Bittar and Lopes (2015) in their policy analysis. The focus on sex education as *prevenção* over and above education and/or guidance clearly highlights the priorities of the Brazilian State in preventing negative public health outcomes. This suggests that the interdisciplinarity and holistic focus of the PCNs has been superseded by the public health focus of the SPE, most explicitly targeting the reduction of HIV/AIDS.

However, the representation of AIDS and abortion as the greatest risks did not seem to resonate with the young women in this study. STDs/AIDS were described as being rare or almost non-existent in Lençóis, indeed they were discussed in depth by less than one-third of participants. There was also a strong rejection of abortion as immoral and wrong, suggesting it was a minority practice, in terms of acceptance if not in terms of numbers.¹³⁴ Rather, teenage pregnancy was seen as the greatest “risk” to sexually active young people in Lençóis, given the perceived scale of the

¹³⁴ Participants did not reject abortion on the grounds of its illegality, but due to spiritual understandings (despite most not identifying with organised religion) or ideas of rights for unborn children. This issue is very complex, and warrants further exploration than can be afforded here (see Chapter Eight).

“problem” and likelihood of it affecting them or someone they knew, mirroring the findings of Hillier, Harrison and Warr (1998, p. 25). All but one participant discussed teenage pregnancy, and the vast majority described how the “risk and risk-reduction” theme played to this understanding:

[Asked if schools talk about teenage motherhood] Yes. Because there are... erm... a lot of things you miss out on, you can't go out partying all the time if you've got a baby to raise, you have to take on other responsibilities, sometimes you have to leave school because there's no one to leave the baby with, you have to start working... That sometimes you don't have the support of your mum and dad. And it was, it was talked about, yes. (Ana, 19)

According to one-third of participants, teenage pregnancy was described in school-based sex education as dangerous for young women's bodies due to under-development. A further handful reported that, within school-based sex education, teenage pregnancy was positioned as damaging to a young woman's family life and romantic relationships, as her parents may not support her and her partner might abandon her. Finally, in the accounts of almost a dozen women, school-based sex education described teenage pregnancy as risky for a young woman's future as she may have to leave education and take an unfulfilling, poorly-paid job to support her child. None of the young women in this study identified any positive school-based accounts of teenage pregnancy, something which did not fit with more varied local understandings of what young motherhood could mean.¹³⁵ With its focus on the negative outcomes for young people, then, school-based sex education was described as positioning sex as saturated with risk. The majority of the young

¹³⁵ As mentioned earlier, participants expressed mixed feelings regarding teenage pregnancy. Some understood it as entirely negative, whilst others perceived positives, or approached the issue in more ambiguous ways. None of this complexity appeared to be explored within school-based sex education.

women in this study identified the reduction of teenage pregnancy and the prevention of STD transmission as the most common foci of sex education, with the two generally afforded equal importance.

Once sex had been firmly positioned as “risky”, the “risk and risk-reduction” approach then proposed solutions for reducing or avoiding these risks. Perhaps surprisingly, given the target of risk-reduction, there was no mention of abstinence or delaying sex in the accounts of the young women interviewed, nor in the observed sex education sessions:

...the nurses don't even tell us anymore that, that, that we're too young, that our bodies aren't ready for that kind of relationship. They just tell us straightaway, they tell us that we have to use contraception so we don't get pregnant. Because they're more concerned, as I see it, that we don't catch a disease and that we don't have unwanted pregnancies. (Betina, 18)

This would seem to contradict traditional understandings of normative heterosexual femininity in Brazil, which relied to a large extent upon a woman's virginity, purity and chastity. Conversely, sex educators seemed largely to accept that young people were having sex, and so mainly concentrated on reducing the risks of this sex through a focus on what was generally referred to as “prevention”, echoing the focus detected in sex education policy documents by Sfair, Bittar and Lopes (2015), but which, according to several participants, generally equated to “condom use”. This echoes the findings of studies such as Bragg (2006) in the UK, which describes ‘a “preventative” and biological framework that trie[s] to alert students to the dangers and difficulties of sex rather than deal with aspects of relationships’ (pp. 318-319). Whilst the young women in this study acknowledged the importance of knowing about contraception and how to protect oneself, a common criticism was that this

focus on risk and risk-reduction did not leave space to learn about other aspects of sexuality:

...it was more about condom use... the basic things really “use a condom so you don’t get pregnant”, there is contraception, but sexuality, I don’t think so (...) I think for them [discussing condom use]’s already very in-depth, right?.. They don’t talk about it. (Patrizia, 24)

Here, Patrizia distinguished between school-based conversation about contraception, and education on sexuality more broadly, which she identified as lacking. This echoed a distinction made by one or two other women, who understood “sex education” to cover technical, biological and prevention-based information, but stressed that this did not encompass what they recognised as sexuality, which had a more fluid, relational and emotional meaning which tended not to be included:

[Asked what aspects should be included in lessons about sexuality] Pregnancy, right, STDs, your own pleasure, right, differentiate between the pleasures, right, know how to differentiate, erm... contraception... they could also look at respect, right, caring for one another... and talk about relationships. As well... Right? Talk about relationships as a whole (...)

N – So look at sexuality...

(interrupting) As complex, right? As a whole, right? Treat sexuality as a whole. (Alice, 28)

In addition to leading to a reductive approach to sex education, the “risk and risk-reduction” approach to sex education was also heavily gendered: young men were portrayed as the source of risk, and women as its likely “victims”. Daniela recounted how a visiting sex educator warned the group that young men could not be trusted to remain faithful, and positioned this as a powerful reason to insist on condom use:

Erm, he asked, said, how, how, erm... How we... How every time we're going to have sex, we need to use a condom, because we don't know who we're having a fling with... Then if he's having a fling with us, he could also be having one with other people, right, because men can't, men can't be trusted. (Daniela, 19)

This gendering of risk echoes warnings a small handful of young women described receiving from friends, relatives and especially fathers, in which men were commonly positioned as being pleasure-seekers desiring only sex, with no strings and no commitment, who will abandon a woman in the face of unexpected or unwanted consequences. In this case, then, the theme of "risk and risk-reduction" connected with, and helped cement, warnings young women received in informal contexts: that heterosexual young women must act as sexual gatekeepers and, should they fail in this role, that they will likely shoulder the responsibility of parenthood alone.¹³⁶ A handful of participants connected this to their own observations in the community:

...if she gets pregnant, if she has to have a child, it might be that he doesn't give a damn, and she's the one who's going to have a child on her back! If it cries during the night, she's the one who'll go to it, if it gets ill, she's the one who'll care for it, so. Women need to preserve themselves. (Rayssa, 24)

This idea of the feminisation of risk was also felt to be perpetuated in sex education lessons:

N - And [the school] did they talk about the consequences for her life, how it will be afterwards? Like you said, that she doesn't have a life anymore. Did they talk about that?

They did. Because, you're going to think only about, about your child. Because you need nappies, and often you don't have the support of

¹³⁶ The expectation that the mother will assume all responsibility for the child is likely connected to the cultural veneration of motherhood, discussed in Chapter Two.

your parents... Or of your own partner. (Daiane, 19)

It is possible that this close imbrication of State-sanctioned and informal discourses works to emphasise “risk and risk-reduction”, making it a convincing theme for young women. It is clear how the message of feminised risk, present within the “risk and risk-reduction” theme, echoes young women’s lived experience of the feminised consequences of sexual behaviours, potentially carrying the message through all the more strongly. The gendering of risk also reflected the heteronormative framework discussed earlier, positioning men as sexual predators, with unstoppable desire and singular intentions, and women as the gatekeepers to sexuality, taking care to “preserve” themselves, in Rayssa’s words, from the threat posed by male desire. In short, the “risk and risk-reduction” theme within *lençoense* sex education was instrumental in positioning “appropriate” heterosexual femininity as dependent on risk management and risk avoidance by young women.

Another significant problem with the “risk and risk-reduction” theme is that risk is conceptualised in a very narrow way, focusing on the risks of becoming pregnant or contracting an STD, but not on other social or relational risks young women might perceive. What might be “safe” in terms of pregnancy or pathology – condom use, in short – might be dangerous for their reputations¹³⁷ or relationships:

She doesn’t demand [condom use]. Why?! Right? (...) she could be in love, she could believe that the man, if she doesn’t give in to the whims of her boyfriend, when he’s smooth-talking her, that he could turn to another girl, right? So, I think it’s worry, really, fear of *losing* him, it’s about loss. (Alice, 28)

Present within Alice’s account are echoes of what Holland et al. (1998) describe as

¹³⁷ See pp. 235-236.

'the male-in-the-head', where young women experience a sense of constant surveillance in which they think consistently about their partners' reactions and feelings, before and above their own, something also identified in Tolman, Davis and Bowman (2015). In Alice's account, the risk of pregnancy/STDs is not deemed as pressing as the risk posed to a relationship by demanding condom use, a risk Levinson, Sadigursky and Erchak (2004) saw as resulting in a 'sense of powerlessness' (p. 216) for young women within negotiations for condom use. The "risk and risk-reduction" approach, then, fails to acknowledge that young women must often balance a variety of competing risks and are working to mitigate these risks in ways which might not always adhere to school- and health-post-based exhortations to condom use. The "risk and risk-reduction" theme, then, could be failing to capture, and so failing to work to reduce, those risks perceived as more pressing, severe, or immediate in the lives of young women.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to mention academic debate over 'the missing discourse of desire' (Fine, 1988). As discussed in Chapter Two, Fine, and others, have highlighted the lack of sex education focus on female adolescent desire and pleasure. Whilst this was true to some extent in this study also, it could be argued that discussions of pleasure were present in the *lençoense* case, interwoven with the "risk and risk-reduction" theme. Desire and pleasure were not "missing" altogether, rather they appeared to be strategically employed to further dominant messages. In their accounts of sex education coverage of the causes of teenage pregnancy, participants often referenced some variation of the idea that things happen "in the moment". This phrase could be interpreted as shorthand for feelings of lust, desire, or sexual attraction:

Everybody knows that you have to use a condom so you don't, don't

get pregnant, or catch a disease. And lots of girls screw up, right, in the moment, in, in the heat, in the emotion, they go without and they end up getting pregnant. (Maria, 24)

Here, Maria positions feelings of desire as risky – letting go of one’s senses “in the moment” is described as leading to negative consequences, and likened to “screwing up”. Allowing oneself to do this and forgetting the information received about contraception, when “[e]verybody knows you have to use a condom” also links experiences of pleasure and desire with irresponsibility.

This employment of ideas around pleasure to reiterate the theme of risk was also observed in one sex education session. The group were watching a film about teenage life, which the teacher paused at pertinent moments to make didactic points. During a section on teenage pregnancy, she paused the film and became very serious, in stark contrast to her usual classroom demeanour. She told the students that lots of children are being abandoned because their parents think about “the pleasure of the moment”, and not about the consequences. In such accounts, pleasure is implicated in young women’s loss of control and subsequent failure to use contraception: pleasure becomes a risk factor. Pleasure is therefore imagined as a driving force in risky sexual practice, which resonates with Lamb, Lustig and Graling (2013), who state that ‘[t]he discourse of desire is no longer missing, but is often situated as part of a discourse on safe practice and thus equates pleasure with danger’ (p. 315).

The theme of “risk and risk-reduction” is also interwoven with the second prominent theme identified in *lençoense* State-sanctioned sex education – “responsibility”.

“Responsibility”

The emphasis on “responsibility” within *lençoense* sex education was prominent in

numerous instances during fieldwork. In the same sex education session referred to earlier, the teacher described how proud she was of her own daughter for entering into sexuality “with responsibility”, waiting for an appropriate age. Similarly, in the *CRAS palestra* described in Chapter Four, there was a strong focus on personal responsibility: the nurse reiterated “*Tem que se cuidar*” (You have to take care of yourself), and made no mention of moments when one’s ability to be “responsible” might be compromised. Finally, the leaflets collected¹³⁸ also made numerous references to responsibility, for example, in “*Lição de attitude*” (see *figure 14*), there is a text which reads ‘You have lots to enjoy and discover, but be responsible, don’t play around with your health or your life. Go to a health centre and pick up some condoms’ (my translation).

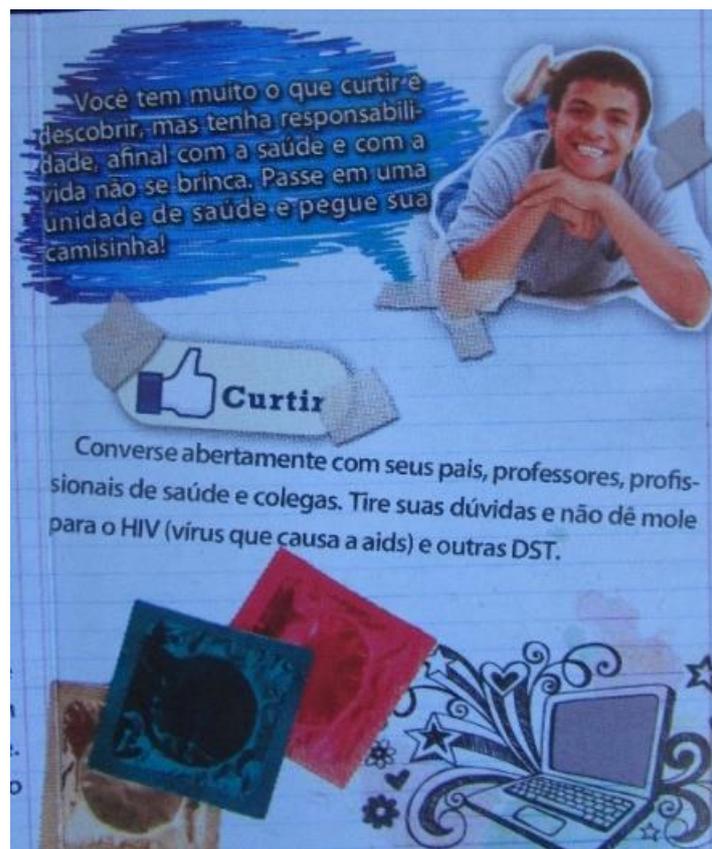


Figure 14 - Page from a health-post leaflet

¹³⁸ See Chapter Four.

Such exhortations appeared to be directed equally at young men and young women within the leaflets. In addition to this observed focus within my own research, other scholars have identified an emphasis on responsibility within the PCNs themselves: indeed da Silva (2015) argues that in highlighting the individual's responsibility in the exercise of sexuality, the PCNs reveal 'an intention of social control' (2015, p. 81, my translation).

As discussed in Chapter Two, ideas around sexual (ir)responsibility have frequently been framed in terms of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism centres on a rational individual making their own choices and accepting the consequences of their actions: in economic theory this individual is the rational consumer; in discussions of sexuality, they are 'the responsible sexual agent' whose sexuality is 'adult, private, monogamous, married and fiscally responsible' (Elliott, 2014, p. 212). The "responsibility" theme present in State-sanctioned sex education then, is productive of a particular subject position – the responsible sexual agent – against whom young people can measure themselves and others. From the employment of themes of "responsibility", it is clear what young women must do to earn the status of responsible sexual agent: take the initiative to inform themselves; visit the health-post; pick up and use condoms consistently; and avoid premature pregnancy. One-third of participants seemed extremely keen to position themselves as responsible sexual agents within the interviews, by emphasising how they personally seek out contraception and use it consistently:

...there are also couples who are responsible, right? We can't judge. Right? Place blame, because there are lots of responsible couples. Like me, I'm also responsible! I take my pill, I use, you see. (Sara, 19)

Here, Sara firmly positioned herself and her boyfriend as responsible sexual agents, at odds with those who do not take responsibility for their contraception. Another way young women in this study claimed the status of responsible sexual agent was to stress their decisions to delay sexual initiation:

I haven't had *that many* sexual experiences in my life, I haven't. I started my sexual life already older, erm, I had my first proper boyfriend, boyfriend for kissing, hugging, when I was eighteen. (pause) My first time sexually, I was already twenty. But I, I've always been someone who. Who liked to work, and I worked in a social project with music, I worked with children, and so I travelled... (Priscila, 27)

In Priscila's account, and a handful of others like it, this delay was portrayed as a conscious decision, which allowed them to responsibly commit to their educations and futures.

The idea of (ir)responsibility was extremely prominent across the interviews, manifesting itself as a variety of judgements about the sexual behaviours of young people: that they get caught up in the moment; that they don't care; that they are only concerned with having a good time. The adolescent sexual subject was constructed as the very opposite of the responsible sexual agent; impulsive, reckless, hedonistic and shameless, ignoring knowledge they may well have received about sexual health and acting without concern for the consequences:

Sometimes [young women] *don't give a damn* about anything. They're not aware of what they're doing (...) They don't, they, the teenagers *don't give a damn about anything*. They don't give a damn. They don't think about these things, they don't think. And when we're there, we don't think about pregnancy, we don't think about diseases, we don't think about anything! We only think about the fact that we're there, that we're going to have a good time, that it's going to be wicked, I

don't know what. It's only later that we think about what's going to happen (laughs). (Betina, 18)

This was also identified in Goicolea et al.'s 2012 study in Ecuador, where young people were 'constructed as irresponsible and engaging in casual sex that leads to "problematic" outcomes such as early pregnancy, single motherhood, and sexually transmitted diseases' (2012, p. 308). This was particularly true for female adolescents, given the ideal of their responsibility and restraint.

The powerful construction of the responsible sexual agent subject-position, then, has the irresponsible sexually active young person as its dichotomous counterpart.

Those young people who were seen to have failed to act responsibly were deemed to have made wrong or irresponsible choices, and so were often criticised, something also seen by Lamb (2013) in her study on US sex education (2013, p. 454): sexual and reproductive decision-making is used as justification for positioning a person as (ir)responsible. Interestingly, in the quote above, Betina moves from talking about "they" – young women who don't give a damn about anything – which acts as a distancing mechanism, and could be interpreted as a rejection or denial of these kinds of behaviours for herself, to "we" – counting herself within the group of young women who only think about having a good time. Although she was the only participant to talk in this way, Betina's subtle acknowledgement of her own "irresponsible" behaviours shows the contradictions in formulating divisions along the lines of (ir)responsibility. Other participants were not so forgiving: a handful of participant narratives made it clear that those who do not behave responsibly are likely to be seen as accountable for whichever negative consequences might befall them:

Now, nowadays, the only people who get pregnant are those who want

to! (laughs) and the only people who get diseases are those who want to... Because it's all there to be taught (...) there are so many contraceptive methods, for those who, like, have their heads screwed on... You've got to be thinking about what you're doing... Because "accidental pregnancy" doesn't exist. (Janaina, 21)

Narratives such as Janaina's which hold young women accountable for becoming pregnant are particularly interesting, given discussions elsewhere of the obstacles young women face in obtaining reliable contraception, the limitations of existing sex education, lack of parental discussion and/or discipline, and coercion from (older) male partners. This potentially indicates the primacy placed on personal responsibility, and the expectation that a "responsible" young woman will transcend all these other obstacles. In the young women's accounts of sex education, teenage mothers were frequently described as having become pregnant through irresponsibility, carelessness or thoughtlessness. Irresponsibility was positioned as a major factor by over one-third of participants, discussed by Sara in terms of their "shameless" behaviour:

I think that, often, [they become pregnant] out of shamelessness. Because, you know? (laughs) That's my point of view, I think it's that (...) In the moment, they know they have to use one, but they don't use one, you see? "Ah, don't" or, erm, "It's just today, nothing will happen", you see? And they end up, right, it ends up that they start, start doing it, start getting used to it "Oh, let's do it without, let's do it without, nothing will happen, nothing will happen" and then the day arrives where it happens, right?! (Sara, 19)

School- and health-post-based sex education frequently supported such ideas. As previously discussed, the constant reinforcement within State-sanctioned sex education of the association of condom use, and visits to the health-post with "responsible" behaviours, suggest that those who are perceived to have failed to do

these things as “irresponsible”, with teenage mothers at the pinnacle of irresponsibility (Shoveller and Johnson, 2006).

This focus on the irresponsibility of pregnant teens also shows the gendering of responsibility, in a similar way to the “risk and risk-reduction” theme, something discussed by a handful of participants:

And, in the culture here, the only one who has the responsibility of avoiding [pregnancy] is the woman. Not just here in Lençóis, but in general. The responsibility lies with the woman. (Juliette, 19)

Although one or two of the young women argued that contraception was the responsibility of *both* parties, the accounts of Juliette and others show the deeply ingrained assumption that, to be appropriately heterosexually feminine in the *lençoense* context, a young woman must be responsible. This echoes Goicolea et al.’s 2010 study in Ecuador, where avoidance of intercourse and prevention of pregnancy and STD transmission were seen as wholly the responsibility of young women (2010, p. 6). And there was some evidence to suggest that, rather than challenging these assumptions and working towards a broader change in attitudes, school-based sex education continued to stress the avoidance of “negative” outcomes as the responsibility of young women. For example, in a conversation I had with a sex educator from a local middle school, she stated that a woman now has various ways to avoid pregnancy, she is informed about how to avoid pregnancy, she can obtain contraception for free: nowadays only those who want to get pregnant do so. At no point during this conversation was mention made of a male partner and his responsibility in the situation. The positioning of young women as gatekeepers and enforcers is both ‘illogical’ and ‘counter-productive’ (Hillier, Harrison and Warr, 1998, p. 21), given both traditional cultural norms of heterosexual

feminine passivity, and the reality that many young women struggle to negotiate condom use with their male partners:

Lots of men don't like to use them. Condoms. And that's why they don't want to use them. But then it depends on each woman. If she wants to protect herself, she'll take care of herself, she'll either think about protecting herself or she'll think about satisfying the, right, the man's desires... Of wanting to or not wanting to, liking it or not liking it. The man not liking it. That depends on each woman. (Elena, 25)

Here, as above, men are positioned as reluctant to use condoms, and women as the ones who must insist on their use. However, as well as demonstrating a feminisation of contraceptive responsibility, attitudes such as Elena's clearly show responsibility is individualised, because it "depends on each woman". This echoes Richardson (2000) who argues that the focus on female, rather than male sexual responsibility in HIV/AIDS education can 'lead to women's difficulties in translating safer sex advice into practice being understood at the level of individual "excuses", with potentially important implications for attribution of blame' (2000, p. 124). This attribution of blame was present in a handful of participant accounts, regarding those not considered firm or decisive enough in the face of risk:

I think often it's the man [who doesn't want to use condoms]. And the woman ends up getting carried along. Because if the woman were smart, right, she'd know "Oh, I can't", right, she'd know that she can't (...) She has to "Oh, it's not like that, if it's going to be like that, right, it's not happening, because there are consequences" you see? (Sara, 19)

Here, Sara was quick to place blame, by saying that "if the woman were smart" she would demand and ensure condom use. In this formulation, the conditions which impact upon an individual's ability to minimise risk are not considered, a significant

criticism of the emphasis on “responsibility” within youth sexuality education. As discussed in Chapter Two, such approaches assume levels of equality which do not exist, implying that all young people have access to the same choices and the freedom to choose between them (Harris, 2004; Shoveller and Johnson, 2006; Jackson and Weatherall, 2010). In reality, each woman is likely to be affected by a specific set of circumstances which may enhance or reduce her capacity to make what might be judged as “rational decisions” (Lamb, 2013). This representation of decision-making as decontextualised, dependent only on having the facts to make an informed choice has implications for the sex education agenda. The “responsibility” theme in school-based sex education is premised on the idea that knowledge of health-promoting behaviours is enough to ensure their enactment (Lamb, 2013, p. 456); the idea that all one needs is the knowledge, and the practice will follow. This idea was disputed by many of the participants, who named embarrassment, gender dynamics and naiveté, amongst other factors, as issues which could interfere with the practice of known “healthy behaviours”. Several participants felt that information on sexuality issues was not enough to ensure that young women could/would act in ways which would avoid outcomes generally perceived as negative. For example, several participants highlighted as a barrier the embarrassment young people feel in accessing contraception, whilst others expressed the opinion that young women tend to feel “it won’t happen to me”, so do not apply the information they have:

I think that they don’t know, like, technically, really deeply, but they know the basics that they really need to know, but they don’t apply it. Because they don’t, they don’t care (pause) they think it will never happen to them, it’ll always happen to a neighbour, it’ll never happen. (Ana, 19)

Explanations such as Ana's, raised by a handful of participants, suggest that many young *lençoense* women do not conceptualise themselves as "at risk", potentially a form of the 'optimistic bias' detected by Chapin (2001), in his study of African American teens' "risky" sexual practices. They also indicate that risk is subjective, and understood differently by different individuals.

The feminisation of responsibility has often been couched in terms of "self-esteem" and "empowerment" for young women, however, these 'appealing notions... operate within an already gendered organization of heterosexuality' (Jackson and Weatherall, 2010, p. 169). Some studies, such as Guttman and Ressler (2001), have suggested that discourses of personal responsibility and "empowerment" can offer young women a positive way to conceptualise their choices, and a vocabulary through which to make their demands: 'appeals to personal responsibility can enable people to feel in control of their lives and encourage them to take an active role in monitoring their health and improving their well-being' (2001, p. 121). Only one young woman in this study could be interpreted as using this discourse in such a way:

... if they had in their minds, from the start "I'm taking care of myself", I think it's more... loving yourself, taking care of yourself, educating yourself. That's what young people need. Before looking to someone else, look for your well-being. Because young people who take care of themselves, have a weight off their mind, right? They're less worried. They, they do things with more happiness, they're lighter... I think that their view should be that way "I'm me, and I have to take care of myself". (Marcela, 23)

However, a further criticism of the neoliberal responsabilisation approach contradicts interpretations of "empowerment", arguing that it is individualising (Lamb, 2013), as each person is encouraged to look out for their own safety and happiness, with no

one held responsible for the health or happiness of others. Although Marcela's account expresses this in positive terms, this individualisation of responsibility for one's own sexual health, safety and happiness could also be said to be relieving the government, adults, and healthcare or education systems of their duty to help and provide for young people (Elliott, 2014, p. 221), or at least limiting it to the provision of condoms and basic biological information. It could also be said to be limiting the responsibility sexual partners might be seen to have to one another to be respectful, caring, and concerned for the other's comfort, health, pleasure and well-being, and to be neglecting the broader picture of inequality which needs to be addressed before one can exercise "choice".

This individualising effect is one of many similarities between the "risk and risk-reduction" and "responsibility" themes. The two are inextricably linked, particularly within public health discourses, where they are typically understood to be two sides of the same coin (Coleman, Kearns and Collins, 2010), with increased responsibility the solution to heightened risk. Ideas around "protecting yourself" and "being careful" are extremely prominent in, and reflect, both approaches. The effect is that young people – and particularly young women – are encouraged to look inwards for responses to risk situations, and to concentrate their efforts on self-management and self-control.

Given the focus placed on the importance of responsibility to "appropriate" heterosexual femininity, perhaps, the young women in this study were quick to distance themselves from "irresponsible" behaviours, repeatedly claiming responsible sexual subjectivity through descriptions of how they personally enacted responsible behaviours by delaying sexual initiation, pursuing knowledge about sex, and consistently using contraception. There was a surprising level of judgement

present in these accounts: even when discussing friends or family members who became pregnant as teenagers, one-third of the women in this study discussed them in ways which could come under the banner term of “irresponsible”, given that people “only get pregnant if they want to”. Although they did not use the term “irresponsible” themselves, participants evidenced clear disapproval of those who did not educate themselves or protect themselves, when the possibility was seen to be available.

This tendency to classify young women according to a dichotomy of responsibility and irresponsibility echoes the local cultural distinction made between good and bad girls, “girls to marry” and “girls to shag”, which was reinforced by the “respectability” theme present within State-sanctioned sex education. Interestingly however, the “responsibility” theme is, itself, at odds with traditional constructions of “appropriate” heterosexual femininity, as Richardson (2000) argues: ‘while the construction of normative female sexuality as “passive” and male as “active” is reinforced in certain aspects of AIDS discourse... it is elsewhere threatened by the allocation of responsibility for negotiating sexual practice to women and the demand that they take control of the (hetero)sexual encounter’ (2000, p. 138). The female passivity so encouraged in conventional models of femininity such as *marianismo* must be sacrificed if the new standard of responsible female sexual agent is to be reached.

“Respectability”

Another prevalent theme within State-sanctioned sex education was “respectability”. A common trope in analyses of Latin American cultures is the ‘Madonna/whore dichotomy’, which emphasizes appropriate, respectable feminine behaviour, embodied in the Madonna, and contrasts this with the lack of sexual restraint, and other inappropriate behaviours associated with the figure of the whore (Stevens,

1973b). Although this model is far too simplistic to analyse feminine behaviours in the region, let alone in specific contexts, this cultural understanding certainly forms part of the ‘cultural grammar’ (Parker, 1999) of Lençóis¹³⁹, and echoes of this dichotomy were seen within State-sanctioned sex education. For example, Janaina described an occasion where the distinction between “good” and “bad” girls was made in school:

...two teachers, they spoke to us. Said that a woman has to put herself in a position of respect in society, not be there with that way of talking, dancing like that, because no man – they warned us – no man wants a woman like that. You might be showing yourself off, dancing, are you getting his attention? You are. But he, I can guarantee that when he’s looking for a serious girlfriend, or a wife, who is he going to go to? The most reserved girl (...)

N – And, what was the reaction to that? To that kind of talk?

Like, pretty shocking. Right, but nothing far from the truth... Because the girls really were too much. Girls chasing after guys, not the guys chasing after the girls any more. (Janaina, 21)

This description of the girls in Janaina’s class as “too much” suggests a heterosexual femininity which went beyond the limits of acceptability: it was excessive and unrestrained. The example Janaina gives of girls “chasing after guys” inverts the accepted norm of active male sexuality of which young women are the passive recipients, instead positioning young women as the driving force. This was seen as unacceptable, not only by the teachers who stepped in to “warn” the young women about the social consequences of their behaviour, but also by Janaina herself, who endorsed their warning with her judgement that it was “nothing far from the truth”. In her discussion of UK social policy, Carabine pointed out ‘[t]he role of knowledge...

¹³⁹ See Chapter Two.

especially scientific, medical and professional knowledge, in constituting difference through categorization based on binary opposites' (2004b, p. 162). In Janaina's account, teachers utilised professional knowledge to produce a binary opposition between respectable girls who are serious and reserved, and disreputable girls who dance and talk inappropriately, and chase after guys. A model of respectable femininity is therefore produced through differentiation against unrestrained heterosexual femininity which is "too much". In a further example, Carolina describes how school-based sex education positioned sex as "wrong" in certain circumstances, such as "doing it" too early in new relationships:

"It's wrong to do it" "It's wrong to do it with your boyfriend when you've just got together" (...) Erm, at school, that, they teach you that that's wrong, that it's wrong to do it, right? (Carolina, 29)

Although these were the only examples of specific teacher reference to respectability, similar references were frequently drawn upon by young women in the interviews. Several participants indicated difficulty negotiating their sexualities, and achieving the right balance between participating in the local sexual youth culture which placed importance on the practice of *ficar*, whilst simultaneously avoiding their heterosexual femininity being read as "too much". This balancing act, and other understandings of respectability, are tightly woven into the 'cultural grammar' (Parker, 1999) of sexuality in the town, as discussed in Chapter Two. Within this 'cultural grammar' (ibid.), the cultural prominence of *ficar* as a preferred relationship type meant pressure on young women to engage in a range of sexual behaviours from dancing, flirting, kissing and *preliminares*¹⁴⁰ to *o ato em si*¹⁴¹, whilst at the same

¹⁴⁰ Foreplay.

¹⁴¹ The act itself.

time monitoring and managing their reputations to avoid being seen as “easy”:

Like *ficar* to me (coughs), *ficar* is, for me it's kisses, cuddles, talking to that person, and the next day you don't see each other again... But there are people who, no, *ficar* means sexual relations... With people they've never seen before in their lives... You just met them and you're doing it. So what's the first impression that gives? You're that thing that he's going to think “My god, she's so easy!” (Janaina, 21)

Although the literature reviewed in Chapter Two suggested that *ficar* was commonplace and mostly a socially acceptable practice, it was still risky, especially for young women, and especially if they included sexual intercourse within this relationship type (Justo, 2005), something clearly echoed in Janaina's account above. This chimes with Neiverth and Alves' (2003) work in Paraná, where they found that young women must be sensual and seductive, but must also block men's sexual advances. Whilst, as discussed earlier, the sexual culture of the region seems to have moved away from ideals of femininity based round purity and chastity, such as those established in the *marianismo* model (Stevens, 1973b), women now have to walk a very fine line between being happy to *ficar* and becoming a girl who is “good to shag” but not to marry:

If a girl pulls more, she's going to be slagged off, that's she's been around, right? It'll go round “Oh, that one's been around, everybody's already been with her. That one's not marriage material” Because they always diff, differentiate, which I think is horrible, “That one's for marrying, that one's just for shagging” (...) [girls for marrying], they're those girls who are considered difficult. Who won't do it with just anyone, who aren't, aren't going out all the time, you see?... When she stays at home, when she's all proper, she doesn't get with many guys, or she doesn't have a serious, fixed boyfriend, then she's most respected. She's always worth more. (Michele, 19)

From accounts such as these, the theme of “respectability” seems to resonate strongly with young *lençoense* women’s experiences of “tightrope walking” through their negotiations of femininity, similar to those experiences identified by Carrier-Moisan (2015) and Turner (2014), discussed in Chapter Two. Similarly, Scott, Quadros and Longhi (2002) identified how practices of *ficar* act as dividing lines between socially desirable and undesirable women: ‘if she gets with one guy and then another, she’s going to get a reputation and a bad image and no other boy is going to want to date her’ (ibid., p. 219, my translation). These experiences of “tightrope-walking” illustrate the conditions within which young *lençoense* women construct their sexual identities and live their sexual lives, conditions it is vital to consider to understand the exercise of sexuality within Brazil (Heilborn, 2006).

These culturally-prominent ideas about heterosexual femininity are reinforced by the understandings produced from the “respectability” theme within State-sanctioned sex education, but also by those of “responsibility” and “risk-reduction”. However, there were also moments where these themes were at odds with one another – particularly when, as alluded to earlier, prevention-led approaches around risk clashed with understandings of “appropriate” feminine behaviour. This is exemplified in the difficulties perceived in carrying condoms – a behaviour positioned as non-negotiable within the “risk-reduction” approach. A handful of participants discussed the understanding that it is inappropriate for a young woman to carry condoms, or she will be seen as easy, interested, or in pursuit of sex:

...if a girl has condoms, they’ll say that she’s interested... You see? (...) she’s seen as someone who wants it, who’s after sex. With men it’s “Ah, what if it happens unexpectedly?! We’re protected!”, but not women. “She’s after it. She came out tonight looking for it”... I think that’s *horrible* too. (Michele, 19)

This demonstrates a clear conflict between the “risk-reduction” and “responsibility” discourses which emphasize the importance of planning ahead, obtaining and using condoms, and discourses of “respectability” which demand that young women perform appropriate gendered behaviours to avoid being viewed as “too much”. Having a condom in one’s bag might make one a “responsible sexual agent”, but it also positions a young woman as “planning” to have sex: she reduces the risk of pregnancy and STDs/AIDS, by increasing the risk to her reputation (Hillier, Harrison and Warr, 1998, p. 19), muddying the waters of the messages about “appropriate” heterosexual femininity within State-sanctioned sex education.

Moments of Resistance

As discussed in the previous chapter, school-based sex education is often perceived to be an individual initiative brought in and carried out by particular teachers.

Although there were clearly drawbacks to this individualised approach, for example, a lack of institutional protection from parental complaints, the fact that these teachers were acting more or less independently afforded them a certain level of autonomy over what could be said in the classroom, something which is possibly linked to the increased freedom of decision-making enjoyed in schools since municipalisation.¹⁴²

The idea of sex education as individual teacher initiative also echoes the arguments of Cooper (1995; 2002) that the State is not a monolithic entity, rather its various apparatuses function differently, which can result in challenges to hegemonic agenda.

It was in these more informal moments that resistance emerged to the dominant themes outlined in this chapter, through which both teachers, and the young women

¹⁴² See Chapter Three.

themselves, challenged and subverted some of the ideas present within those themes. In the case of sex educators, this was done through finding informal moments within the lesson structure to give personal opinions which may not fit with the broader agenda. For the young women, this resistance was enacted in two main ways – by directly challenging the dominant themes, and by seeking out alternative sources which might provide them with other approaches seen as more relevant to their needs and contexts.

One such moment of sex educator resistance involved the de-centring of virginity. During a group discussion in one sex education lesson, the teacher referred to the question of virginity as “an illusion” which creates an environment in which the man has to be the “big man” and the woman has to act as the barrier to sexual activity. Later in the same lesson, she asked whether the presence of a hymen really makes one woman better or greater than another. Here, this teacher questioned the importance traditionally placed on (female) virginity, and so on female sexual restraint, positioning it as a social construction, and clearly demonstrating resistance to dominant messages of “respectability”. Another such moment was the pragmatism towards youth sexual activity. Earlier in the chapter, a quote from Betina¹⁴³ suggested that sex educators no longer employed discourses of readiness and maturity when talking to young people about sex – rather than imploring them to wait (either until marriage or until an unspecified “later”), sex educators seemed to have accepted that many young people are already having sex and need educating accordingly. This was borne out in lesson observations, where none of the sex educators spent time encouraging young people to wait. Again, this would seem to contradict discourses of “respectability”, which traditionally demand (female) sexual

¹⁴³ See p. 217.

restraint, and encourage delaying one's sexual initiation, as discussed earlier.

The young women in this study also demonstrated resistance to the dominant themes, both by challenging these themes, and by seeking out alternative sources which might provide them with other approaches. A small handful of participants directly challenged the themes mobilised in school-based sex education. For example, as seen earlier, Carolina described sex education positioning having sex "too soon" with a new partner as "wrong". However, she counteracted this with her own mixture of messages of desire and responsibility:

I think this way, if there's chemistry (laughs) let's do it, right?! But, taking care of yourself. Don't say that that's *wrong*. Because *often*, erm, we had questions we wanted to ask, but we couldn't do it, because they were there saying "Ah, there's a right age for this, there's a right age for that, there's a right age for the other!" (Carolina, 29)

Carolina challenged the moralising messages of "respectability" by producing a subject-position which was both desiring and responsible. She worked both within and without the dominant themes to disrupt the subject-positions offered to young people, using one dominant theme to challenge another, tempered with an alternative standpoint privileging "chemistry".

A further way one or two women described resisting these dominant themes was by seeking out alternative approaches which fit more closely with the things they wanted to know about. For example, around half the participants described an interest in learning about the embodied and sensual elements of sexuality, but indicated that this did not tend to come into school-based sex education. As a result, a couple of the women described how young people use the internet as an alternative source for obtaining these kinds of information, discussed further in Chapter Seven. This exemplifies another way young women resisted the dominant

messages of State-sanctioned sex education, by looking to other sources to acquire alternative approaches, rather than accepting wholesale the messages revolving around risk, responsibility and respectability.

“Missing” Sex Education Themes

Having discussed those sex education themes which emerged prominently from participant narratives about their sex education experiences, it is now pertinent to explore themes which, according to those accounts, appeared to be “missing”.

Earlier in this chapter, and in line with the key sex education issues highlighted in the existing literature, the ‘missing discourse of desire’ (Fine, 1988) was discussed.

Although pleasure and desire was the topic most frequently identified as “missing” from State-sanctioned sex education by the young women in this study, they referred to a variety of topics connected with sexuality as underrepresented or even neglected. These included pleasure and desire, LGBT issues, feelings, relationships, gender dynamics, and the realities of motherhood. However, as the topic identified most often as missing, this section explores the omission of the topic of pleasure and desire within school and health-post based sex education.

Earlier in the chapter, I described how pleasure and desire were not entirely absent within *lençoense* sex education, rather that they were mobilised in support of dominant messages. Outside of this use, however, State-sanctioned sex education in the town reflected the studies of Fine (1988) in the US, and others who identified discourses of desire and pleasure, particularly female desire and pleasure, as largely absent. Around half the participants identified pleasure and desire as “missing” from State-sanctioned sex education; with female pleasure and desire almost entirely absent from discussions, and even male pleasure and desire rarely mentioned.

During lesson observations¹⁴⁴, I noted only one reference to sex-as-pleasure, when the teacher mentioned, as an aside, that people also engage in sex “just for pleasure, just for fun”. This was not pursued, however, and the subject was changed by a student who asked about sex purely for reproductive purposes; meaning a potentially useful didactic moment was lost. Similarly, in the healthcare leaflets collected, potentially productive spaces for the discussion of pleasure were often closed down in order to further risk-reduction aims. For example, in the “*Lição de atitude*” leaflet, one page read ‘*Prazer no corpo e na cabeça*’ (Pleasure in body and mind), suggesting that the text would talk about physical pleasure and personal happiness. Instead it proceeded to warn the reader to be alert, as more and more young people are getting AIDS: the promise of a discussion of pleasure was derailed to reinforce dominant messages about AIDS awareness and protecting oneself.

Only one leaflet explored the topic in a more holistic way. It features a cartoon of a group of men and women of various ages and ethnicities (see *figure 15 – Sexuality. Learning to have pleasure*), suggesting a broad target audience, and the text emphasizes that there is no “right way” to feel pleasure, highlighting the importance of diversity, respect and tolerance.

¹⁴⁴ See Chapter Four.

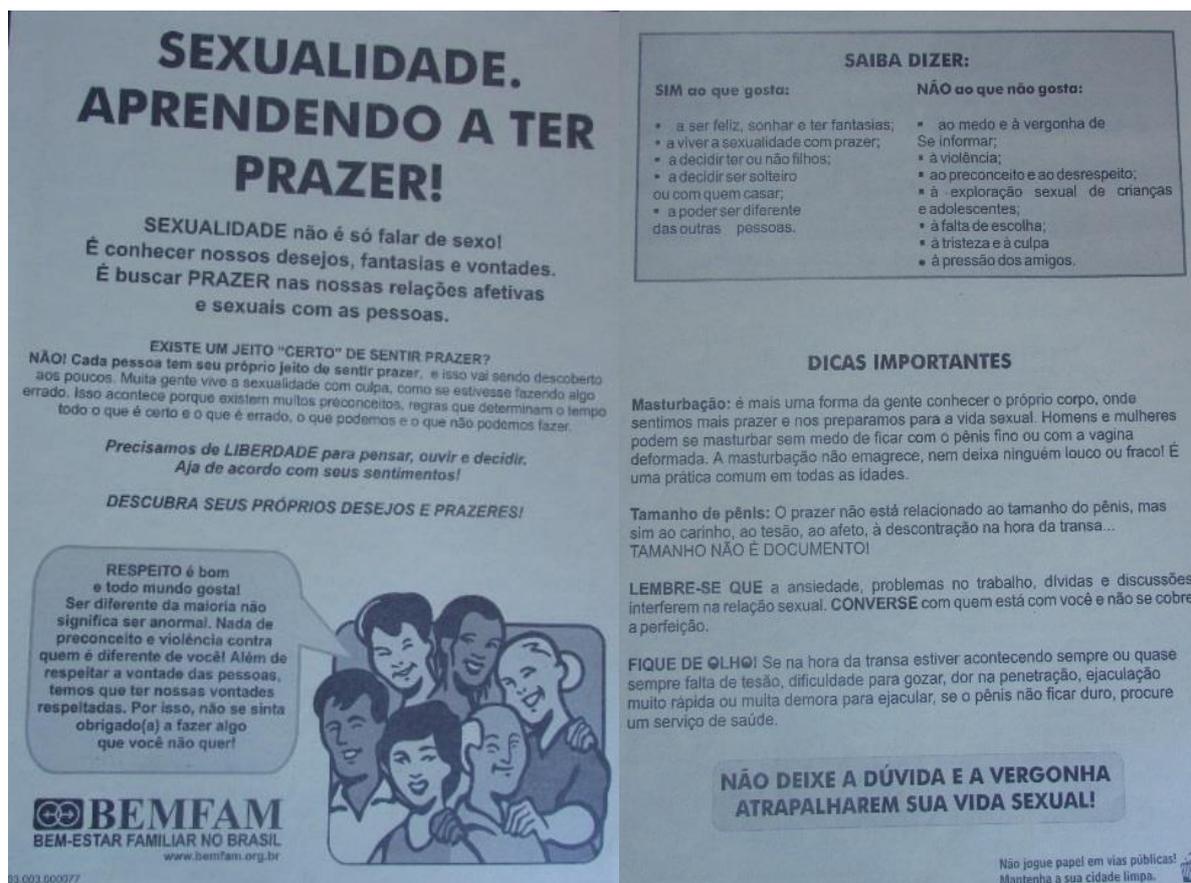


Figure 8 - Front and back of health-post leaflet about pleasure titled "Sexuality. Learning to have pleasure"

It stresses that sexuality is not just about sex, but about desires, fantasies and pleasures, and encourages the reader to say yes to what they like (being happy; having fantasies; experiencing pleasure; having children or getting married, or not; and being different) and no to what they do not like (fear, coercion and shame; violence and sexual exploitation; peer pressure) (see figure 15). It ends with some "Important tips" regarding the importance of masturbation in getting to know one's own body and gaining awareness of what brings pleasure, and remembering that "size doesn't matter". The closing message of the leaflet is "Don't let doubt and shame mess up your sexual life". This leaflet was given to me at one of the health-posts, but – unlike its counterparts which discuss contraceptive methods, condom use and STDs – it was never, in my experience, distributed in classrooms or used as

a teaching aid. None of the participants in this study mentioned this leaflet, whilst references *were* made to those featuring information on contraception.

Beyond these brief references to pleasure, and this single leaflet approaching sexuality in a broader way, this theme was identified as largely missing within State-sanctioned education:

...[pleasure and desire]'s a taboo, right? It's something that's fairly taboo... [In school] they talked more about the thing proper, like... The use of this, the use of that, how to protect yourself, etc., etc., etc. But, talking about pleasure, talking about desire, talking about delight... You know? Talking about how good it is, having sex... you know? I don't think so. No, they don't talk about that. (Susana, 24)

There were several important ways in which pleasure was absent in the *lençoense* sex education classroom. One was the reduction of sex to discussions of vaginal penetration, something also identified in Harrison and Hillier's analysis of Australian sexuality education programmes (1999), Bolander's exploration of Swedish sex education television programmes (2015), and Hirst (2004) and Ingham (2005) in the UK context. None of the participants in this study recalled lessons discussing oral, anal or non-penetrative sex or mutual masturbation, and only one or two mentioned masturbation as a potential focus for sex education, and only then to reiterate the silence around it:

I think that, like I told you, [masturbation]'s a *heavy* topic for them... Because there are lots of under 18s at school... I think it must be that it's a heavy topic. It must be that they think it's a heavy topic, right, plus we've also got a head teacher that's narrow-minded. (Daniela, 19)

This tendency towards the 'coital imperative' (Jackson, 1984) could be seen as having an impact on the way participants conceptualised sex. When asked during the interviews what they meant by "sex", the most common responses related to "o

ato em si" (the act itself). Very few of the women discussed any sexual acts beyond vaginal penetration at any point. One of the few who did was Maria, and even then the discussion came in the context of STD/AIDS prevention:

...foreplay, and all that, kissing, dry-humping and such, no, ok, you don't have to use a condom. But penetration? That's got to be with a condom. And lots of girls don't. There are lots of girls who, they do sexual acts, all sexual acts without a condom. (Maria, 24)

Another way in which pleasure could be considered absent within State-sanctioned sex education was in schools' apparent reinforcement of the idea that women find it difficult to experience sexual pleasure:

[School] said that for a woman it's more difficult, their orgasm, but men, it's, it's easier for them, right? Women, they also said that for women, it depends on their emotional state, how she is. Now, not with men. I remember they talked about that. (Rayssa, 24)

As well as assuming that women have difficulty reaching orgasm, such a focus might silence problems experienced by young men: male orgasm is positioned as something easily achieved, closing down the possibility to talk about occasions when this may not be the case. In Rayssa's quote, it is clear that the idea of the female orgasm as elusive was strengthened in the school environment, something also found in Allen's 2007 study of New Zealand sex education (2007, p. 252). The failure of schools to challenge or open up discussion of this accepted "truth" positions female sexual pleasure as very difficult for young women to achieve.

Various reasons were given for schools' reluctance to engage with topics around pleasure, including teacher embarrassment, institutional taboo, the potential for parental complaints, and fear that outsiders would interpret the lesson as "pornographic". Another possible explanation could be that discourses around

pleasure and desire clash with the dominant themes of “risk-reduction” and “responsibility”, discussed earlier in chapter. Several authors (Fine, 1988; see also Allen, 2004; 2007; Hirst, 2013) have discussed at length the value which could be added to sex education by the inclusion of discussions of pleasure and desire. However, there was some disagreement amongst participants: around two-thirds discussed the coverage of pleasure, and these were divided roughly equally as to whether or not they felt pleasure was an appropriate topic to discuss in school. Patrizia exemplified those who were unsure:

Nothing intimate, like, (laughing) I dunno! I don't know how to explain how it is! But I think it's that... Yeah. You could work on everything, except... except pleasure (laughing). (Patrizia, 24)

Reasons given by those opposing the inclusion of pleasure and desire tended to position these issues as unsuitable for discussion in school, due to them being too private, intimate or causing embarrassment, with over one-third of the women raising such concerns. This mirrors concerns over the public/private divide discussed in Chapter Two, and its implications for the issues considered within and without the remit of the State, as seen in Chapter Seven:

I think it's rubbish because, erm... erm... that stuff, that sort of thing at school, I don't think you should talk about it (...) Not like, that stuff, like. That gets, that would get, at school it'd get, weird. Right? Just talking about that. It's more, I think, like, for outside school. Than inside school. (Rebeca, 18)

Additionally, one or two others felt that these were things that simply could not be “taught”, given their variable and embodied nature:

Now, not about, that stuff that's more intimate, I dunno... About that stuff about, about, about cumming like, pleasure... Because I think

that varies from person to person. Everybody is stimulated by different things. (Janaina, 21)

Others, like Susana, disagreed, emphasising the importance of discussions about pleasure:

...it's something that never happens. But I think it's possible, I think it's necessary, right? (...) Because it's pleasure that, that moves the, the adolescent to want to know, about, about the practical stuff. It's pleasure that moves them. Like, you're already feeling pleasure and desire, about some things, some people, all that's missing is you going out there and looking for it. (Susana, 24)

Positioning pleasure as an important part of sex education, as Susana does, is directly contrary to traditional understandings of Brazilian heterosexual femininity as reliant on female self-denial, to conservative religious understanding of sex as purely reproductive, and to persistent *machista* cultural understandings of pleasure as being for men only. Several reasons were given in support of the inclusion of discussions of pleasure and desire into sex education. Three or four young women mentioned that these issues should be included because they represented a major source of concern for young people, and their doubts and worries should be addressed directly. Additionally, a handful of participants felt that it was important for pleasure and desire to be discussed, in order that young women know more about what they can expect from sex:

I think we're missing that at school. About feelings, about feeling pleasure, we don't even know what that is, all we know is sex and that's that... There are people who don't know what it meant to feel pleasure... There are even people who don't know what it is to cum, there are people who don't know what that is! And that's lacking, I think it's really lacking. (Daniela, 19)

The inclusion – or exclusion – of topics of pleasure and desire could potentially impact on young women’s satisfaction with the school as a source of sex education, and whether they feel the need to look elsewhere for information on this matter. For those young women who *did* desire a more complete exploration of the place of pleasure in sexuality, its absence might decrease the perceived value of the school as a source of sexual information, and increase the influence of sources which *did* discuss this dimension of sexuality, such as peers, the internet, and television, whose coverage of this topic is discussed in the following chapter. In this way, the silences in State-sanctioned sex education could be said to (re)produce other sources such as peers and the media as credible authorities on certain aspects of sexuality, because these spaces allow more room for young women to develop positive sexual subjectivities, rather than ones based purely on risk and fear of negative consequences.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored the dominant themes present in school-based sex education in Lençóis, according to the accounts of the young women in this study. From their narratives, three main themes were identified – “risk and risk-reduction”, “responsibility” and “respectability”. The former was based around the idea that, for young people, sex is inherently risky and problematic, and that consistent condom use is the most reliable way to reduce those risks. The second theme acted as a dividing mechanism, categorising young people as “responsible” if they were cautious as to when they had sex and with whom, if they sought out information and contraception, and if they routinely used contraception, regardless of other factors and pressures, and as “irresponsible” if they failed to do so. Both these themes were heavily gendered in the ways in which they constructed “appropriate” heterosexual

femininity as responsible, gate-keeping and contraception-using. The “respectability” theme spoke to cultural norms of “good” and “bad” girls to encourage sexual restraint in young women, to ensure that they are “girls to marry” rather than “girls to shag”. Although these themes commonly worked in support of one another, there were moments of friction between them: especially when the ideal of the responsible, risk-reducing young woman clashed with more traditional ideals of respectable heterosexual femininity in the carrying of condoms. These themes were also subject to challenges, both from teachers and from the young women themselves, and these moments of resistance create space and demand for other sources and other perspectives on sex education and sexuality issues, to be explored in the next chapter.

Finally, this chapter explored some of those themes deemed “missing” from State-sanctioned sex education by participants, with a particular focus on the most commonly identified “missing” topic – pleasure and desire. By examining how and why this theme was seen to be missing from school and health-post-based sex education, this section has revealed a gap in young people’s sexual learning, which is largely filled by those “informal” sources explored in the coming chapter.

Chapter 7. ‘At school they mostly talk about the basics. The other stuff, we learn about in the street’: The role of “informal” sources of sexual learning

This chapter explores the role of so-called “informal” sources in the sexual learning processes of young *lençoense* women, and their relative importance, given the perceived inadequacies of State-sanctioned sex education, described so far. The previous chapters discussed State-sanctioned sex education in-depth, and highlighted the scepticism with which it is regarded by many of the young women in this study. This chapter explores three “informal” sex education sources employed by young people in Lençóis – the family, “the street” and the media. It describes the role of each source and how the young women use and evaluate the information gained, within their broader sexual learning processes. It should be noted that these sources were not employed distinctly from one another, rather they were used in overlapping and intersecting ways by the young women.

The family was highlighted as the ideal source of sexual learning, and its authority is discussed here. However, many participants reported significant barriers preventing the provision of family-based sex education in most *lençoense* homes. In light of this, and the omissions in State-sanctioned sex education, previously discussed, this chapter argues the increased importance of “the street” and the media to young people’s everyday sexual learning, especially regarding certain topics, highlighted as “missing” within State-sanctioned sex education. This chapter examines how participants use “the street” and the media to learn about the “missing” theme of pleasure and desire, arguing that the absence of such discussions in State-sanctioned sex education seems to decrease the legitimacy of this formal sex education and thus increase that of “informal” sources which *do* explore this topic.

In short, this chapter indicates the important role ascribed by participants to “informal” sources within young women’s sexual learning processes. It argues that these sources are prized by young women, especially in light of omissions elsewhere, and that they contribute most fully to sexual learning on otherwise taboo or “unteachable” topics, such as pleasure and desire. Before exploring the contributions of “the street” and the media, this chapter examines a source of sexual learning deemed ideal by participants, but which was commonly described as failing to live up to its potential: the family.

Family-based sex education

In this study, several participants identified the family as the ideal source of sexual learning, for various reasons: parents were seen as having a vested interest in making sure their children grow up happy and healthy; they were perceived as knowing their children best and therefore understanding what information they can be given and when; and they were believed to be more reliable than other sources. Parents were seen as having one’s best interests at heart, so as likely to deliver the best possible information:

Now, the family, because it’s at home, that’s the way, that’s the most reliable person. It’s the person you can, you know they want the best for you... (Michele, 19)

Whilst there was debate amongst participants about the legitimacy of other sources in the teaching of sex and sexuality¹⁴⁵, a parent’s right and responsibility to educate their children about sexuality was never questioned. Families were perceived by a number of young women as particularly authoritative over certain dimensions of sexuality, especially sexual morality and the “right way” to behave or act. The

¹⁴⁵ See Chapter Five for discussions of the legitimacy of the State in providing sex education, and pp. 286-290 for similar discussions of the legitimacy of “the street”.

family's authority on these matters was frequently deemed to far outweigh that of other sources:

I think that, if you stop and think about it, the responsibility is your mother's and your father's (...) Who has to, who has to approach you and say "Look, it's like this, it's like that" is your father and your mother (pause) School... has that obligation, that duty to teach you what, erm... about your body, the uterus, those things, but the stuff about, about, about, about, your first time, how you should behave, like that stuff, I think it really has to be at home. (Ana, 19)

There are several possible explanations for the strength of the belief that sex education should come primarily from the family. One such explanation is the fit between home-based sex education and the conceptualisation of sexuality as a "private matter", as discussed in Chapter Two. DaMatta's (1997, [1985]) socio-spatial formulation highlighted that the private and public spheres have specific activities associated with them: in the case of "the house", such activities include eating, sleeping, having sex, having and raising children and conducting domestic affairs (1997 [1985], p. 41). This formulation establishes the home as the rightful location for expressions of sexuality. Furthermore, sexuality in Brazil has historically been seen as a family matter (Beattie, 1996): it was the father's job to preserve the honour of his daughters, and so his family name, commonly by ensuring their virginity until marriage. Although the imperative for pre-marital virginity has lessened tremendously, families still play a key role in policing their daughters' sexuality, and this is often especially true in rural areas, as observed by Mannarelli (2008) in the Peruvian context. This role was discussed by a handful of participants:

The way people are brought up here, women have to be careful – everyone does, right, but there's that whole tradition – they can only have sex after they get married. Or after they graduate. Or after they

turn 18... And so, their parents get, they threaten their daughters. Not their sons, they set them free early, because they're men. And the girls, they keep them close, and say "Oh, you can't do this, you can't do that". (Carolina, 29)

Given such understandings of the home as the traditional site for the management of young women's sexuality, it is perhaps no surprise that many participants felt the home was the most appropriate place for the delivery of sex education, and the parents those best-placed to deliver it.

In addition, according to DaMatta 'the house is distinguished as that space of calm, rest, recuperation and hospitality, in short, of everything that makes up our idea of "love", "care" and "human warmth" (1997, [1985], p.57, my translation). This establishes the home as a safe and nurturing space, ideal for inter-personal relations, a construction echoed by one or two participants, who privileged family relationships above all others:

Mums, mums are who you trust *most*, you might tell a friend something, and she might, like – what if one day she tells someone? And mums, I don't think that would ever happen. Your mum's your mum. So, I think that you have to have that, that conversation [about sex], that, erm, more involvement from the mums... (Joana, 23)

In this excerpt, Joana positioned mothers as inarguably trustworthy, so the ideal source of sex education.

It was in this context, viewing the home as the rightful place for expressions of sexuality and a safe and nurturing space for trusting relationships, and the family as the "natural" regulators of daughters' sexuality, that participants discussed the role of the family in young people's sexual learning processes. The majority of young women in this study believed that family openness about sex and sexuality would be

beneficial to young people's learning, particularly about sexual morality, echoing Ana's earlier quote and Rodrigues et al.'s 2015 study, also in the Bahian interior, which positions family-based sex education as fundamental, given the family's established role in the moral education of children (2015, p. 8). However, it was also acknowledged that parental authority on certain topics may be eclipsed by that of other sources. For example, Carolina described health-posts as a more reliable source for information such as contraceptive advice, because of the extent of their knowledge of the subject:

...their parents, aren't going to have, their parents don't have as much knowledge as a nurse, you get me? And the best place for them to look for that knowledge is in the health-post. (Carolina, 29)

Although Carolina was unique in raising this concern, her comments might still suggest that parental authority on sexuality could be surpassed by other sources with regards to health-related content. Other sources were also deemed more credible when discussing matters regarding the detail of sexual activity, something which several of the young women considered out-of-bounds in discussions with parents. In this case, "street" sources such as friends were deemed far more valuable:

...we tell [our mums] the basics, like, what they need to know "Mum, I'm dating so-and-so" Just that. (pause) But not with friends "I'm dating him, I've already had sex with him for the first time" (...) Because lots of mums, they, erm, they're going to help their child, but they'll criticise, criticise, criticise. (Betina, 18)

These accounts seem to suggest that the family holds significant authority in the matter of sexuality, even though their credibility was deemed greater on some topics than others. Family authority was echoed within the PCNs themselves, which state

that 'the work of the school... does not substitute nor compete with the role of the family' (Brasil, 1997, p. 299, my translation), positioning school-based sex education as secondary to that given in the home, as discussed in Chapter Five.

From these accounts, it is noteworthy that participants tended to talk about the role of their mothers within sex education, rather than their fathers, or their families more generally. Over half the women interviewed highlighted that sex education came more from mums than dads and, according to one-quarter of participants, dads were usually only involved with the sex education of sons. Paternal involvement in the sex education of daughters was understood to occur only when they were single fathers and had no other choice, though a handful of young women disputed this – for example, both Gabriela and Elena described receiving more sex education from their fathers than their mothers. For many women, however, when their dads did speak on the matter, they were often perceived as trying to warn their daughters about the perils of men:

...my dad talked to me about (...) about the importance of protecting yourself, of using, of using a condom, of staying vigilant with boyfriends, regarding men, because lots of men only want sex and don't want anything serious. (Elena, 25)

Mothers were generally perceived to be better-suited to the job of sex education than were fathers, something also seen in Ballard and Morris (1998), and Sprecher, Harris and Meyers (2008), both in the US. Around one-quarter of participants positioned it as natural that the mum take on this role, given cultural differences between mothers and fathers which were assumed to be inherent. In their explanations, the young women appealed to essentialising discourses of femininity and masculinity, positioning women as more open and multi-tasking, and men as

closed-off, *machista*, and not big conversationalists. These views of the relative merits of men and women as sex educators also crossed over into participants' assessments of school-based sex educators, mentioned in Chapter Five. These accounts, which suggest that women, and particularly mothers, are somehow naturally "better" at this kind of talk, contribute to the "naturalness" of the assumption that sex education was the mother's job, or even obligation.

Family-based sex education was also gendered in the kinds of sex education received by sons and daughters. One-third of participants reflected on different upbringings and educational approaches for boys and girls regarding sexuality, as alluded to in the earlier discussion of family regulation of daughters' sexuality. This reflects Measor's findings that male and female adolescents in her 2004 UK study 'were offered quite different access to information about sex and sexuality in their respective families' (2004, p. 155). It would be interesting to pursue further research comparing the different experiences of young men in the *lençoense* context, as this was beyond the remit of this study.¹⁴⁶

Ideal versus reality

Although many participants identified the family as the ideal source of sex education, the majority also acknowledged that home-based sex education was not a reality for most young *lençoenses*. In contrast to Rodrigues et al. (2015), who found that the majority of participants *had* received sex education at home, three-quarters of participants in this study felt there was a lack of discussion about sexuality issues with the family:

The majority of parents are very closed-minded, you know? They think that their children don't have sex lives, and that they can't. They

¹⁴⁶ See Chapter Eight.

try to forbid it, and of course that doesn't work, but they try. It's pretty forbidden, even to talk about this stuff. (Juliette, 19)

Echoing many other studies in the field (King and Lorusso, 1997; Fisher, 2004; Sprecher, Harris and Meyers, 2008), parents were generally seen as avoiding the topic altogether, dealing with it in an abrupt way which closed down discussion, or giving only superficial information. Two main explanations were offered by participants for this perceived lack of openness: taboo, and parental assumptions about the relationship between talking about sex and “doing it”. It is important to add, however, that some participants *did* learn about sex at home; around a quarter described close relationships with their families, usually their mothers, allowing them to discuss such issues comfortably.

The most common reason given for the perceived lack of dialogue in the home was taboo, something also detected by Heilborn and Cabral in their 2011 Brazilian study. Most participants believed that *lençoense* parents tended to be “traditional” or “old-fashioned”, and one-third felt that parents’ “traditional” attitudes came from having received no sex education from their own families. As a result, many parents were seen to consider sexuality an inappropriate topic for discussion:

It's the way they were raised. Because in the past they never talked about that, no way. And now, for the parents to bring it up, like, they can't manage it, because they don't know anything, and no one talked to them about it, their parents didn't talk to them about it. So, it's terrible for them, talking to us about it too. (Daiane, 19)

Daiane's account indicates that a lack of conversation about sex and sexuality in parents' upbringing not only failed to equip them with sufficient knowledge for discussions with their own children, but also makes talking about it a “terrible” experience, perhaps due to anxiety or embarrassment. These difficulties were

frequently seen by participants as being 'passed on' to the children, making open conversation even less likely:

Parents who *didn't teach* their children who then *don't teach* their children who, who then don't have that openness. I mean, a person who had a *strict* upbringing, who didn't have knowledge, they then pass that on, already with, with anxiety, they, the same way they were too embarrassed to ask their parents questions, they pass that on to their children *to be anxious* too. I mean, it's a generational thing! (Marcela, 23)

As Marcela points out, it was not simply the parents who were too embarrassed or uncomfortable to raise the subject with their children. A handful of participants acknowledged that their *own* embarrassment prevented them from asking questions, or broaching the topic at home, and most attributed this embarrassment to the lack of an open family culture for conversation about sex. This suggests that the taboo around sex is forged in interaction, socially constructing sex as something which warrants embarrassment and discomfort.

In addition to explanations based on taboo, many of the women interviewed believed young people were afraid to discuss sex at home in case parents interpreted their questions as proof they were "doing it", or wanting to:

And at home, they're not, they're not going to say anything about it, to their parents, no way. Because they'd think "Ah! You're already wanting to do it! To do something. You're too young". (Janaina, 21)

Such accounts suggest that some participants felt that *lençoense* parents made a direct connection between information about sex and sexual activity. Rather than seeing sex education as a gradual acquisition of knowledge and understanding over time, preparing children for eventual sexual activity, it seems that it was understood

that young people should only receive help and advice at the moment they are perceived to be “needing” it - an attitude which may be incompatible with attempts to provide comprehensive sex education from a young age. Connected to such concerns was the parental fear, raised by a handful of participants, that discussing sex with children would incite them to become interested in sex, or even to become sexually active, as discussed with reference to school-based sex education in Chapter Five.

Only one or two participants described examples of more gradual, progressive sex education in the home:

...some parents are starting early, from the age of, of eight, seven or eight years old (...) if the child has a doubt, they don't go and tell them *everything* all at once, but as the child has approached them with a question, if you think you can respond, you sit down with the child and answer it. Answer that question for them, in a way that they can understand... (Elena, 25)

In this example, Elena described what she saw as a new trend, in which some parents sought to inform their children gradually about different aspects of sexuality. However, such an approach was only discussed by a couple of participants, suggesting it is a minority practice within *lençoense* homes.

In addition, two participants explained parental openness on issues of sexuality in terms of modernity, liberation and higher levels of education, contrasted with the idea of the traditional, embarrassed parent discussed earlier:

So, some parents already, who are already better informed, and who have, who a history that's more... right? A better academic history. They're more liberated, sometimes they talk about it, erm, they, erm – what do you call it? – they care for, for their child, they guide them and everything else. And there are others who don't, who, because they

had a more old-fashioned upbringing, that it's that way, that you can't date young, they end up, raising their children in the same way that they were raised, right? (Patrizia, 24)

Here, the discussion of sex education topics in the home is positioned as proof of more modern, progressive parenting, a move-on from taboo-laden, embarrassment-ridden discussions with “traditional” parents. Michele summed up this trend:

Because no one wants to be... old fashioned anymore. So, everybody says they're modern, but in practice, at home, they're not. (Michele, 19)

Although these voices were in the minority, they seem to be expanding upon ideas ventured by several participants, who consistently highlighted the problem of conservatism as a barrier to openness about sex. Other studies, such as Heilborn and Cabral (2013), have highlighted the so-called modernisation of sexual values which has been occurring in Brazil, and a more open attitude to sex education in the home would certainly form part of this transformation. However, in positioning the provision or lack of home-based sex education in terms of progress and change, an implicit value judgement is made in preference for more “modern” parenting practices.

This dichotomy between tradition and modernity could possibly be linked to Lençóis' semi-rurality. As seen in Chapter Two, rural sexualities are often presumed to be extremely conventional, heteronormative and highly traditional (Little, 2003; Hubbard, 2008; Mannarelli, 2008). In addition to this, the Northeast region of Brazil, and Bahia in particular, is stigmatised as “backwards”, as discussed in Chapter Three and elsewhere. One young woman, Maria, actively repudiated the idea that Lençóis might be in some way “backwards”, by distancing the town from its rural neighbours, and highlighting its comparative modernity:

Those who live in the most countryside of countryside, right, it's more difficult for the information to get there. Right? For example, the people who live there, the children there in lúna, which is a community close-by to here, I think it's more difficult for them to get that information about the question of prevention... And it's even worse when it comes to sexuality. Talking about that at home with their parents, their parents won't talk about that (...) So I can understand a, a, a young girl from a rural area getting pregnant. Now, from here, from Lençóis, a bigger small town, which has television, which has health posts, to get pregnant or catch a sexually transmitted disease, it's because they didn't look after themselves, so it's because they *screwed up*. (Maria, 24)

The attempts of some parents to claim modernity, described by Patrícia and Michele, and the othering process undertaken by Maria vis-à-vis the “backwardness” of girls from lúna in comparison to young women in Lençóis, could potentially be attempts to claim a stake in Brazil's modernity, and to reject the stereotypes and stigma of backwardness so commonly associated with rurality, and with northeastern-ness in the Brazilian context. However, as this dynamic was discussed by only a small handful of participants, future research would be needed to further explore this relationship.¹⁴⁷

In short, family-based sex education was seen as the ideal route to sexual learning by many participants in this study, possibly due to its compatibility with traditional understandings of the public/private spheres of Brazilian society. However, experiences of sex education in the home were, for the majority of the young women, far from ideal. Both parents and children were seen as too embarrassed to engage sufficiently with the topic, due to the parents' own rigid upbringings and the

¹⁴⁷ Discussed in Chapter Eight.

passing-on of taboos about sex through the generations. Equally, the young women feared exposing sexual activity or curiosity to their parents by bringing up the subject. This reality may well increase the perceived need for State-sanctioned sex education in schools, given this lack of sex education from within the home, as seen in da Fonseca, Gomes and Teixeira's (2010) study in Southern Brazil. In this study, however, the lack of sex education at home most commonly worked to position other "informal" sources such as "the street" and the media as even more important to young people, in offering them a place to find out about topics omitted both in school and at home.

"The Street"

When asked how young people learn about sex, by far the most common response was "*na rua*"¹⁴⁸, with half the participants identifying "the street" as the most important or most usual source:

...the way it is nowadays, the way the world is these days, [young people] learn more in the street than in their own homes. Or in the classroom. (Erina, 24)

The frequency with which "the street" was identified shows its importance to young people's sexual learning processes, mirroring its centrality to their social and cultural lives. As discussed in Chapter Two, much of *lençoense* young people's social interaction takes place in the street, from nights out "*na rua*", dancing *pagode* outside the town's bars or clubs, to sitting in the doorway of a friend's house for hours, chatting and gossiping.¹⁴⁹ With school lasting just a few hours each day, and without the funds to participate in private extra-curricular activities such as English classes,

¹⁴⁸ In the street.

¹⁴⁹ Very little research has been carried out with young people in Lençóis, therefore no studies were available to support these observations.

most young people have many unoccupied hours and, for those without jobs, much of this time is spent in the street, echoing Gough and Franch's 2005 study in Recife. *Lençoense* use of the street was observed as gendered, in similar ways to those identified by Gough and Franch: both young men and young women went on nights out *na rua*, but mostly remained in single-gender groupings. During the day, while young men would hang out in the street, young women more commonly remained in the home, or on their front steps, chatting with friends. Given the percentage of their time spent in the street, and its social significance in their lives, it is perhaps unsurprising that "the street" plays a key role in young people's sexual learning processes.

Although the socio-cultural space of "the street" was discussed at some length in Chapter Two, it is important to explore how the young women in this study employed the term. When asked what was meant by learning "in the street", participants described sitting down with friends, in the street, and each contributing what they know about a variety of sexuality topics, a practice which I call here "learning with friends":

In the street, like, because I formed a group of, of girl-friends¹⁵⁰, like, and we always talked about it, right? (Rebeca, 18)

However, from other aspects of their accounts, and from my own observations, the category of "the street" was broader than this, including other sexual learning practices, including "learning in relationships" and "learning from gossip".

"Learning in relationships" is considered a street learning practice due to the way

¹⁵⁰ Participants usually discussed female-only friendship groups, with only one or two referring to male friends or mixed groups. This reflects observed norms in the town: young men and women have separate friendship groups, combining only for the purposes of meeting/flirting with potential partners.

young people use the street as a major site for romantic and sexual relationships. Because of the strict attitudes of many parents, few young people – especially young women – will bring home someone they are dating until things are very serious:

Now, the daughter, she starts dating, she just kisses that person and her dad wants to meet him, wants to know where he's from, what he does, what he's like (...) There are times when he has a *perfect* profile, but the dad will still find some flaw to – I think it's to scupper the relationship! (both laugh) (Marcela, 23)

As a result, the majority of young people's romantic and sexual relationships are lived in more public spaces – in bars, in clubs, at parties, on street corners, by the river, in the *mata*¹⁵¹ – and the “street” location of these relationships justifies the characterisation of “learning in relationships” as a street learning practice. This type of street learning can be further broken down into learning from a partner – through discussion or them teaching – and learning-in-practice, which involves learning from the experience itself.

Similarly, “learning from gossip” is considered a street learning practice because neighbourhood gossip, passed around “in the street”, was seen as a route to learn from the examples, experiences and cautionary tales of friends, acquaintances and neighbours. It is through these informal street channels that examples of (in)appropriate sexual behaviours travel, positioning “learning from gossip” as an important element of street learning.

The three practices that make up “street learning” – “learning with friends”; “learning in relationships”¹⁵², and “learning from gossip” – were extremely important to the young women in this study, especially in the context of the omissions and

¹⁵¹ Wooded areas.

¹⁵² This study focuses on heterosexual relationships only, as discussed in Chapter Four.

inadequacies they perceived in State-sanctioned sources. Once again, these should not be understood as discrete categories: the young women used these sources in overlapping ways. However, each practice contributed to young *lençoense* women's sexual learning processes, and these contributions will now be examined.

Learning with friends

In her work in Recife, Franch (2010) described female friendships as characterised by openness, demonstrated by the exchange of secrets and by mutual confidence; and support, demonstrated by solidarity during difficult times. For the young women in Franch's study, friendship was a space where they could 'share their experiences, discoveries and anxieties, in an environment of intense affection' (2010, p. 35, my translation). Close female friendships have long been linked to norms of femininity (Kehily, et al., 2002), with the closeness and propensity to talk about personal experiences and feelings often interpreted as inherently "feminine", and "natural" for women (McLeod, 2002, p. 213). Indeed, these intimate relationships are 'represented as *exclusively* feminine' (Romanelli and Prieto, 2002, p. 58, my translation and emphasis), whilst such intimacy is considered socially inappropriate for young men (Thompson, 2006, p. 50). This intimacy could well make female friendship a productive space for sexual learning: indeed, Romanelli and Prieto's 2002 study of young women's affective relationships in São Paulo found that female friendship groups act as a 'field of reference' and a 'source of information... including about the facts of human reproduction and of sexual activity' (2002, p. 61, my translation).

This study, like others (e.g. Ballard and Morris, 1998; Sprecher, Harris and Meyers, 2008; and Borges Nichiata and Schor, 2006; Rodrigues et al., 2015, in the Brazilian context), indicates the importance of friends to sexual learning, identified by almost

two-thirds of participants:

[E]verything I learned about sexuality, I learned with my friends (...) Just with friends. I, for example, all of them (indicates the group of girls she works with) we all learned one from the others. All of them, we grew up together, us girls. So, one learned because of the others. (Patrizia, 24)

This frequent citing of friends as an important source of sexual information was commonly attributed to the level of comfort young people felt with their friends, due to the intimacy gained through self-disclosure, and through knowledge of the group's support and solidarity:

The issues, the issues you discuss in that circle... Right, and saying "Oh, I got with so-and-so" and then "He likes anal sex, but I didn't want to"... You know? So, that sort of conversation, right?.. And then, it ends up on the issue of "Oh, I like... having sex in position X, or in position Y" and "Oh, I've never done that! How is it?" (...) I think that friends have that closeness, right, to talk with their friends, about sex. At least I, I feel more at ease, talking with my friends, right, than talking to a doctor, I'm not going to lie! (Maria, 24)

The closeness and trust described by Maria clearly facilitates sexual communication on even those subjects frequently deemed the most intimate, such as sexual positions.¹⁵³ She also highlighted peer-learning as a preferred source, considering the restrictions felt with other sources, such as doctors, something also identified by a handful of other young women.

It was clear from this study that several young women distinguished between different kinds of friends on the grounds of intimacy, distinctions also made in Romanelli and Prieto (2002), and Uhl's 1991 study in Andalusia. Not all kinds of

¹⁵³ See pp. 271-272.

friends were deemed suitable for sharing sexual experiences and sexual talk – the young women were only comfortable opening up to the friends to whom they felt closest:

It's not with just anyone. In my case, right? Now I don't know if there are others who will talk about it with anyone, but in my case, it has to be with someone very... right, that you are close enough with to talk about this stuff. Because it's something very *personal*, right? For you to open up about, like, talk about. It's hard. (Joana, 23)

One distinction not made, however, was between female friends and female relatives of a similar age. This is most likely due to the intense social proximity of young women to their sisters and, especially to their *primas*¹⁵⁴, given the power of kin relationships in this small, close-knit community, as seen also in Mannarelli's 2008 work in Peru. Usually, these female relatives were treated as, and referred to interchangeably with, friends, and trusted not to reveal confidences to parents, grandparents or aunts and uncles: only one participant discussed such a threat. As a result, female friends, sisters and cousins are placed in the same category for the purposes of this chapter. Outside of kin relationships, however, young women exercised considerable caution when assessing whether a person could be trusted with their confidences or not, quite likely a symptom of the fear of gossip which touched almost all the participants, discussed later in the chapter.

A major sexual learning practice identified by participants was learning from those friends more experienced than oneself. According to just over one-third of the young women, the most successful transmission of knowledge about sex was from the more-experienced to the less-experienced:

¹⁵⁴ Literally female cousins, but used more generally for female family members (or very close family friends) of a similar age.

So, you sit down, you make a circle, talking about the subject, and someone says that they got with someone, and they start talking about it, right? (...) and someone asks “Oh, how was it?” out of curiosity, right, a young girl who hasn’t done it yet. The younger girls generally ask the older girls, they generally ask the older ones. (Maria, 24)

More experienced friends were appreciated because they could share their real-life experiences, answer questions and clear up doubts. In the eyes of less experienced peers, these women’s lived experience legitimises the knowledge they pass on, whilst conversation with friends less experienced than, or equally inexperienced as oneself was not necessarily seen as helpful. This echoes Allen’s 2001 work in New Zealand, Buston and Wight’s 2002 study in Scotland, and Powell’s 2008 work in Wales, where experience was also highly prized as a source of sexual knowledges.

As Maria mentioned, the more-experienced were usually ‘the older ones’ in a friendship group, as also indicated by Franch (2010), who highlighted the specific role played by older women in female friendship networks, as *conselheiras* or advice-givers. According to Franch, these women were often married and/or had children, and were commonly sought out with the express intention of learning about relationships and sexuality (ibid, p. 37), as Joana also identified in the *lençoense* context:

With, like with our friends, we look to those who have more experience, who are already mothers, right, who already have families, and we ask them. (Joana, 23)

Experience, therefore, was often viewed by the young women in this study as a way of piecing together a more complete picture of what sex was, how it was done, and how it felt. Learning from someone who had already “done it”, either from their successes, or from their mistakes, was seen as extremely valuable:

One person knows one thing, and I know another, and they all go along, putting things together, they start to talk and talk, and they go on, like, like, they exchange various bits of information amongst themselves (...) one person discovers something, another discovers something better, and they go on, sharing amongst themselves, and discovering the true sex. (Gina, 18)

These accounts highlight sexual knowledges as co-produced in an active process. Collaborative learning has long been a topic of interest for education scholars taking socio-cultural approaches to learning (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978), who see learning as social and believe 'knowledge is socially constructed in the world through interactions with others' (Benbunan-Fich and Arbaugh, 2006, p. 780). In this study, sexual learning with friends was both cumulative and collaborative – gained over time and through discussion, each contributing their own experiences and knowledges:

I myself, I didn't have a lot of experience at school. I think it's more in the street. With my friends (...) I gained experience more in the street, with my friends, talking amongst ourselves. And so we went on, gaining experience, by ourselves. Each person passing on what she knew. (Daniela, 19)

In such contexts, each individual woman contributes a level of knowledge, perhaps from information she has gained from other sources, perhaps from her own personal experiences, or those of another close friend. This individual contribution of knowledge is vital to the process, described by Fischer et al. (2002) as 'the starting point for the negotiation of common meaning' (p. 214). The women join together to share these experiences and pieces of information and to re-articulate them into a shared group knowledge of sex, possibly what Gina referred to earlier as "discovering the true sex": they 'integrate the varying individual perspectives into a

common interpretation' (Fischer, et al., 2002, p. 215). Reliance on this method of learning also highlights the inventiveness of these young women – by widening their net for the collection of knowledges, they stand a better chance of elaborating a joint understanding of sex which is relevant to their context:

... if I have five friends, each of them has adult experience, when we get together, then I have a large source of information. (Patrizia, 24)

It is important to note the content of the advice gathered in friendship groups. In Franch (2010), the advice tended not to be “technical” information, about contraceptive methods for example, rather it represented the opportunity to discuss issues the women couldn't discuss at home, in case they were exposed as sexually active or interested in sex. Such topics included who to “lose it” to, and how to discuss suspected pregnancy with a boyfriend (2010, p. 38). However, in this study, *conselheiras* were sometimes described as providing both types of information, “technical” and experiential:

I learned more about sex, like, with – and about prevention – with my friends, my cousins who are older than I am, right, we'd sit, we'd talk, we'd say, right, that you have to use condoms, that you have to have your smear tests, that you have to take the pill, if for example, you have sex and you don't... use a condom and you're scared of getting pregnant. You have to take the morning after pill... I learned those things, pretty much, in a circle, talking with my friends. (Maria, 24)

However, the authority of friends on “technical” topics was also questioned at times:

Stuff that's more, about, how, how ovulation works, taking care of yourself, how to take the pill properly, there's no way to learn that with friends, because not everyone understands that stuff. (Ana, 19)

Therefore, the predominant role of friends, as suggested in Franch (2010), and identified by almost half the participants, was to give advice on more emotional and

relational aspects, based on their own experience:

I believe that it's more, erm, normally mates talking about their experiences, what they've experienced, what they've been through, and depending on how close the friendship is, then maybe they'll talk about, they'll try to guide each other, help each other (...) "When am I ready to have sex?" for example. "When am I going to be able to do it?" ... Or... For example, no, I think it's more that really. "When am I going to be able to do it?" or "What was your experience like?" (Elena, 25)

This is particularly true of discussions of pleasure. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the level of intimacy felt with close female friends was seen to facilitate conversation on sexual topics. Those women who discussed learning with friends mentioned a wide range of discussion topics, including STDs, contraception, sexual satisfaction, what makes a good relationship, and how men can't be trusted. Most of these topics related to the embodied and relational aspects of sex – those topics not covered in schools¹⁵⁵, and difficult to broach at home, due to the barrier of embarrassment. Around one-third of participants identified female friends as a source of learning about aspects such as pleasurable sexual positions and practices:

What we talk about most is what it's like with our partners. If he's satisfying you. If your relationship is how you wanted it to be. *It also gives us the opportunity to ask each other questions, because in general our friends have had more than one partner, they've slept with more than one person.* (Juliette, 19)

"Oh, I slept with so-and-so yesterday, it was like this, like that" "Oh, I shagged him, oh I love it when he gives me a spanking" "Oh, I love it when he pulls my hair" "I like it when he does that". (Maria, 24)

Discussions about pleasure with friends was also identified by a small handful of

¹⁵⁵ See Chapter Five.

participants as informing young women what to expect from their bodies during sexual activity:

I don't think they understand what it is, even, like. I think they experience more that, that thing about fire, right, in their bodies and everything, but they don't know what it is (...) All of a sudden, someone more experienced ends up telling them, right?... "Oh, when you're getting to, to, to the moment you're most waiting for, you get like this, that, the other" and they start like "Oh, yes, she said that to arrive at orgasm, you have to get like that, and I did so" (...) we start comparing "Oh, if she says that to get to that place, your legs... if I got that way too, it's because it's true then!" (both laugh) "So, I managed to get to where I wanted to go". (Patrizia, 24)

This was seen by some young women as particularly helpful, because many young women engage in sexual activity without knowing how their bodies will feel and react, and as a result, find it hard to articulate sexual demands for more pleasurable sexual encounters:

Lots of teenage girls, they're not there shagging, *sometimes*, because she wants to, because she likes it, because she feels pleasure. Because in truth, sometimes she still hasn't discovered, she still hasn't felt that *pleasure* that a man feels. It's totally different. Sometimes, *with time*, with time, with time, as she has sex, and I don't know what, she'll start discovering, and she'll start seeing how things are. She'll start managing to reach, like, feeling more pleasure... like, but straightaway, no. (Betina, 18)

In accounts such as these, participants made it clear how often and how easily young women discussed pleasure with their friends. Such discussions offered young women recourse to information about different sexual acts and sexual positions, something not discussed in the State-sanctioned sex education they received, nor deemed suitable for discussion at home, as previously argued.

Despite these accounts which situate friendship groups as important sources for learning about pleasure, for a small minority of women in this study, such topics were off-limits, even with close friends. Sara was particularly concerned with the possible consequences of what she saw as over-sharing with friends:

...there are lots of girls who talk like this “Oh, I do it this way with my boyfriend, he does this, he does that, he’s great” and there are friends who, right, end up having a certain interest in your boyfriend, right? (...) I think they end up, either she’s all over him, or she ends up wanting to know... But that’s all because his girlfriend was sharing *everything* she does! (Sara, 19)

Comments such as Sara’s indicate a wariness of close female friends, which echoes studies which identify strong feelings of competition within female friendship groups (e.g. Franch, 2010), and the constant threat of “boyfriend stealing” (Ringrose, 2008). It also reflects points raised earlier in this chapter, and in Chapter Five, where parents were understood to be concerned that discussing sex with young people would incite them to sexual activity. This is seen here in a different guise: Sara worries that discussing her sex life with female friends will incite them to think about her boyfriend in a sexual way, to desire him, and eventually to try to seduce him. It is possible that this seemed an even greater threat for the young women in this study, given Lençóis’ small size and relative geographical isolation: the pool of potential sexual partners is small, making overlap with women of a similar age a very real possibility.

To conclude, “learning with friends” was generally seen as a very important and useful sexual learning practice, because participants felt comfortable with friends, more so than with other sources, such as parents or doctors. For many women in this study, this comfort facilitated the exchange of information on subjects they found

difficult to discuss elsewhere, for example, sexual positions and sensations. In addition, more experienced friends were understood as legitimate sources of sexual knowledge, because they had “been through it”, making them well-placed to pass on information to the less-experienced. The importance of “learning with friends” also implies something which could be easily missed about sexual learning processes – they are often collective, as also identified by Bragg (2006) in her UK study. This practice could, therefore, be interpreted as the gradual co-production of knowledge through the pooling of information and the sharing of experience, to reach a shared group understanding of sex and sexuality.¹⁵⁶

Learning in relationships

“Learning in relationships” was also considered an important sexual learning practice by two-thirds of the young women in this study. These participants identified different ways in which young people learned from relationships, including learning from a partner – through dialogue/discussion or by them teaching – and learning-in-practice.

A handful of participants, however, felt that couples did not tend to communicate about sex, they just “did it”:

They don’t talk about sex much. They *have* sex. But talk about it? No. Very few. (Carolina, 29)

¹⁵⁶ One issue not discussed by in this study, but perhaps warranting further investigation, is the importance of “learning with friends” for those who do not easily “fit in” with *lençoense* social groupings, or whose experiences might be considered minority or even “deviant”. Some studies with same-sex-attracted teens have shown higher levels of social isolation. For example, in their study with Italian young people, Baiocco et al. (2014) argue that lesbian and gay young adults tried to ‘avoid the closest of relationships, such as best-friendships, especially because such relationships could require the disclosure of their sexual orientation’ (p. 117). However, this is disputed by other studies, e.g. Martin-Storey et al. (2015) who found no difference between the sociability and popularity of same-sex-attracted and different-sex-attracted teens in their study in US schools. Additionally, Vrangalova and Bukberg (2015) found that US undergraduates deemed “sexually permissive” experienced higher levels of relational aggression, but lower levels of social isolation than their peers.

This tended to be explained by references to the enduring taboo over discussions of sex in many contexts within the local culture, compounded by the belief that young women were reluctant to raise the topic of sex, possibly for fear of the impact on their respectability:¹⁵⁷

...there are lots of partners who have sex, and the sex finishes, and they get dressed and leave. They don't talk, they don't have a conversation, a dialogue "Oh, did you like it? Was it good for you? Was that position good?" There's none of that (...) it's still a taboo, for lots of girls. (Maria, 24)

This silence in relationships could also be due to fear of offending or upsetting their partner (Levinson, Sadigursky and Erchak, 2004), or stem from an enduring *machista* belief that sex and sexual pleasure are the domain of men:

[Women], they worry a lot about satisfying their man, about giving him pleasure, and he's not bothered about doing the same. (Juliette, 19)

A few women, however, explained that their boyfriends had been useful sources of sexual learning for them. This was especially true of Daniela, Sara and Gabriela, who all reported having learned a lot from relationships with older men, which once again shows how experience was considered to legitimise sources of sexual learning:

Because I have a boyfriend, he's older than I am, you see, he is *much* more experienced, he's more experienced than I am. So, often when I have a doubt, I clear that doubt up with him, you see? (Sara, 19)

Although one participant acknowledged that younger guys can also take on the role of "teacher", this was a role far more commonly accorded to older men, whose experience and maturity was seen to give them the authority to teach on sexual

¹⁵⁷ See Chapter Six for discussions of "respectability".

matters. This cultural valuing of experience as a route to sexual learning, seen earlier in this chapter, might explain the local tendency for younger women to date older men, something identified by more than a third of participants – it may be that they wish to learn about sex and sexuality from someone with experience, or want to date someone they perceive as “mature”:

...normally girls, I think they mature more quickly. Than boys, who are little dumbasses, they start maturing later. I think that older boys are more experienced, erm, they're not silly, they're not... they're no longer children. (Gabriela, 18)

Although this trend could just as easily be explained by a preference of local men for younger women¹⁵⁸, it was reported by one or two participants as decidedly driven by young women, causing tensions between women of different ages, as they competed for the same pool of men in this small-town context:

There's a serious problem here that, the majority of the time, when you see a couple split up... “So, who did he leave her for?” “Ah, for that young girl!” (...) Younger girls, these days, the majority of the time, they cause more problems for couples, more break-ups, than more experienced women, older women. (Luiza, 29)

Despite this focus on experience, one or two of the women in this study described “learning from a partner” as a far more reciprocal process, where each partner learned something from the other:

We do [learn from dating], a lot. Erm, yeah! And you, at the same time you're learning, you're also teaching (...) You're going to go through a lot together. And you're going to make mistakes that you can learn from. (Janaina, 21)

¹⁵⁸ There was much popular concern locally over the perceived preference for *novinhas* (young girls) amongst local men, also discussed by one-third of the participants.

This is similar in many ways to the earlier discussion of sexual learning as a collaborative process: one is never purely the learner, one also has the capacity to share experiences and teach others, enriching their understandings about sexuality, as well as one's own. Janaina's comments also raise interesting issues about a woman's capacity to teach a man in matters of sexuality, something which would be unthinkable in traditional conceptualisations of Brazilian femininity, where women must be passive, submissive, and naïve about sex (Paiva, 1993).¹⁵⁹

In line with earlier discussions about the privileging of experience was the idea of "learning-in-practice", something discussed by a quarter of participants:

There's, shall we say, twenty-five, thirty percent from their parents, erm, shall we say, who have some, they help them in a way. Right? But the, the other seventy percent, like, shall we say, they learn in practice! (Marcela, 23)

"Learning-in-practice" appeared to encompass experiences of possessing little, or incomplete information about what sex was, how it felt and how it could/should be done, and filling in the gaps by "doing it".¹⁶⁰ The majority of the handful of women who discussed "learning-in-practice" positioned it as problematic, and potentially risky. This was mainly because it was seen as a haphazard process, characterised by "trial and error":

...it's trial and error, and through trying it out "I'll do this, I'll do that", they go about perfecting it. But, I think that that might not be the best way to, to learn, right? (...) for example, if you've never been told about sex, and you go and have sex with someone who, who... is infected, and you go and have sex without a condom, and with that, there's

¹⁵⁹ See Chapter Two.

¹⁶⁰ Generally, use of the term "learning-in-practice" was limited to sexual experience and experimentation with a male partner, however, one woman talked about the importance of masturbation, and one or two discussed sexual experimentation with a female partner.

nowhere else for you to go, you might already, in that first moment, already have contracted a disease. (Elena, 25)

Some of the young women interviewed focused on the importance of “learning-in-practice” to learning about pleasure, reiterating once again the centrality of experience. A handful of participants were adamant that “doing it” was the only real way to learn about pleasure:

N - And about pleasure, the sensations of sex, all that – how do they learn about that?

I think in practice, right?

N – In practice?

Yeah. Because you feel a touch, if you're hot, if you're not, if you're cold, right? I think it's like that, in practice, actually feeling it (...) No one ever talked to me! (...) I didn't have that thing where, like, an aunt came to me “Oh, this is the sensation”, no. It was when I was already practising... I learned through feeling it (laughs). (Fernanda, 28)

One of the arguments in support of learning in this way is that every woman is different and feels pleasure differently:

N - Where do young people learn about [pleasure]?

In practice! (both laugh) In practice! Yeah, because if you talk about pleasure, it's something that you feel, it's not the same thing for another person. There are girls who feel pleasure, they get excited at the neck, for others it's their leg, their thigh, you see? So, I think it's in practice (...) If you go on what your friend says “Oh, squeeze her thigh, she'll like it” and if that girl doesn't like that thing?! If for her it's her neck?! (Michele, 19)

The emphasis on learning-in-practice, then, reinforces the importance placed on experience throughout this study, and also highlights the perception that the best way to learn about embodied sensations and desires, is to feel them for oneself.

Cintia, however, believed “learning-in-practice” was only a valid route if accompanied by conversation – she expressed concern about simply practising sex without discussion:

N – And is it a good way to learn, like that?

(long pause) I think so. If you have a lot of dialogue with the other person. Because sometimes you meet someone who has already had experiences and – various experiences – and sometimes you can exchange experiences, exchange... those experiences and make a... and have a... great life... A great sexuality (...) I think [doing it without dialogue], that’s risky, right? Just doing it and learning (...) if you practise, then nine months later you wait and see if you got it right or not! (Cintia, 22)

In summary, the young women in this study had mixed feelings about “learning in relationships”. The opportunity to gain experience was prized, especially if one’s partner was more experienced than oneself. In addition, “learning-in-practice” was seen as a major route to sexual knowledge by some participants, and – although viewed as haphazard and possibly risky – was also seen as a potentially positive learning process, if accompanied by dialogue.

Learning from gossip

The third street learning practice is “learning from gossip”. According to participants, examples from the local context were frequently invoked by friends and family to illustrate community attitudes towards certain behaviours. Sometimes this was done directly, within the context of a sex education discussion; however, the most common way that participants were presented with such examples was through gossip:

...at school they mostly talk about the basics – teenage pregnancy and about, about diseases. They mostly talk about that. The other stuff,

we learn about more, more in the street really... With friends. Like, there are women, we'll say "that woman there just stays at home, her husband goes out, cheats on her" Like that, you know?.. And people say it's just gossip, but it's not gossip, we're gaining experience about this stuff, right?! (Daniela, 19)

The concept of gossip has been difficult to define academically, though most definitions involve ideas of 'talk about an absent third party' (McDonald, 2011, p. 1197). Gossip has traditionally been categorised as a female phenomenon (Guendouzi, 2001; McDonald, 2011), even 'an inherent part of "female nature"' (Einat and Chen, 2012, p. 110), despite evidence that both men and women gossip. Various uses for gossip have been identified: for fun or entertainment, or to increase intimacy within relationships (McDonald, 2011), as a form of aggression or malice (Einat and Chen, 2012), to indicate and maintain group norms and sanction transgressors (Winkler-Reid, 2014), as well as to regulate behaviour. There is much debate about whether "gossip" is limited purely to *negative* talk about others (McDonald, 2011, p. 1197). Within this study, the Portuguese terms used helped to determine the intentions behind this talk: "*fofoca*" was used both for gossip in the sense of "rumour" and negative talk, but also for the light-hearted and informal exchange of news and tidbits, as was the term "*comentar*". However, assertions that people have "*língua grande*", meaning "a big mouth", meant their gossip had undercurrents of malice, or bad intentions. And the term "*falar mal*", meaning to speak badly about, is self-evidently negative. Each of these terms was used by a handful of participants to describe "gossip" in Lençóis, but many used more than one of these phrases, indicating that gossip is a multi-faceted concept in the town, used both for the circulation of information and with more malicious intent.

Gossip was an ever-present concern for many participants. Almost two-thirds talked

about the power and dangers of small-town gossip:

I don't know if it's just because it's a small town, or if it's because everybody is very close-knit. Because, I'm Ana's friend, Ana is Maria's friend, Maria is Soraya's friend, Soraya is Amanda's friend. So, Amanda finds things out about my life through lots of people, you see?.. They go round, one passing it to the others, and then it comes back again. It's like Chinese whispers! (Michele, 19)

Indeed, there was a strong impression amongst participants that gossip was unavoidable in a small town like Lençóis:

...people get involved in the lives of others, it's as simple as that! It's a small town, there's not much to do! (laughing) (...) "Neighbour, did you see, at the market so-and-so had a fight with so-and-so, because she stole her husband, and so-and-so went to the doctor and got an abortion!" I dunno! Everything is a topic, and becomes gossip. (Fernanda, 28)

This reflects other studies which argue that small town contexts where "everybody knows everybody" intensify practices of surveillance, as the lack of anonymity and the visibility of everybody's lives lends itself to the accumulation of intimate and "private" knowledges of others (e.g. Macdonald and Kirk, 1996; Parr, Philo and Burns, 2002 and Rebhun, 2004, in the Brazilian context).¹⁶¹ One or two participants even described occasions when their sexual activity became widely known due to the *lençoense* rumour mill:

All my friends knew that I wasn't a virgin anymore! But my mum didn't know!.. You see? So, it's with time that things, the rumours go round

¹⁶¹ This acquisition of "private knowledges" potentially makes young women vulnerable in their friendship groups, as members possess a great deal of "private knowledge" about one another (see Franch, 2010). The role of peers in the process of group regulation through gossip is not explored here, but could form the basis for interesting future research.

town, because it's a small town, and so she found out! (Betina, 18)

Whilst the women in this study were largely critical about the *povo fofoqueiro* (the gossipy folk) of Lençóis, this did not prevent them from engaging in gossip themselves. I cannot comment on unobserved practices within their social lives, however, several women in this study utilised informal comments about other young women to highlight to me their inappropriate behaviours, and their own, more appropriate ones in comparison. Skolnik, de la Vega and Steigenga (2012) identified similar behaviours in their work with Guatemalan wives of migrants, suggesting that women used gossip as a way of 'reinforcing the acceptability of their behaviour and increasing their status in comparison with these unnamed "bad" women' (2012, p. 28), and Einat and Chen (2012) described similar uses in their study in Israeli female prisons: 'In the hands of women, gossip is often used to claim symbolic capital indirectly by competing for socially acceptable images of femininity' (2012, pp. 109-110).

The use of negative commentary about people's lives and decisions was, according to the young women in this study, very common in Lençóis, and its circulation within gossip channels was reported as generating and reinforcing understandings of appropriate and inappropriate heterosexual feminine behaviours, in ways which reflect the findings of Einat and Chen (2012) and Skolnik, de la Vega and Steigenga (2012), discussed above. Several participants discussed how gossip was employed to teach "acceptable" and "unacceptable" behaviours:

I always grew up hearing that teenage pregnancy isn't good. Why? Sometimes, a school-friend of mine would get pregnant and my mum would say "If that was me, I'd kick her out" So that gave us a kind of fear. So I know that I can't get pregnant because everybody criticises, everybody talks – and there are mums who even kick you out of the

house, right? (Patrizia, 24)

In Patrizia's example, her mother not only utilised a school-friend's pregnancy to alert her daughter to behaviours she considered inappropriate - becoming pregnant at a young age – but also to warn her of the consequences of these inappropriate behaviours. The implied threat is clear: if Patrizia were to become pregnant, she would be kicked out of the house.

From the circulation of gossip about other young women, a few participants reported learning that those who engage in sexual relationships “too young”, “too quickly” or “too early” on in a relationship or with “too many” men are subject to chastisement:

Women have to be careful how she gets involved in the relationships she has, because society demands a different stance from her. That she be proper, that she... preferably that she has few relationships, and that, that if she starts her sex life, that it's with someone who she is going to stay with for a large part of her life. And men are something else, they can get with as many women as they want, they can have as many sexual experiences as they want (...) And, when a woman takes that stance of, also experimenting, wanting to have several relationships, even to also be able to discover herself, then that woman is seen in society as... if not a slut or a tramp, sometimes that happens too, right, that vision. (Priscila, 27)

In this way, it could be argued that “learning through gossip” is a useful sexual learning practice for young women in Lençóis, as it helps them to negotiate “appropriate” heterosexual feminine behaviours in their small town context.

However, gossip also had many negative effects, in addition to exposing “private knowledges” about individual women, as described earlier. Almost half the young women in this study described small-town gossip as almost constant surveillance which impinged upon their freedom to act as they chose. Although this was rarely

reported as influencing young people to cease having sex, the constant threat of gossip was seen as having negative consequences for their access to information and open conversation about sex:

...you get to the health-post and you're talking and there might be somebody listening, because this is a small town, right? And the people here have big mouths. And you might get scared that, like, someone saw and they tell someone... (Joana, 23)

Many participants saw gossip as having direct consequences on young people's sexual learning processes, and potentially their sexual health. For example, Carolina described how fear of becoming the subject of gossip prevents young people – especially young women – from attending the health-post, and so benefitting from services offered there:

N – And why do you think that they don't want to go to the, the health-post? Embarrassment. They're embarrassed, because it's a small town, and anything that happens, there are people who spread that information around... And they don't, they're too scared to go and then people know, their parents find out. Because lots of them start having sex without their parents knowing about it. So they get too scared to go, and they don't go, exactly because of that. (Carolina, 29)

This echoes the work of Torres, Beserra and Barroso (2007) on adolescent sexual health in Fortaleza, where young women reported worries about accessing contraception at the local health-post because of intense neighbourhood gossip (2007, pp. 298-299).

Several participants commented on how young *lençoense* women take care to cultivate a public image of themselves which will not cause them to become the subject of gossip. In Patrizia's case, she delayed starting to date, because she was so aware of the scrutiny she would be under from her brothers, her parents, and the

neighbours:

I was afraid, right? I started dating, like, very late, because our brothers are out on our streets, so they're always staring at us, so... there are various factors. If our parents don't see, but a neighbour sees and then tells them that we're dating, so... they're really afraid. It's actual fear. (Patrizia, 24)

Although only one or two women described the fear of gossip as limiting their sexual activity, a handful of others reported modifying their behaviour to avoid being gossiped about. They did not cease sexual activity, rather they resisted the practices of community surveillance by developing tactics for hiding their sexual relationships:

They go out on the street, and there in the street they meet everybody, and everybody goes off into a corner.

N – Oh, ok. And no one tells their parents?

Nothing. So, later, they come home late, and they say that they were with their friends... And that's that. (Daiane, 19)

There are parents who think their children are saints and in reality they're not! (both laugh) Yeah! (still laughing).

N – And where do they do it, then, are they going out to...

Oh! In a car. In the street. A dark alley. Sometimes at the river. Because there are lots of rivers here, right? The river, they go to the river. They get a group of friends together and go to someone's house whose parents aren't home. And there there's a bedroom that's separate. Erm... There's no shortage of places... (Michele, 19)

The prevalence and power of small town gossip, then, not only made young people feel that they were under surveillance, but also lead them to adapt their behaviour accordingly, echoing Gough and Franch (2005) who describe how '[a] range of adult regulatory regimes operate such as surveillance and curfews' (p. 160), leading to

girls preferring to remain in the home 'to avoid neighbours gossip... They complained about their neighbours watching their every move and misinterpreting their actions' (ibid., p. 161).

In short, the negative, regulatory effects of gossip were evident in this study, as in many others. Neighbourhood gossip was seen as a pervasive, almost-unavoidable force in the town. For some of the women, it played a role in educating young people about the norms of sexual behaviours and practices, helping them to learn what is and is not acceptable in their context, and adapt their behaviour accordingly. Others reported that fear of being a subject of neighbourhood gossip affected young women's confidence in accessing sexual health advice and information, and contraceptive services. And a further handful of women demonstrated resistance to the regulatory powers of neighbourhood gossip: rather than ceasing sexual activity, they discussed how young people subvert the surveillance of their neighbours and acquaintances by practising their sexualities in secrecy, whilst simultaneously working to present their sexual selves in an "acceptable" fashion in public.

Scepticism of "the street"

Whilst the preceding sections highlighted the common reliance upon, and relative importance of, street learning practices, doubts were raised by some participants as to the reliability of knowledges coming from "street" sources. These doubts were especially prominent regarding information gathered by word-of-mouth from peers, with one-third of participants expressing such concerns:

There are friends who tell others not to take the contraceptive pill, because she got pregnant whilst taking it. She doesn't stop to think "Hell, I got pregnant whilst on the pill, it must be because I took it wrong, it's because I was forgetting to take it" – no! She'll see it in that way, she sees it like "Ah, the pill's no good, because I was taking

**it and I got pregnant”. And that’s what gets passed on, you see?
(Luiza, 28)**

In addition to the concerns of participants, it became apparent in conversations with healthcare workers and sex educators their scepticism and, at times, open disdain for street knowledges. A Health Department representative compared what he described as “inadequate”, “random” street learning, which he saw as leading to STIs, HIV/AIDS or pregnancy, with school and health-post interventions which offered a “more concise education” on the subject. Similarly, a female middle-school teacher saw State-sanctioned sex education as a remedy to the “confusion” caused by street learning – an argument also raised in the PCNs as justification for the inclusion of sex education in schools (da Silva, 2015, p. 82). The teacher described students approaching her to clear up doubts and misconceptions gained in “the street”, saying she told them “if it’s really like that or not”.

It is important to note that the majority of scepticism directed at street knowledges referred to information about scientific content such as contraceptive methods or biology; information which can be demonstrated as “correct” or “incorrect”. However, the distrust of street information on these topics seemed to extend to street knowledges as a whole, causing several of the sex educators in this study to dismiss potential utility in this source of sexual learning. Other studies have highlighted similar omissions of street knowledges, for example, Ribeiro’s 2003 work in Bahia, found that ‘[c]hildren learn in the street, with their friends, from magazines, from television, however, schools only recognise the legitimacy of medical/normalizing, moralizing and institutionalised discourses.’ (2003, pp. S352-S353, my translation). Although street learning and school-based sex education have very different aims - the former to find out about sex, whilst the latter has public health and risk-reduction

aims – the reasons for the easy dismissal of street knowledges require consideration.

One potential reason could be their lack of fit with dominant medicalised discourses. Chapter Five discussed the authority of healthcare professionals on sexuality matters, in comparison with teachers and parents, highlighting a clear preference for medicalised discourses on the subject, as Ribeiro (2003) also identifies. One interpretation, therefore, is that schools limit sex education to “scientific” or “technical” explanations¹⁶², because medical discourses are understood to be the most authoritative on the subject, as they were for several participants.

It could also be that schools adhere to such discussions because they fit most closely with the public health agenda described in Chapter Three, e.g. the prevention of STDs, HIV/AIDS and teenage pregnancy, through condom use. As argued throughout, this focus on prevention is echoed in the introduction of the SPE, and reflects the role of the Department of Health in directing sex education policy (Sfair, Bittar and Lopes, 2015). These sex education priorities also fit closely with broader national projects of development and economic growth. According to a recent report ‘Brazil would have greater productivity equal to more than \$3.5 billion if teenage girls delayed pregnancy until their early twenties’ (UNFPA, 2013, p. 27), indicating the economic importance accorded to the reduction of teenage pregnancy, and highlighting it as a national priority. These discourses are also compatible with international demands regarding gender equality and controlling the spread of HIV/AIDS, as seen in the Millennium Development Goals and the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Discourses which echo these priorities may therefore be

¹⁶² See Chapter Five.

more likely to be officially sanctioned and accepted, at the expense of other types of knowledges which might not fit so closely. Discussions of the experiential, embodied or relational aspects of sex and sexuality, the subjects of much street knowledge, are perhaps seen as leading the focus of sex education away from these perceived key messages. Some authors have argued, however, that this is not the case: for example, Allen (2004) contends that a focus on pleasure within sex education can encourage young people to engage in lower-risk, pleasurable sexual activity, consistent with “safer sex” aims (p. 152). Similarly, Ingham (2005) claims that awareness of positive sexual experiences increases one’s capacity for communicating one’s wishes, and reduces the likelihood that one will be pressured into unwanted sexual activity.

Another explanation as to why the official sources of sex education explored within this study appear to discount street knowledges may be because they conflict with overall normalizing discourses, for example, regarding condom use. The dominant discourse in State-sanctioned sex education was that condom use is of the utmost importance, and so should be non-negotiable:

...it was always focused, focusing on, emphasising condoms most. Because, we always said, the pill will protect you against pregnancy, unwanted pregnancy, but not against disease. And they always talked a lot about that, it was always condoms. We went back, revised everything, and we always hit on the same subject, of condoms. Condoms. Condoms. (Ana, 19)

However, this emphasis on condoms appears to leave little or no space for what many young women already knew about condom use, from their street learning – that men don’t like condoms and so negotiating their use can be almost impossible:

...they’ve already been through that scene of having, of being in the

street and such, getting with a guy and “Come on, let’s go somewhere more intimate” and she says “Let’s go” and then they end up having sex and it’s happening and, like, and such, it’s happening and she’s like “Oh, you need to put a condom on” and he says “Oh, I don’t like condoms”... Boys say it’s more pleasurable – some guys, have said to me, they say that the act of sex is more pleasurable without a condom. (Maria, 24)

Instead of engaging with the contradictions thrown up by differing knowledges, the uncomfortable fit of street knowledges with the dominant discourses of non-negotiable condom use merely seems to prompt their omission.

Despite their perceived usefulness to young people, street knowledges were frequently questioned by the seven sex educators involved in this study¹⁶³, and none of the young women reported their inclusion within formal sex education. This could be detrimental to young people’s learning processes: the knowledges they have co-produced and accumulated in “the street” are potentially delegitimised in the process, and the potential of street knowledges to enrich school-based discussions of sex and sexuality remains unfulfilled.¹⁶⁴ This is not to argue that street knowledges are “the truth”, but rather that their potential inclusion within sex education could challenge what is dominant and open up more nuanced understandings of sexuality. The inclusion of street knowledges within sex education may well unsettle assumptions about the primacy of medical knowledges, and lead to an engagement with the social and relational aspects of sexuality, sparking debates about condom negotiation, for example:

...when you get with a guy, the first thing he asks is if you’re on the

¹⁶³ Four teachers, two nurses and a Health Department representative, as discussed in Chapter Four.

¹⁶⁴ Sex education interventions which incorporate street knowledges, such as the work of *Grãos*, may be more successful than those which do not. Comparative work would be needed to assess this.

pill. So, if we say that we're on the pill, he automatically isn't going to want to use a condom... So, I think that it needs, needs the woman to say, for example, I dunno, to lie for example, right, that she doesn't, that she isn't on the pill. For example, it's happened to me where I've been on the pill, and then I meet a guy, fine, and the guy fancies me, and I got with him, I had sex with him, he asked me if I was on the pill and I said no, when I was, because if I said I was, he would say he wasn't going to want to use a condom! (Patrizia, 24)

This section has examined the contributions of “the street” to the sexual learning processes of young *lençoense* women. It identified three street learning practices – “learning with friends”, “learning in relationships”, and “learning from gossip” – which each helped young women shape their understandings and build their knowledges of sex and sexuality, and argued that the combination of these three practices made “the street” extremely important to young *lençoense* women’s sexual learning. Despite this importance, street knowledges were regarded with some suspicion by the seven sex educators in this study and by some participants themselves, potentially due to their lack of fit within dominant medicalised and prevention-focused discourses. Whatever the explanation, these knowledges are usually excluded from discussion within State-sanctioned sex education, possibly to the detriment of young people’s sexual learning processes.

It is undeniable, however, that the majority of participants named “the street” as young people’s main source of sexual learning. From the examination, in this chapter and elsewhere, of family-led and State-sanctioned sex education, it is clear that many young *lençoenses* have no choice but to rely on “the street”, and the media, for the majority of their knowledges about sex, because the topic is ignored, minimised, avoided, and reduced to “biology” by these other sources. Whilst this remains the case, “the street” is likely to continue as one of the two default primary

sex educators for young people in Lençóis. The second, the media, is examined now.

The Media

The media plays a significant role in the lives of young Brazilians: televisions are ubiquitous, even in the poorest of households; mobile phones with internet capabilities are increasingly common-place; and internet access in general is on the rise.¹⁶⁵ Such national-level trends were noted by Fernanda:

The internet is cheap. I think that, right, you buy a computer, you can put it on visa, pay in instalments (...) I think that everyone must have a computer at home, right? Yeah, there are those *really poor* populations, who live *right in the interior*, but I think that the majority do. Look, favelas, in Rio de Janeiro, you pass by the houses, you go, if you go to 100, 99 have computers, or at least a tablet... (Fernanda, 28)

The extent of media permeation was reflected in the importance accorded the media as a resource for sexual learning. Its significance was discussed by all twenty-seven women, though many commented that its impact was largely negative.

Two main media sources were identified: television, and the internet. Television was the most frequently-discussed medium, with almost all the women commenting on its importance. Two types of programme were identified as relevant - *novelas* and those described as “educational programmes”, which were seen as lacking.

Novelas, however, were extremely common: the main TV network showed at least four different *novelas* per night, including one at 6pm, aimed expressly at teenagers.

Therefore, the analysis of television focuses on the perceived role of *novelas* in

¹⁶⁵ See Chapter Three.

sexual learning, as discussed by twenty-five of the twenty-seven participants.

Novelas

In Brazil, *novelas* have been described as ‘cultural texts of utmost importance’ (Jarrin, 2013, p. 176), and their relevance to the *lençoense* context should not be underestimated. The viewing, and subsequent discussion, of *novelas* was so ingrained in the everyday cultural life of the town, that one participant described her neighbours’ shocked reaction when she revealed that she did not watch them:

“...You don’t watch *novelas*? (shocked) Ohhhh, oh my word! Where have you come from? What *planet* are you from?” Is it not like that? I hear it all the time. “You don’t watch *novelas*? (pulls shocked face) Ohhhh!” (Fernanda, 28)

The prominent place of *novelas* in *lençoense* cultural life appears to be reflected in participant perceptions of their importance to young people’s sexual learning.

Novelas were variously described as inciting young people to sexual activity, educating youth about contraception, depicting sexual pleasure, and providing access to narratives around normally “taboo” topics, such as LGBT relationships.

The role of *novelas* in the perceived sexualisation of children and young women was a very real concern for the women in this study. Around half the participants expressed anxiety that *novela* portrayals of sexual activity were informing young people about sex from a young age, which in turn sparked their curiosity and made them want to practise what they saw on-screen:

I think it’s something that [*novelas*] shouldn’t cover, because the majority of the time, lots of kids, from age 10, they watch them, right? And so, they, without knowing what it is that they’re seeing, they end up wanting to do it, because they’ve seen it, right? But do they have the knowledge about it, no they don’t. They just saw it on TV and want

to do the same thing. (Jussiara, 18)

A handful of women in this study believed the harmful effects of exposure to sexual scenes were mitigated if they perceived additional attempts to impart useful messages about contraception or consequences. However, around one-quarter of participants felt that *novelas* do not “teach”, they just “show”: sexual relationships are shown, or at least hinted at, but without accompanying information about contraception, relationships or other related issues. The ubiquity of sex, paired with this lack of educational information, was seen as having possible negative consequences for young viewers, as described by Gina:

They show scenes of the act of sex, like, which may be awakening, even increasing people’s interest in doing it, knowing how it is. And so, due to a lack of information, they end up getting pregnant earlier, or getting a disease, or something more serious happens. (Gina, 18)

Additionally, a couple of participants highlighted the role of *novelas* in the portrayal of pleasure, stating that they clearly show that sex feels good, and implying that this focus on pleasure might encourage sexual activity:

On TV, they show that it’s good to do it, because the faces and the mouths that people do (both laugh) They’re like “Fuck! It must be good, because look at the lovely faces they’re pulling, right? All the screaming!” (Carolina, 29)

From the young women’s accounts, then, *novelas* were generally perceived to heighten the sexual knowledge of children and young people, and arouse interest in sex at young ages, without providing the necessary accompanying information regarding protection, prevention and possible consequences. Cintia explicitly described this process:

I think they already end up believing it, in the things that, that, that

television imposes, that, that you're going to meet someone, and you're going to end up, erm, having sex with that person, and that you're going to have, you'll have a... and that the sexuality of those two people will be, erm... something beautiful. And, and just that. But it can't only be beautiful, it also has to be safe, something well-explained, and something pleasurable, for both, both people. (Cintia, 22)

Here, Cintia challenged the representation of sex merely as something beautiful, without examining the risks or realities. Although she suggested that young people are duped by this simplistic presentation, her own analysis indicates a far more critical stance towards the material. Indeed, the young women in this study were often very critical about the messages they perceived about youth sex and sexuality within *novelas*. For example, a few participants felt that *novelas* give young people an overly-romantic view of sex and its consequences. Betina, in particular, challenged the image presented:

...*novelas*, they show, like, that in the end everything will work out. That in the end [the young woman]'ll manage everything, she'll get pregnant, and then she'll, she'll have – in the end she'll get her happy ending (...) [Young people] watch a lot of *novelas*, and they think that they're going to get their happy ending, and they're not going to have a happy ending! It doesn't work that way. [That girl]'s going to lose out, here and there, to be able to provide for her child. (Betina, 18)

Betina directly questioned the image of youth sexuality presented, suggesting *novelas* would be a more useful and legitimate source if they were to show “the truth” about a teenage mother’s struggles to provide for her child.

Despite such evidence of critical approaches to sexual learning processes based on *novelas*, two women felt that sex in *novelas* contributed to wider trends in television, making sex “banal”:

...what [television]'s saying is that sex is banal! (...) before, sex was only for after marriage, it was an act of conception... And nowadays it's not. Now, it's just something you do (laughing) without any commitment. And that's what they show on, on, on television. (Carolina, 29)

Carolina clearly expressed the belief that television portrays sex as meaningless or without value. Michele, however, explained what she saw as the fine line between the “normalisation” and “banalisation” of sex in *novelas*. “Normalising” sex was understood as showing it as natural, normal, and not wrong, and was seen as very important, given its lost-standing taboo. This was understood as distinct from making sex “banal”, unimportant, without meaning:

Showing people who are prejudiced that *it's natural*, that's good. But showing other people who aren't seeing the information that way, that you can do it any old way, it becomes banal, like it were any other thing, as though it weren't a display of affection, as though it were just dating for the sake of it, getting with people, getting with people, getting with people. (Michele, 19)

Michele then went on to express the need for this “banalisation” to be corrected within sex education:

[Asked who is responsible for sex education] I think it's a collaboration. The young person's interest, the family being more open, and the school and the government making a partnership and investing in this, and showing the young people that they aren't – how shall I put this? – abnormal creatures. That they feel pleasure, they feel desire, they feel attraction, but that that is natural! *Not banal! Natural...* (Michele, 19)

Although the sexualisation of young people, and the “banalisation” of sex were concerns for many participants, the sexual learning processes associated with

novelas were not always viewed as negative: around one-third of participants identified positive impacts also. For example, Maria, described her conscious engagement with the medium as a learning strategy:

**...it was my strategy to talk about the subject with my parents. We'd be watching television, a scene would come on, and then I'd bring up the subject... And, erm... a girl got pregnant at... young, because she didn't use a condom, and she'd say "Oh, if only I'd used a condom", and then I'd bring up the subject, and my dad would get involved, and my mum would get involved, and my siblings would get involved (...)
it was the only way I had to bring up the subject, talk about the subject.
(Maria, 24)**

Maria's deliberate use of *novela*-watching as a strategy for opening up meaningful communication about sex echoes the findings of Buckingham and Bragg's 2004 UK study that children often 'used the media as a pretext for discussion with peers or parents' (p. 238). This mobilisation of the *novela* as a conversation-starter also mirrors Brunsdon's 2000 examination of the soap opera, which argues that this medium provides space for the discussion of difficult and often taboo issues 'at one remove' (p. 107), giving soaps meaningful use in the lives of viewers. Although a unique account, Maria's use of the family viewing of the *novela* as a "strategy" for talking about sex is illustrative of the kinds of positive uses to which *novelas* can be put within sexual learning.

Internet

Almost all participants identified the internet as an important source of sexual learning for young people, hardly surprising given its rapid growth in Brazil over recent years, described in Chapter Three. The ever-increasing connectedness of Brazil suggests the huge potential influence of the internet, potential which was borne out in this study, with twenty-four of the twenty-seven participants regarding

the internet as important to young people's sexual learning. However, they were undecided as to whether the internet was a good or a bad thing for sexual learning: roughly half indicated the positive role it played, in filling the gaps left by other sources; facilitating engagement with intimate topics; and allowing for personal autonomy in what one chooses to look at and learn about. However, the potential risks and hazards of learning about sexuality online were also raised, including the questionable validity of information and the risk of exposure to explicit materials.

In terms of its positive contributions to young people's sexual learning, several participants described using the internet to actively seek out information pertaining to doubts they had or curiosities they were feeling, situating sexual learning on the internet as a conscious decision:

...if I have a doubt, about anything, about contraception, how it's used... Then, I'll go on the internet, search, research and such, you know? (Sara, 19)

Here, Sara described being proactive in her use of the internet: the drive to view online content about sex came from existing doubts and concerns, followed through in an active process of searching and finding. This deliberate process, and the information-seeking described by other participants, suggest that young people are actively engaged in looking for information about sex and sexuality, due to their existing concerns, doubts and curiosities, or to ongoing sexual experimentation or exploration. Below, Susana described searching the internet for information due to doubts related to her sexual activity:

I remember that I went through a period really... intensely searching the internet about pregnancy. Because I was afraid of falling pregnant. I always was. So I spent a lot of time searching lots, like, every little thing I did with someone, like, intimate things, I started thinking that I

could get pregnant... You see? Even though I knew about the process behind getting pregnant, I thought that one of his sperm would get out and manage (mimes a fish-like thing wriggling up towards her belly). (Susana, 24)

Her comment “every little thing I did with someone, like, intimate things” suggests that, for Susana at least, engagement in sexual activity prompted her exploration of sexual content online, not the other way around. This, and similar accounts, support Albury’s (2013) claim that young people engage with mediated materials around sexuality because they are already developing their sexual identities, they do not stumble upon the content and become influenced to engage in sexual activity as a result. This reflects a concern seen time and again in different guises within this research, for example, with parental concerns that home- or school-based sex education would incite young people to have sex. However, not all participants agreed that online research was prompted by existing sexual desires or curiosities – a small minority felt that online contents *did* influence young people to engage in sexual activity at young ages, reflecting the fears over sexualisation seen in the earlier section on *novelas*:

[Lots of people] put up photos of sexual acts, when they’ve got several friends on Facebook who are minors (...) if they see that very exposed, right, it’s going to awaken their curiosity and they’re going to do it! (Maria, 24)

Despite some concerns, the internet was largely deemed useful in supporting the deliberate, agentic search for information. Around one-quarter of participants identified as a major benefit the fact that what one searched for and learned about online was up to the individual, in contrast with more formal sources where the information came “top-down”. This also differed from conversations with parents,

whose traditional upbringing often created embarrassment, or friends, with whom some topics were still seen as off-limits, despite higher levels of comfort.¹⁶⁶ The internet, therefore, gives young people a degree of agency in their own learning, which seemed to be appreciated by participants:

...on the internet, you search for what *you want*. Right? On the internet, it's very easy to find your information. If a person wants to find out about diseases, by searching, you're going to find it. Now, also, if you only want to look at Playboy, which is a magazine with naked people, you'll find that too! So, it depends a lot on what you go looking for. (Michele, 19)

The value of independent sexual learning online was particularly relevant in the acquisition of knowledges about pleasure and desire, often discussed with reference to online pornography. The easy availability of free, unrestricted online pornography is a controversial topic globally, often blamed for giving young men unrealistic expectations about sex (Albury, 2014, p. 174), for promulgating gender inequality and sexual violence (ibid), and for warping young women's body image. Therefore, there have been calls, in the UK and elsewhere, to integrate discussions of the risks of pornography into sex education, as seen in the "Sexualisation of Young People" report (Papadopoulos, 2010, pp. 14-15). Although less than one-third of the young women in this study discussed pornography, their narratives chime with wider global discussions about the place of porn in an increasingly mediatised world.

A small handful of young women in this study described positive uses of pornography; namely that it can be accessed by young people curious to find out how sex really works. In other studies, pornography has been said to have potential educational value for young women in 'influenc[ing] and constitut[ing] more

¹⁶⁶ See discussion of family (pp. 251-262) and friends (pp. 265-274).

fundamental understandings of sexual practices, their limits and possibilities' (Nikunen, 2007, p. 83)¹⁶⁷, and one or two participants alluded to such processes here:

Pornographic sites, there are *lots* of young people, lots of teenagers wanted to get to know, wanting to see, wanting... and so, it's funny, right? That some, long before the experimentation itself, they have that curiosity to, to go on those sites, right? To be able to search, to find out how it is. (Priscila, 27)

However, it is important to note that the “possibilities” which pornography highlight to young consumers might not be realistic within the particular sexual culture of Lençóis, where appropriate and acceptable sexual scripts were often perceived as rather narrow. Additionally, only one young woman described using pornography herself: other participants seemed reluctant to identify themselves as users/consumers of porn, positioning it as something used by other young people.¹⁶⁸ This distancing of the self from the consumption and use of online pornography is perhaps unsurprising, given its negative connotations. Carolina, however, was extremely frank about her own experiences with pornography and how much it taught her about sex:

...my dad and my mum, they had videos, porn films, at home, hidden away. And when they went out, I'd look after the house (...) And I'd find them and watch them! And I started being interested in sex. I was around twelve or thirteen (...) But I learned all by myself. About sex. I learned by myself, from videos, erm... little magazines, which I always bought in secret (...) How to masturbate, I learned that from videos

¹⁶⁷ A small handful of participants made similar arguments regarding *novelas* and their portrayal of LGBT relationships – that they show viewers that such relationships are possible, thus reducing some of the stigma surrounding these issues.

¹⁶⁸ Participants did not discuss pornography as gendered, whereas much of the literature focuses on the consumption of porn as a largely male phenomenon (e.g. Allen, 2006).

too. (Carolina, 29)

According to Carolina's narrative, porn was instrumental in both her pursuit of knowledge about sexuality, and her sexual practice, echoing Ramlagun's 2012 work in South Africa, which found that '[p]ornography becomes the means through which the girls learn about the sexual act, the forbidden sexual excitements and pleasures' (2012, p. 35). Ramlagun (2012) found that pornography gains particular value as a source of sexual learning given the lack of focus on embodied, experiential and pleasure contents within other sources and, similarly, Albury, in her 2014 comparison of sexuality education in the UK and Australia, argues that porn is used to "fill gaps" left by other sources; for example, what genitals look like, how bodies look during "the act", and what other sex acts are like (Albury, 2014). In short, it is often argued that porn gives young women access to knowledges on pleasure, and the embodied experience of sex which are not available to them elsewhere.

This also resonates with observations made by participants about other, non-pornographic media which shows what could be termed the "practical" side of sexuality. Although they did not, or did not want to admit to, using pornography for this purpose, a handful of participants discussed using the internet to search for information about embodied aspects of sex such as sexual positions and sexual pleasure, relational aspects such as how to "handle sexual relations" with a partner and experiential aspects such as "how you feel afterwards": issues which were frequently reported as not being covered in school-based sex education.

Together with porn, portrayals in *novelas* of sex as pleasurable, and the availability of embodied, experiential and sensual knowledges on the internet might, then, provide some insight into why media sources are seen as so influential. Whilst formal sources were seen to primarily discuss the negative consequences and risks

of sex¹⁶⁹, media sources were, in the main, thought to show the positives, possibly explaining their popularity with young people. Allen (2006) comes to similar conclusions in her New Zealand study: ‘When images of real bodies and details about the logistics of sexual activity are missing in sexuality education, the power of pornographic discourse (which offers this information) is inflated’ (2006, p. 77). With this in mind, Allen argues that making moves to include issues of pleasure and desire, issues commonly sought out online and on television, within State-sanctioned sex education might make formal sex education more engaging and useful for young people (ibid, p. 70).

However, not all the women who discussed the use of pornography saw it in a wholly positive light. For example, Priscila was concerned with what she felt pornography was teaching young people about the nature of pleasure and relationships:

I think it ends up being treated in a *vulgar* way. Not in a way which is... pleasurable, about getting to know yourself, about being happy with another. It’s a physical thing, with physical, so it shows a lot of scenes of private parts, right, men’s and women’s... So, that, I think that a young person looks to a porn site to be able to get knowledge of something, but they lose the other side (...) Sex is beyond great! But it has to be treated as something important in our self-discovery as, as human beings too!.. And not as something vulgar, like, which you simply practise to satiate yourself physically. (Priscila, 27)

Priscila’s comments resonate with popular arguments about the dangers of pornography; that it shows decontextualised physical acts which fail to address the emotional complexity and “specialness” of sex (Subrahmanyam and Šmahel, 2011). It also reflects arguments seen earlier about the “banalisation”

¹⁶⁹ See Chapter Six.

of sex within local culture.

In addition to the capacity for independent sexual learning which the internet offers to young users, and its potential for learning about “intimate” issues such as pleasure, many young women in this study identified it as an appealing source for young people’s sexual learning due to its private and anonymous nature, which chimes with studies such as Cooper (1998), which identifies anonymity as key to the popularity of the internet with young people. In this and previous chapters, the role of embarrassment and taboo have been consistently highlighted as major barriers to young people accessing information about sex, impacting on the types and quality of sex education received at home, at school, and even from friends. For a handful of participants, the internet represented a way of overcoming these barriers, and gaining access to the information they needed:

They do searches, right, the best way they know how, like, you’re curious about something, type it into Google and there’s your answer. Erm, without anyone talking to you about it, without any embarrassment, right? Because, errmmm, often there’s a lot of shyness, right, face-to-face, so they prefer, they prefer to use the internet, to communicate in a way, like... that’s not face to face. (Jussiara, 18)

Jussiara highlighted the importance of the anonymity/privacy afforded by the internet, deemed a “refuge” by Luiza. In these narratives, the fact that nobody need know the issues one is researching made the internet an extremely useful source. Marcela linked this desire for privacy and anonymity to the challenges of living in a small town with a tendency to gossip:

...in almost all small towns, right, where the neighbours know each other, normally everybody knows where everybody else lives (...) [a young person] just scheduled an appointment with, with, with a

gynaecologist, for example – they *merely* scheduled and appointment with, erm, erm... and someone else is passing by (...) They pass that on. “Oh so-and-so was this, doing this” (...) Which worries the young people... The person is afraid to say “Oh”. I think that if it were a case, like, of saying “I’m going to look somewhere which doesn’t expose me *so much*”... Then there’s the internet for that!.. (Marcela 23)

This focus on anonymity as a major advantage to using the internet for sexual learning is supported by other studies (Ralph et al., 2011; Subrahmanyam and Šmahel, 2011; Johnson, 2015). This is possibly even more important for researching on those topics deemed most “intimate”, as discussed previously, but also for those considered most taboo – for example, LGBT relationships and identities, frequently deemed a “heavy” topic by women in this research – or in which it would be deemed particularly “risky” to reveal one’s interest or, conversely, one’s ignorance.

Despite the perceived advantages of using the internet to learn about sex and sexuality, several participants warned of potential pitfalls. Two participants raised concerns about the wealth of information available, that it makes it hard for a young person to find relevant information, and could leave them more confused than ever:

I believe that [young people], for example, their doubts, the questions they’d like to ask someone, they put them in and start reading, and maybe what they find, what they read, is... maybe it’s the answer to their question. And maybe not. Sometimes it confuses them even more (both laugh) And then, they’ll try another way (...) putting in one question after another to see if they can manage to satisfy their need. Manage to find the answer they really wanted. (Elena, 25)

Another concern raised by one or two participants was that young people might accidentally happen upon harmful material, in terms of explicit or violent content, or

of unreliable information:

I don't agree with [the internet] really, no. I think they should ask their parents, or whoever they live with. Because they, erm, how do I put this, the internet could give them certain information, right, that isn't reliable... Right? That's not, like, truthful, or... which might deceive them, like... stuff, erm, situations that are wrong, like violent sex, right, they could learn about that, on the internet (...) it's the, like, most hidden way, of doing harm. (Jussiara, 18)

Another young woman, Fernanda, expressed concern about the extreme sexual videos which can easily be found on the internet:¹⁷⁰

N - And when young people surf the internet about sex, what do they search for, in general?

(laughing) I think it's the, the, the videos, the filthiest videos they can find, right? (...) I don't think they're going to be looking at good things, educational things. Right?

N – Just ugly videos? (laughing)

The most explicit ones. (Fernanda, 28)

Fernanda and Jussiara's comments show the other side of the argument regarding the freedom and autonomy offered by the internet to young people in their sexual learning processes: that it can be risky as well as positive.

The suitability of the internet as a source of sexual learning, then, provoked strong reactions. The internet was seen as a "refuge" for those for whom privacy and embarrassment were key criteria in selecting suitable sources, whilst for others it was seen as unreliable, or even dangerous. What it did represent, however, was an opportunity for young people to search for the information they themselves deemed

¹⁷⁰ Most references to pornography related to online porn: only one participant mentioned videos/magazines.

important, placing the internet in a unique position, in providing a sense of autonomy to the sexual learning process.

What is, perhaps, most striking is the *potential* of the internet as a source of sexual learning. SNS, especially Facebook, are extremely popular in Lençóis, and several participants were unapologetic about their intense use of this medium:

I sit in front of the computer, there, oh, I download I don't know what, I don't know what, I don't know what, I send it and then I go straight to my *Orkut*¹⁷¹, my Facebook! I open my email and my Facebook! (both laugh) (Betina, 18)

Luiza even shared how she peruses Facebook whilst breastfeeding her baby daughter:

It's like a fever, these days (N laughs) Everyone, I, whenever I'm breastfeeding, I'm there, logged into Facebook (both laugh). (Luiza, 28)

Given this “fever” of SNS use, future research on Brazilian semi-rural youth sexuality might look at how SNS could contribute to sex education. Elsewhere, recent studies have considered how to capitalise on SNS popularity and mobilise these sites for direct educational purposes (e.g. Byron, Albury and Evers, 2013, on the use of SNS for sexual health promotion). During this research, only one attempt was recorded of using SNS in such a way: a local teacher, administrator of a popular local Facebook discussion group, published a series of posts called “Dúvidas Diárias” (Daily Doubts), which took the form of “Frequently Asked Questions” about a range of sexuality topics including anal sex, “safe sex”, female masturbation and STDs. These posts gathered a small number of “likes” and initiated reasonable levels of

¹⁷¹ Previously the most popular SNS in Brazil, recently outranked by Facebook.

conversation; however, this initiative was not mentioned in the interviews, and after a short time the posts ceased. There was not enough data on this theme to explore here, but further research into the issue could be productive.¹⁷²

Conclusions

This chapter has explored some of the “informal” sources of sex education available to *lençoense* young people, and argued that the family, “the street” and the media are all considered valuable to the town’s sex education landscape. The family was viewed as particularly well-placed to assist young people in their sexual learning processes. However, it was just as frequently acknowledged that many families were unable to overcome the barriers of generational taboo and assumptions about the power of sex education to incite sexual interest and encourage sexual activity, in order to openly discuss sexuality issues in the home.

In light of this, this chapter argued that “the street” and the media are extremely important to young *lençoenses*’ sexual learning, helping them to fill the gaps left by other sources. This was particularly true with regards to topics not included within State-sanctioned sex education, explored through the example of pleasure. As discussed in Chapter Six, the topic of pleasure and desire was considered “missing” from State-sanctioned sex education by many young women in this study. However, this absence does not mean that the young women were without recourse to learn about pleasure and desire; indeed they described rich and varied learning processes through friends, experience, and mediated materials. It can be argued, moreover, that the relative silence on pleasure and desire within State-sanctioned sex education has the potential to diminish the perceived authority of these formal

¹⁷² See Chapter Eight.

sources on sexuality matters, whilst the comparative wealth of information in the informal sphere has imbued street sources and the media with greater credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of young people, because the education provided coincides more closely with their own concerns and interests. Although other studies (e.g. Allen, 2006; Albury, 2014) have discussed this impact in the case of pornography, this study suggests that the influence of online research more broadly, as well as *novela*-viewing, “learning with friends” and “learning in relationships” is similarly inflated, given the possibilities these practices offer to young people to explore otherwise omitted topics. This is not to say, however, that these sources were entirely unproblematic: for example, concerns were raised as to the accuracy of information gained through some of these practices. Regardless of such concerns, “informal” sources contribute substantially to the sexual learning processes of young *lençoense* women, and must not, therefore, be ignored when considering how sex education might be developed in future.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

This study has explored the everyday sexual learning practices and processes of young women in a small, close-knit community in a semi-rural region of Northeast Brazil, through the experiences of twenty-seven young *lençoense* women. Doing so has offered a lens through which to examine the localised and embodied practices of the Brazilian State, the interplay between local ‘cultural grammar’ (Parker, 1999) and sexual learning processes, and the construction of norms of heterosexual femininity within the *lençoense* context. This concluding chapter draws out the key arguments made within this thesis, and explores how its findings intersect with and diverge from the existing literature. It explores the potential applications of those findings to policy and practice, and highlights the key contributions made by this study as well as assessing its limitations. It concludes by considering the avenues this study opens up for future academic research.

Key Findings

As indicated throughout this thesis, several key findings have emerged from this research. Firstly, State-sanctioned sex education in Lençóis was frequently experienced as patchy and inadequate, and criticism of provision by participants was very common. In addition, sex education was seen as a localised process, dependent on individual teachers, rather than as a coherent, national-level policy, applied consistently. Several important themes were identified by the young women as “missing” from the education they received, especially pleasure, but also relationships, emotions and LGBT experiences and identities. Despite perceived State inaction, State intervention in young people’s sexual lives in the form of school- and health-post-based sex education was viewed as legitimate; indeed, many young

women felt greater intervention was needed to avoid “negative” outcomes.

Secondly, State-sanctioned sex education provided the young women in this study with powerful messages of “risk and risk-reduction”, “responsibility” and “respectability” which impacted on the construction of norms of heterosexual femininity. This process was culturally mediated, and messages from State-sanctioned sources worked to cement, or stood in tension with, messages the young women identified as coming from “informal” sources, or from their everyday practices and experiences.

Thirdly, the young *lençoense* women often reported looking to these “informal” sources for sex education in place of, or in addition to, State-sanctioned sex education. These “informal” sources were highly valued by the young women, not least because they offered them recourse to learn about themes “missing” elsewhere, such as pleasure. From the participants’ accounts, despite the problems they perceived within “informal” sexual learning, the importance of such sources to their sexual learning processes was enhanced by the omissions they perceived in State-sanctioned sex education, and the frequent lack of sex education provided by the family.

Intersections with existing literature

These main findings situate this study in an interesting position vis-à-vis the existing literature, as it intersects in some key ways, but diverges in other interesting ways from the work which precedes it.

First and foremost, this study adds to a significant body of critical work on State-sanctioned sex education, discussed in Chapter Two, which challenges the ways this education has traditionally been conceived and implemented. It echoes the findings

of authors such as Thomson and Scott (1991) who argue that much UK school-based sex education is reductionist, and Allen (2008) who argued that sex education in the New Zealand context tends to neglect what young people feel is important. It also reflects Ingham's 2016 argument that many of the failings of UK sex education are due to its non-mandatory status. All of these issues were highlighted as relevant criticisms in the *lençoense* case. In terms of how the *lençoense* case fits with other Brazilian studies, many parallels can also be drawn: like Abtibol et al. (2015) and Pirotta et al. (2015), in São Luis and São Paulo respectively, this study found that sex education provision was inconsistent, had a largely informative slant, and focused predominantly on use of male condoms. Like participants in da Fonseca, Gomes and Teixeira's 2010 study in Rio Grande do Sul, and those in Russo and Arreguy's 2015 study in Rio de Janeiro, the young women in this study supported school-based sex education, but identified many improvements which could be made.

This study also mirrors existing work in some of the sex education topics it identifies as in need of improvement. It joins with the works of authors such as Fine (1988), Allen (2004; 2007), Ingham (2005) and Hirst (2013) in exploring the importance of the inclusion of pleasure within State-sanctioned sex education, although not all the young women in this study supported the inclusion of such discussions, or felt this was something that could realistically be achieved within State-sanctioned sex education in Lençóis. It also adds to the body of work, discussed in Chapter Two, which highlights the importance of a greater focus on gender and power within sex education. In addition, this study draws particular attention to the regulatory element of this type of education, supporting the findings of authors such as Moore (2012) and Elliot (2014), which highlight the responsabilisation techniques identified within

sex education practices.

This study also contributes to the academic conversation on non-State sources of sex education. For example, in their study in Fortaleza, Northeast Brazil, Gondim et al. (2015) highlighted school as the main source of participants' sex education, followed by "informal" sources. In this study, this was reversed, with "informal" sources taking precedence over school-based sex education, due to the perceived failings of the latter, something also found in Rodrigues et al.'s 2015 study in the Bahian interior. In addition, of the "informal" sources identified within Gondim et al.'s study, friends were seen as the most important, followed by family, with media sources coming much further down the list. In this study, however, barriers reported to family-based education meant that the young women mainly relied upon friends and the media, particularly the internet, for their sexual learning.

Much of this "informal" learning was reported as taking place in "the street", echoing the socio-cultural importance of "the street" identified by Gough and Franch (2005) in their study in Recife. However, this study builds upon Gough and Franch's work to position "the street" as of even greater importance in young people's lives, due its instrumental role in everyday sexual learning processes. In similar ways to those identified by Gough and Franch (2005), "the street" was, at times, viewed as risky by the women in this study: neighbourhood gossip acts as surveillance and regulation, and time spent in the street has repercussions for one's reputation, especially for young women. However, spending time in the street was not seen as a classificatory factor to the extent it was within Gough and Franch's (2005) study, and in works such as Lewis and Pile (1996) or Miranda-Ribeiro and Potter (2010) where young women who spent time in the street were assumed to be of questionable sexual morals. Rather, classificatory practices within *lençoense* youth sexual culture

depended more on the practices of *ficar* in which young women engaged. Although, as Justo (2005) and de Jesus (2005) argue, *ficar* seemed to be the preferred relationship type for young *lençoenses*, the practices one could legitimately incorporate within this relationship type were not clear-cut. Whereas in de Jesus' (2005) study, this modality could clearly be classified as without commitment but also without intercourse, in the *lençoense* case expectations were mixed, leaving it to young women to determine "how far" to go. This uncertainty seemed to lead to judgement of those who included penetrative sex within their practices of *ficar* as "easy".

This focus on *ficar* highlights another key way in which this study dialogues with existing works: its acknowledgment of the relevance of local sexual culture to sexualities, sexual practices and sexual relationships. The importance of gendered dynamics of heterosexual relationships, negotiations of the "tightrope" between being a "girl to shag" and "girl to marry", and understandings of sexuality as a private or a public matter, amongst other elements of sexual culture detected in this study support Parker's (1999) argument that one must consider the 'ideological constructs and the value systems' (p. 255) that shape the sexual universe in a given context. He states that these social "rules" are often contradictory (ibid.) and this was certainly the case within the *lençoense* context at times, such as in the local cultural preference for *ficar*, but the enduring pressure for young women to have few relationships, so that they remain "girls to marry".

In terms of the local youth sexual culture of this small town, this study could be interpreted as a challenge to much of the existing literature on rural sexualities. As seen in Chapter Two, rural sexualities are often assumed to be based on traditional approaches to masculine and feminine roles, intense heteronormativity,

conservatism, family control, and structures of shame, honour and respectability. However, the young women in this study, despite their geographical isolation and limited financial means, often gave accounts and shared perspectives that were far from “traditional”, prompting consideration of their connectedness to global youth processes (through their use of SNS, their exposure to tourism and their consumption of *novelas*, for example) as well as their isolation. The relative lack of research on (semi-)rural sexualities in the Brazilian context means that these findings make a useful contribution to this small field.

Finally, one key convergence between this study and the existing literature is in the way the State is understood. Throughout this thesis, it has been argued that the State in Lençóis is localised, everyday, powerful in the margins, and embodied in State actors. It has also been apparent within the young women’s accounts the different ways the Brazilian State was viewed and understood: any idea of a rigid, unified State was absent, in this study at least. This supports Cooper’s (1993; 1995; 2002) understandings of the State as a complex of apparatuses with, at times, very different methods of operations, and different identities: what Bell describes as Cooper’s conceptualisation of the State as ‘shape-shifter’ (1997, p. 458).

Just as important as how the findings from this study intersect with and diverge from the conclusions made by other scholars are the areas which *did not* appear as central to this study, which one might have expected to see, given the existing literature. Throughout the study, I have indicated that, prior to fieldwork, I had anticipated “motherhood” appearing as a salient theme within young women’s accounts of their sexual learning, and “religion” as an authoritative source of norms and values of sexual behaviour.

“Motherhood” is often understood to be culturally venerated across Latin America

and frequently assumed to be key to Brazilian femininity, as seen in the *marianista* model, discussed in Chapter Two. In addition, some Latin American studies have highlighted the increase in social status afforded to a young woman entering motherhood and the likelihood, therefore, that motherhood will be something to which young women aspire. For example, in her study in a *favela* in Belo Horizonte, Southeast Brazil, Santos (2012) found that ‘motherhood can present itself as a milestone and transition into womanhood’ (p. 656), even going so far as to call it ‘a desirable event’ (ibid.). In light of such works, it seemed likely that motherhood, and aspirations towards motherhood, would appear as important themes within this study also. As it was, motherhood emerged as only a minor theme: those young women who were mothers talked about how much they loved their children but did not describe having been driven by a desire to become mothers, whilst those participants without children did not report feeling pressure or expectation to have children in order to achieve adulthood. Possibly if more participants had been mothers, motherhood would have been a more significant theme, but the young women in this study seemed to have different priorities to those suggested by the traditional focus on the importance of motherhood to young Latin American women – for example, work, study, relationships, personal freedom, and having a good time. Similarly, received knowledge about Brazil would suggest that “religion” would likely be a prominent theme within a study on sexuality, and that religious institutions would hold significant authority over young people’s sexual lives and practices. According to a *BBC News* article citing World Christian Database figures, Brazil has the largest Catholic population of any country in the world, which it puts at 150 million, of a total population of around 208 million (cited in *BBC News*, 2013). Catholic views on sexuality are well known, particularly with regards to pre-marital

sex, abortion, and contraception, and the reported size of the Brazilian Catholic population would seem to suggest the considerable influence of such views. However, Brazil has ‘experienced tremendous changes in its religious landscape’ (Verona, 2011, p. 189), with the decline in influence of Catholicism¹⁷³, the growth of various Protestantisms, and the rise in those identifying as non-religious. In parts of the country, such as the Northeast, this picture also includes the practice of Afro-Brazilian spiritist religions, as discussed in Chapter Two. Whilst it is not clear if religion is waning in its influence overall, or if it is the move to religious hybridity which makes the issues less clear-cut, this growing complexity could contribute to explaining why almost none of the participants in this study described religion as authoritative in their sexual learning processes. However, this could also be due to the focus and approach taken within this study: more tailored questions on the subject, or a different recruitment strategy might have resulted in the emergence of different attitudes to religion within the sample.

The fact that these two topics, “motherhood” and “religion”, did not appear often in participant accounts could potentially be linked to Lençóis’ status as a semi-rural town with high levels of youth connectedness, as discussed in Chapter Three. Rural communities have traditionally been conceived of as more religious than their urban counterparts¹⁷⁴, and as placing great emphasis on the authority of religious leaders and faith structures/systems. They have also been viewed as privileging motherhood as a way for young women to acquire status, respect, and adulthood in contexts where other options for doing so are limited: indeed Little and Panelli (2003) argue that rural women are generally ‘seen first as mothers’ (p. 284). In contrast,

¹⁷³ Self-identifying as Catholic does not necessarily mean that one practises the faith or adheres to its regulations.

¹⁷⁴ See Jones and Heley (2016) for an exploration of rural communities in England as post-pastoral.

globalisation and modernisation processes have commonly included secularisation, and a declining role for religion within social and public life. In addition, consumerism and exhortations to “modern” family life have positioned smaller families and delayed maternity as desirable, with the rise of what Thornton (2005) calls ‘developmental idealism’ – the association of low fertility and small family sizes with “progress”, socioeconomic benefit and “modernity”. The place of *lençoense* youth as semi-rural and semi-isolated, whilst simultaneously highly-connected to global youth culture through the intensity of their internet access, the tourist flows within their town, and the high degree of media permeation into their everyday lives, might explain the lack of emphasis on traditional structures of authority and status within their sexual lives. It could be argued that Lençóis, though semi-rural, is far from a “traditional” community, particularly within its younger generations. This tension between tradition and modernity and its impact on sexual learning is discussed further later in this chapter.

A further area one might have expected to feature more prominently within this thesis is “race”. It could be argued that it is impossible to study Brazil without a considerable focus on “race” and racial analysis, given the complex racial history of the country, but also given the denial of racism which has long masked vast social inequality and discrimination behind the illusion of the “racial democracy”¹⁷⁵. In addition, several sex education scholars have indicated the role of “race” and ethnicity in its reception and delivery (e.g. Fields, 2005, on the positioning of African American girls as those most likely to experience teenage pregnancy, promiscuity and disease; García, 2009, on the positioning of Latina girls as oversexed and over-reproductive in US sex education). The fact, then, that “race” did not appear as a

¹⁷⁵ See Chapter Three.

major theme within this study, possibly indicates a departure from received knowledge about both Brazil, and sex education more generally.

“Race” was present within this study, but not as linked to reputation as highlighted in Rebhun (2004), discussed in Chapter Two, nor as linked to hypersexuality, as described in Chapters Two and Three. “Race” was mostly an issue in terms of the racial distance between myself and the participants, and also between participants and their sex educators. It is entirely possible that my own privilege and positionality¹⁷⁶ has prevented me from identifying racialised undercurrents within my data, or that a different researcher from a different racial background might have co-produced different data with the same participants, data with a more intense focus on “race”. This is especially true given that, due to the often-sensitive nature of the subject in the Brazilian context, I did not ask direct questions about “race”, instead waiting for the women to discuss the topic if they felt it was important. However, the fact remains that the accounts that I was given by the young women in this study did not prioritise “race”, which perhaps indicates that they saw other structures, such as gender, as more relevant to their everyday sexual learning processes and practices. In order to analyse more closely the role of “race”, a more racially-diverse sample would be helpful, possibly in a comparative study across regions, including young Brazilian women identifying as “white” or “indigenous”, as well as “black” or “brown¹⁷⁷”, and with targeted questions about racialised experiences of sex education.

¹⁷⁶ Attention was paid to race in my critical reflection on my positionality as a white researcher conducting research in a predominantly Afro-Brazilian town.

¹⁷⁷ *Parda* is a common colour term, selected by many racially-mixed Brazilians on the decennial census.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Beyond seeing how the findings from this study intersect with existing work in the field, my feminist motivations¹⁷⁸ and my personal commitment to the place and the topic¹⁷⁹ have driven me to consider how this research could be applied in a more practical way, to help achieve the changes desired by the young women in this study. There are, perhaps, two avenues for this application – policy and practice. However, potential changes made in either or both of these avenues rest on one major factor – sustained and serious consultation with young people as to the kind of sex education they need and desire. As argued by Allen (2008), continuing to ignore young people’s sex education demands will only reduce the effectiveness of sex education interventions.

Although this is a small-scale study, and any policy recommendations would require far greater investigation, I am able to make some tentative policy suggestions based on my findings. Firstly, and most importantly, the young women in this study made it clear that they wish sex education to form a mandatory part of the Brazilian National Curriculum. Although the flexibility inherent in the PCNs was consciously designed to allow for the holistic and progressive coverage of the topic, the vagueness in the guidelines, also identified by authors such as da Silva (2015), has instead allowed for the topic to be side-lined in favour of other compulsory subjects. Recent attempts to make the subject mandatory¹⁸⁰ indicate that the debate over sex education implementation is still very much relevant, and the findings presented in this thesis would support the argument for making the subject compulsory.

¹⁷⁸ Discussed in Chapter Four.

¹⁷⁹ See Chapter One.

¹⁸⁰ A campaign for mandatory sex education in the Brazilian curriculum was rejected by the Education and Culture Commission in 2011.

However, the young women's narratives make clear that it is not enough to simply ensure that "sex education" is covered, rather that greater impetus is needed to encourage the coverage of what participants described as "heavy" topics – issues like pleasure, relationships, feelings and emotions and LGBT identities and experiences. The PCNs firmly recommend the coverage of such topics, but leave when and how they should be addressed to the discretion of individual schools and teachers, without truly acknowledging the barriers faced – which include parental opposition, time constraints due to other curricular demands and the personal embarrassment of staff. From this research, I would suggest not only that sex education be made mandatory, but that this include compulsory coverage of these so-called "heavy" topics, with the necessary support provided: e.g. greater dialogue with parents to reassure them about the benefits of sex education, regular timetabling of sex education to prevent it being overlooked, and greater, more sensitive staff training (see below).

In addition, the findings of this research would suggest that greater attention ought to be paid to local sexual culture and gender norms, which impact both on the reception of sex education in the classroom (see Measor, 2004) and on its application by young people in their everyday lives. From the young women's accounts, I would suggest that greater attention be paid within sex education to the street knowledges young people acquire through their day-to-day gendered and sexualised interactions, as it is possible that these knowledges can open up discussion which would be beneficial to young people.

Inherent in all these policy suggestions is the need for greater access to training and resources for teachers, better-equipping them to provide suitable and useful coverage of sex education subjects. Although this criterion is frequently

acknowledged within the PCNs, the mechanisms for its provision are far less clearly-defined, often resulting in an ill-prepared, under-resourced workforce with considerable concerns about addressing the topic (see also Altmann, 2006). Within the context of the Brazilian public education system, which is often characterised by poor teacher pay, challenging school environments and lack of access to even the most basic resources, it is easy to see why sex education training and materials may not be given priority; however they are necessary if State-sanctioned sex education is to be responsive to young people's needs.

It is not only in policy that changes were seen as necessary by the young women in this study. After all, the policies already in place in Brazil have been described as 'superb on paper' (Mountian, 2014, p. 8), but as falling down in their implementation. Therefore, in a similarly tentative manner, I make the following suggestions for sex education practitioners.

Firstly, as indicated above, the accounts of some of the young women in this research would point to the importance of including street and other "informal" knowledges within State-sanctioned sex education. The inclusion of these knowledges alongside "official" knowledges might help young people to see how differing knowledges fit and work with their everyday realities, and help sex educators to find ways to tailor State-sanctioned sex education more closely to young people's needs and experiences. It could potentially help to open up a more trusting, communicative space where doubts and concerns can be raised and addressed.

In addition, and perhaps most importantly, given the strength of feeling expressed by participants, sex educators must prioritise the building of trust and confidence with young people. Confidentiality should be maintained at all times within the healthcare

professional-young person relationship, and teachers should endeavour to create a safe space, where the doubts, concerns and experiences shared in the classroom are protected. Distrust of sex educators was described as a major barrier to successful sex education by the young women in this study, and working to rectify this would only enhance *lençoense* sex education provision.

Finally, given the importance accorded to the family as the ideal source of sex education, I would suggest that sex education practitioners work towards enhanced collaboration with parents. Sex education initiatives which included parents, teachers and young people would help to overcome the obstacle posed by parental opposition, and would also harness the authority perceived to be held by the family in these matters, allowing for sex education which would potentially be deemed legitimate by young people on moral and behavioural matters, not purely on those pertaining to health and prevention.

The Case of Grãos

In terms of models of better sex education practice, it is important to briefly describe the work of local NGO *Grãos de Luz e Griô*. This organisation's work on sex and sexuality already incorporates some of the elements suggested above, and could therefore act as a starting point for improvement across the whole town. Analysis of this alternative sex education programme has not been centrally positioned within this thesis, because only one of the twenty-seven young women interviewed for this research had taken part¹⁸¹, making it a niche sex education experience, not directly relevant to the overall study. However, I feel it is important to discuss the programme here, as it represents an alternative sex education model already being

¹⁸¹ Four full-time and one part-time *Grãos* staff members also took part in the research, however the "Love, Sex and Relationships" course had not been part of the training they received.

implemented in Lençóis.

During the research period, *Grãos* ran a course on its youth programme¹⁸² called “*Amor, sexo e relacionamento*” (Love, sex and relationships). Once a week, a psychologist facilitated group conversations on a range of topics linked to sexuality, followed by *Biodança*¹⁸³. In the second weekly session, a second facilitator showed a film on the topic, and facilitated its discussion. These sessions ran for several weeks, and I attended the majority of sessions, participating in all aspects. A group of 25–30 young people, divided roughly equally in terms of gender, participated in the programme. The majority were aged 16 or 17, although a handful were over 18, including one young woman who participated in this research.

Grãos sex education sessions were unlike others encountered during the research. The two facilitators were extremely relaxed about approaching the topic of sex and relationships with the young people: the male facilitator, in particular, was very confident with their slang and pop culture references, allowing him to “speak their language”. The facilitators did not shy away from the discussion of pleasure: when asked about the most pleasurable sexual position, the female facilitator answered that what may be most pleasurable is a focus on the body as a whole, the different erogenous zones, rather than just the genitals. She encouraged the group to try for open dialogue with their sexual partners about what they do and do not find pleasurable. During another session, she also highlighted how enjoyable oral sex

¹⁸² This training programme helps young people gain skills in teaching, youth work and outreach through participation in music, drama and graphic design groups. As well as giving them a monthly income to contribute to their families – reducing pressures for them to work – the programme also provides young people educational sessions, based around citizenship values, to expand their knowledge and well-being.

¹⁸³ *Biodanza* or ‘the dance of life’ encourages freedom of movement and bodily expression without restriction. The idea was to help the young people become more comfortable with their own bodies, and with non-sexual, physical contact with others, making them more skilled in self-expression and relationship-building, as well as developing understanding of their bodies as sexual (International Biocentric Foundation, 2008).

can be. This move away from the ‘coital imperative’ seen in State-sanctioned sex education was unique in my observations, and the facilitators’ attitudes and approachability helped to facilitate the discussion of topics which had, elsewhere, been understood as too challenging or “heavy” for sex education.

The course also gave the young people the opportunity to direct the conversation by asking them all to write down, anonymously, issues of concern; which then became the subjects of future sessions. As a result, the group discussed virginity loss, jealousy in relationships, and *ficar* and *namorar*, amongst other topics. For example, the group watched a film about a young woman who lied about having lost her virginity because all her friends were sexually experienced. The discussion which occurred afterwards examined gendered differences in the virginity loss experience, the “right age” to lose one’s virginity, and the local norm of older men sleeping with younger girls. Throughout the course, the group was encouraged to think about the role of the media in constructions of “appropriate” sexual behaviour, as well as the growing place of online pornography. The importance of condom use was still stressed, but it was integrated into conversations about making condom use part of the sensual practices of a sexual relationship. The limited and biological nature of school-based sex education was one of the main criticisms from the young women in this study, and the case of *Grãos* suggests that young people, given the opportunity (such as through anonymous requests), ask for far more varied discussion, showing a desire to know more about issues of embodiment, experience and relationships. There appeared to be a strong desire to move away from the biological side of sex education – when asked if they wanted to invite a local nurse to give a session on STDs, the group were adamant that they had “heard all that before” and so declined. The *Grãos* programme suggests that a broader range of topics *can* be covered, if

there is the institutional will to do so, as was clearly present here.

Despite these clear successes, *Grãos* sex education was not immune to limitations. For example, there were moments when the conversation was extremely heteronormative, even homophobic, despite a half-session devoted to tolerance and acceptance of different sexualities. Even this act of confining discussion of LGBT issues to a dedicated session, separate from the broader programme, could be interpreted as normalising and privileging heterosexuality. The female facilitator was often quite gender normative in her discussions, suggesting at one point that female virginity is a “little flame” which should be protected, and at another comparing men to “dogs” who make babies and then take no responsibility for them. Finally, there were times when she seemed hazy on the biological and contraceptive details, for example she advised younger girls against taking the pill, instead encouraging the use of “*tabelinha*”. Despite these considerations, it was important to discuss this source of sex education because it contains some elements which could form a model for school-based practice in future.

Contributions

From the discussions throughout this chapter, then, it is clear that this study has made some considerable contributions to understandings of everyday sexual learning in Northeast Brazil.

The main contributions are empirical. The review of the literature, carried out in Chapter Two, highlighted some significant gaps in the empirical work on the topic, especially within the Brazilian context. The originality of this study, then, comes from its contribution of new empirical work to the existing body of knowledge, at various levels. It represents a small-scale, qualitative study on sex education in a small-town

in Northeast Brazil, a largely underresearched region, and it explores young people's perspectives on the education received, rather than measuring its "effectiveness" or "outcomes" as many studies have tended to do (e.g. Abtibol et al., 2015; Gondim et al., 2015; Pirota et al., 2015). It is also rare in its focus on a semi-rural, interior area, as the existing body of work has tended to centre on the lives and experiences of urban, coastal-dwelling young people. In addition, my use of both Anglophone and Lusophone literature to inform the study helps to bridge gaps in the dialogue between different publishing cultures.

Particularly important is this study's contribution to scholarship on rural sexualities in Brazil. As previously stated, this field is relatively small, with most works focusing on urban areas. By not doing so, this study has brought the experiences of women in a previously neglected region into view. It has also contributed to extending the work of the GRAVAD study (see pp. 43-44) on youth sexual culture into a semi-rural sphere. Additionally, it has begun to challenge some of the traditional conceptualisations of rural sexualities: that they are stable, conventional, highly traditional and strictly regulated. Although there are elements of these characteristics in the experiences of sexuality described by the young women in this study, there are also elements which challenge such understandings, and which take into consideration both the young women's connectedness to global youth sexual culture and the kinds of social changes highlighted by Mannarelli (2008) and Oliart (2008) in the Peruvian context.

A major contribution of this work is that it offers a basis for future research, providing an exploratory study in an underresearched field and region. Although there were similarities between Lençóis and other close-knit, semi-rural locations, the study needed to take an open approach, given the lack of literature in this area. This study

has made a significant contribution, therefore, by highlighting issues for future research, as discussed later in this chapter.

Alongside its important empirical contributions, this thesis also offers some theoretical contributions. It is somewhat unusual in prioritising culture in the exploration of sex education, with particular reference to the norms, construction and influence of heterosexual femininity in this specific context. This study has highlighted throughout the overarching influence of culture to the delivery of sex education through issues such as taboo, to the reception of sexual learning through issues such as debate over the inclusion of topics such as pleasure and to the application of sexual knowledges, as seen in issues such as condom negotiation in heterosexual relationships. In this way, it echoes the work done by Parker (1999) in his attempts to understand the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Brazil socio-culturally, but applies this sensitivity to the ‘cultural grammar’ (ibid.) of a place to the study of sex education and sexual learning.

In addition, the understanding of the State as active and productive at the community, individual and everyday levels, embraced throughout this work, could be seen as more productive than the common understandings of the State in Latin America as “weakened” or “absent” at the periphery. Certainly, it has been far more useful in the study of the everyday, localised practices of the State within the sexualities of young *lençoense* women – something a neoliberal conception of State retrenchment would likely conceal.

However, perhaps the most significant theoretical contribution of this thesis is in its attempt to rectify the compartmentalised study of youth sexuality (Oliart, 2008). It does this by exploring the provision and reception of both State-sanctioned and “informal” sex education, the impact of local sexual culture, particularly youth sexual

culture, the interconnectedness of sexual learning and the construction and maintenance of heterosexual femininity and the everyday practices of the State at its various levels with regards to youth sexuality – including the levels of the community and the individual State actor. By considering the experiences of the twenty-seven women in this study in a way which “joined up” these separate spheres, a far more nuanced understanding has been reached.

Limitations

Whilst this thesis makes significant contributions to knowledge around sex education and sexual learning, sexual culture, gender, sexuality and sexual practices, and State practices in a small-town, interior Brazilian context, there are some important limitations to this work which must be acknowledged. Firstly, due in part to the recruitment challenges I describe in Chapter Four, this is a small study, and any conclusions drawn relate only to a very specific population at a given historical moment. Although this does not invalidate these conclusions, it is vital to recognise that Brazil is a large, diverse and complex country, and the experiences and realities of young Brazilian women are similarly varied. Thus, claims made here are made with this complexity in mind.

Secondly, the taboo nature of the topic at hand, discussed throughout, may have impacted on the kinds of responses given by the young women in the interviews – social norms about respectability and propriety could have led to accounts which had been “cleaned-up” for my benefit. Similarly, because sampling was based on voluntary participation, it is likely that many women with different experiences did not come forward to take part in the research, giving me a very specific snapshot of the sex education experiences of *lençoense* young women. For example, all the young

women in the sample had finished school, whilst those women with less educational capital were not represented within this study.

Finally, the methodology of this research asked young women to reflect back on sex education experiences which occurred in their past. For some, this was the recent past, but for others, their sex education was received more than a decade ago. The “unreliability” of memory could be seen by some as a limitation in this study, however as I was interested in the meaning ascribed to these experiences by the young women, and how they perceived these experiences as useful or not within their day-to-day lives, the “accuracy” of their recall was less of a concern. Attempts were also made to contextualise their accounts with observations of sex education sessions and gathering of relevant materials and statistics, however only limited observations were possible, and statistics and demographic data proved extremely challenging to obtain.

Future Research Directions

Throughout the body of this thesis, I have attempted to highlight interesting aspects which emerged during the exploration of the main research questions: especially fruitful given the exploratory nature of the study. Although these topics were not directly relevant to this study, they represent interesting possible avenues for future research in the field.

One example is the role of the internet in sex education, and particularly the role of SNS. Within discussions of the internet in Chapter Seven, the focus was on young people’s consumption of media materials, which is logical given the limited potential for youth production within traditional media. However, with the growth of SNS, especially Facebook, young people are no longer simply consumers of media, they

are also producers. On a more-than-daily basis, young people produce and create media contents which reflect their own experiences, desires, identities and realities. They can also represent themselves as they see fit, rather than relying on traditional media representations, which participants in this study frequently described as unrealistic. The growing global importance of SNS means an exploration of its potential contributions to sex education may well be warranted, and the extreme popularity of SNS, especially Facebook, in Lençóis, makes it a particularly relevant field of enquiry. This potential was hinted at in Chapter Seven of this thesis, but requires in-depth research if it is to be developed further.

Similarly, the relationship between tradition and modernity and the tensions between this relationship and the kinds of sex education which are possible in the home, were also touched upon by one or two participants, in Chapter Seven. Earlier discussions of “religion” and “motherhood” in this chapter also highlighted the tensions between tradition and modernity in the *lençoense* context. Future research could consider a deeper focus on families, and look at the changes in parental approaches to sex education, perhaps longitudinally. A complementary approach to such a theme would be to look at it spatially, and explore sex education attitudes and practices in other small towns, compared with more rural areas.

Another interesting way in which this research could be developed would be to include young men. Many sex education scholars have argued that young men and young women experience sex education very differently (e.g. Measor, 2004; Allen, 2006), and this was also hinted at by the young women in this study. In addition, Gutmann (1997) argues that one of the most productive ways of analysing gender issues is to include the voices of both men and women (p. 841). Given the challenges of confidentiality and trust in this small-town, close-knit environment, it

was felt when planning this study that attempting to include men would result in still fewer women feeling confident about participating, meaning a study of both men's and women's sexual learning experiences was untenable. Therefore, a second study, carried out with young *lençoense* men, would contribute to the wider understanding of this issue.

Other areas which emerged within this exploratory study and would require further investigation include the issue of abortion, which was viewed as morally wrong, despite the rarity with which participants self-identified as religious; and differing experiences of sexual learning for different femininities. This study has focused on the impact of sexual learning on norms of heterosexual femininity, but it would be interesting to explore the sexual learning experiences of those seen to deviate from those norms, such as those viewed as outsiders to the predominant social groupings, or those viewed as "sexually promiscuous". Also relevant for further study would be the experiences of lesbian, bisexual, and trans women, in order to take into consideration non-heterosexual experiences of femininity.

This chapter has attempted to draw together the main arguments posed in this thesis, and to highlight the key findings and contributions made. Having done so, I have tried to situate these findings alongside possible applications in sex education policy and practice, but also to suggest ways in which this research could be built upon by future projects. This thesis has contributed new and original empirical work which both dialogues with and challenges existing literature, which casts new light on received knowledge about sexual learning in Brazil, and which opens new doors to further research in the field.

Appendices

Appendix A - Table of basic participant information

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Appendix A - Table of basic participant information

NAME	AGE	MARITAL STATUS	NUMBER OF CHILDREN	TEENAGE MOTHER?	AGE AT FIRST CHILD	MOTHER A TEENAGE MOTHER?
ANA	19	S	0	No	-	?
DANIELA	19	S	1	Yes	18	?
JULIETTE	19	R	0	No	-	Yes
SUSANA	24	S	0	No	-	?
JANAINA	21	R	0	No	-	No
JUSSIARA	18	S	0	No	-	Yes
REBECA	18	S	0	No	-	Yes
ERINA	24	R	1	Yes	18	Yes
CAROLINA	29	M	3	Yes	17	Yes
ELENA	25	S	0	No	-	No
LUIZA	28	M	2	Yes	19	No
FERNANDA	28	R	1	Yes	19	Yes
GABRIELA	18	R	0	No	-	No
CLAUDIA	18	R	0	No	-	No
CINTIA	22	R	0	No	-	?
MARIA	24	R	0	No	-	Yes
ALICE	28	M	1	Yes	16	Yes
JOANA	23	R	0	No	-	?
PATRIZIA	24	R	0	No	-	Yes
BETINA	18	S	0	No	-	No
DAIANE	19	S	0	No	-	?
GINA	18	R	0	No	-	?
RAYSSA	24	S	0	No	-	Yes
MICHELE	19	R	0	No	-	Yes
SARA	19	R	0	No	-	No
PRISCILA	27	S	0	No	-	No
MARCELA	23	S	0	No	-	Yes

Appendix B – Interview Guide taken into the field (in English)

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Questions</u>	<u>Prompts</u>
<p>Theme One: Where did you learn about sex?</p>	<p>Q1) Where do you think most people learn about sex and sexuality?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents? • Siblings? • The Church? • Schools? • Doctors? • The government? • Books/magazines • TV/internet
	<p>Q2) Who do people listen to most?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why? • About what things?
	<p>Q3) Who, in this society, has the most important voice on sex and sexuality?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On all aspects? • On sexual health? • On morality? • On women’s behaviour?
	<p>Q4) And for you, in your life, which has been the main source of information and guidance?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The next most important source? (if they talk lots about only one)
	<p>Q5) Where did you first learn about sex?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify what the participant means when they say “sex”

	Q6) What were the first things you learned about?	
	Q7) Could you tell me a little about how you learned more about sex?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you learn about sex from your friends? • Did you learn about sex from your family? • Did a boyfriend teach you about sex? • Did you learn about sex from the media/internet? • Did you learn from a combination of these? • Did sex education at school come before or after other ways?
	Q8) In your opinion, which was the best way to learn about sex and why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is this the best way to learn about all aspects?: • About sexual health? • About relationships? • About beliefs and morals? • About practices and behaviours? • Did the all the sources give you the same messages, or did what you learned contradict each other?
	Q9) How important was school sex education as a source of information?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was the information you got from other sources better or worse than school sex education?

Theme Two: What was sex education like?	Q1) Can you tell me a bit more about the sex education you received in school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How old were you when you had the lessons? • Do you think this was about the right age? Too early/too late? • When would have been the best time to get the information? • Was it about the right age for boys as well as girls? • Did you have one class, or more than one? • Do you think this was the right amount? • What sort of lesson was it in? Biology, PHSE, Guidance etc
	Q2) Who delivered the sex education lessons?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was it your usual teacher or a visitor?
	Q3) What did you think of this?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would you have preferred a visitor/your usual teacher?
	Q4) Was this person male or female?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did this matter? • Would you have preferred a man/woman? • Why/why not?
	Q5) How would you say they did?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think they did they do a good or a bad job? Why? • Did they deliver the information in a clear way? • What could they have done better?

	Q6) Were the lessons mixed or single gender?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you think about this? Why? • What did you learn together? • What did you learn apart?
	Q7) Would you prefer a mixed/single gender class? Why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would you prefer a mixed/single gender class for certain aspects of sex education?
	Q8) What did they cover in the lessons?	
	Q9) Did they discuss puberty/biology/reproduction in the lessons?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did they say? • What did you think about what was said?
	Q10) Did they discuss STIs, HIV, and AIDS?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did they discuss the different types of STIs? • Did they discuss how to prevent them?
	Q11) Was there any focus on relationships in the lessons?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If so, what topics were covered? • Did they mention consent? • Did they talk about power? • Did they talk about different kinds of relationships? • Was homosexuality discussed? • If not, should these things have been included? • Is school the best place to learn about relationships?

	<p>Q12) Did your school sex education teacher talk about pleasure and desire?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If so, what did they say about these topics? • Did they talk about men’s desire? • Did they talk about women’s desire? • Did they teach you that pleasure is important? If so, for whom? • Did this match your own opinions about pleasure and desire? • If not, do you think it should have been? • Do you think it’s an important topic? • Is school the best place to discuss it? • If not, why not?
	<p>Q13) Did your school sex education teach you about pregnancy?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If so, what did they say about pregnancy? • Did they talk about teenage pregnancy? • Did they talk about single motherhood? • If so what did they say? • Is school the best place to learn about issues surrounding pregnancy?
	<p>Q14) Did your school sex education teach you about motherhood?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If so, what did they teach you? • Did they talk to you about teenage mothers? • If so, what did they say? • Did you agree with this or not? • Did what you learned match your own opinions about being a mother, now or in the future?

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did anybody discuss with you the possibility of <u>not</u> being a mother? • What about the possibility of <u>not</u> getting married?
	Q15) What did school sex education teach you about being a woman?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has anybody outside this context taught you about what it means to be a woman? • Did these two sources agree or disagree? • Were women's rights discussed in class?
	Q16) In the education you received, did they suggest that you should only have sex in a certain type of relationship?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If so, what type of relationship? • Did you agree? • Did they talk about casual sex? • In what terms? • What are your thoughts about this? • Did they talk about staying single? • What did you think about this? • Did they mention other types of relationships? • What did they say? • Did you agree?
	Q17) After your sex education classes did you talk to anyone about the lessons?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If not, why not? If so, who? Parents, friends, boyfriend • What did you tell them about the classes? • Did you leave anything out? If so, what? • What was their opinion?

Theme Three: Your experiences	Q1) How would you define “successful” sex education?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would the government define it in the same way? • Would teachers define it in the same way?
	Q2) What did you think of the sex education you received in school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does it compare to your idea of “successful” sex education?
	Q3) Did you find it useful?	
	Q4) What aspects were the most useful?	
	Q5) Were there any aspects which were not useful?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why not?
	Q6) How could it have been improved?	
	Q7) What else should have been included?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feminism • Consent • Pleasure • Power • Why do you think they should be included? • Why do you think they were not included?

	Q8) Do you think you got all the information you needed at the time?	
	Q9) Did you get all the information you wanted?	
	Q10) Do you think sex education lesson is designed to teach young people the things they want and need to know?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If not, what do you think it is designed to do?
	Q11) How did you feel during the lesson?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you feel comfortable hearing about these topics? • Did you feel embarrassed at any point? Why was that? • Did you feel you could ask questions? Why/why not?
	Q12) How did the other students react to the lesson?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did everybody take it seriously? • Or were people making jokes? • Did everyone ask questions and offer responses?
	Q13) How do you think the teacher felt during the lesson?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comfortable/uncomfortable? • Did this affect the lesson? •

	Q14) Do you think that school sex education improved your knowledge about sex?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what ways has your knowledge improved? • Which areas do you now know more about?
	Q15) Do you think that school sex education improved your knowledge about sexual health?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what ways has your knowledge improved? • Which areas do you now know more about?
	Q16) Do you think that school sex education improved your knowledge about reproduction?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what ways has your knowledge improved? • Which areas do you now know more about?
	Q17) Did your sex education lessons change your attitude to sex in any way?	
	Q18) Did your sex education lessons change your attitude to relationships in any way?	
	Q19) Has school sex education changed your approach to pleasure?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your approach to your own pleasure? • Your approach to a partner's pleasure? (Current or future)
	Q20) Do you think it is the responsibility of schools to educate young people about sex?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If so, why? • If not, whose responsibility is it?

	Q21) What do you think the government getting involved in people's personal lives?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For example, since I've been in Brazil, I've noticed lots of posters/information about HIV and AIDS, encouraging people to use condoms. What do you think of this kind of government intervention?
	Q22) What impact do you think this kind of government involvement has?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does it make any difference at all?
Theme Four: How could it be improved?	Q1) Do you think schools need to change the way sex education is given in any way?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is taught • The way it's taught • The amount • The timing
	Q2) Was there anything you would have liked to be included that wasn't?	
	Q3) If you could change school sex education in any way, what would you like to see done differently?	
	Q4) If you could design your perfect sex education programme, what would it be like?	
	Q5) Is there anything else you would like to add?	

Appendix C – Participant Information Sheet (in English)



Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences
School of Geography, Politics and Sociology

Information Sheet

Young women's experiences of sex education in Lençóis

My name is Natalie, and I am conducting research for a PhD based at Newcastle University, UK

Mobile phone number:

Email address:

What is the research about?

The aim of this project is to examine young women's opinions about the education they received in school about sexuality, what they learned from it, and how it might be improved in the future.

How can I take part?

- This will involve a one-on-one interview at a time and place agreed with you. The interview will last between one and two hours. There will be no financial incentive for participation in the research, however snacks and drinks will be provided
- If you are interested in taking part, please contact me by text or phone on (insert phone number), or email me at the address listed above. I will be happy to answer any questions you might have about the project, and arrange a time to conduct the interview
- You may withdraw from the study at any time.
- Data will be stored on the researcher's private computer in an anonymised form. Neither your name, nor any identifying characteristics will be revealed in the dissemination of the findings from the final project. Should the researcher wish to present or publish the findings, pseudonyms will be used for all participants.

Supervisors:

Professor Diane Richardson, Professor of Sociology & Social Policy, Newcastle University
Dr Patricia Oliart, Senior Lecturer in Latin American Studies, Newcastle University

Appendix D – Participant Consent Form (in English)



Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences
School of Geography, Politics and Sociology

Consent Form

Young women's experiences of sex education in Lençóis

1	I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the Information sheet	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	I understand that I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing, nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	The procedures regarding confidentiality (e.g. the use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) have been clearly explained to me	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	If applicable, separate terms of consent for audio recording have been provided and explained to me	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	The use of data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me	<input type="checkbox"/>

Participant

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Researcher

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Appendix E - Screenshot of Facebook recruitment group



The screenshot shows a Facebook group page with a purple header. The main title is "Bate-papo com Natalie: Preciso d..." and it is identified as a "Grupo público". The header includes navigation options: "Entrou", "Compartilhar", "Notificações", and a menu icon. Below the header are tabs for "Discussão", "Membros", "Eventos", "Fotos", and "Arquivos", along with a search bar "Procurar neste grupo".

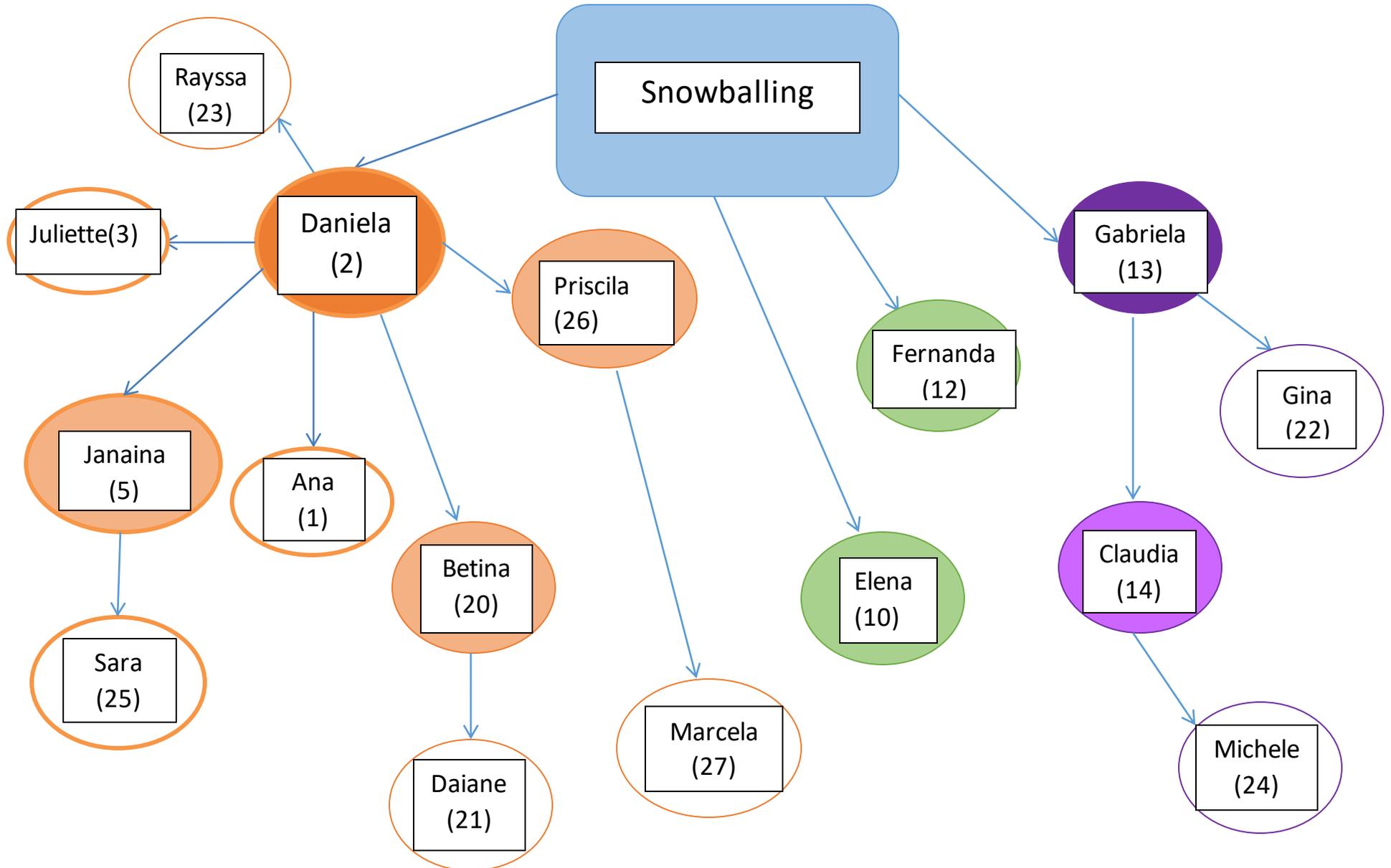
The main content area has a post creation bar with options: "Publicar", "Foto/Vídeo", "Enquete", and "Arquivo". Below this is a text input field "Escreva algo...".

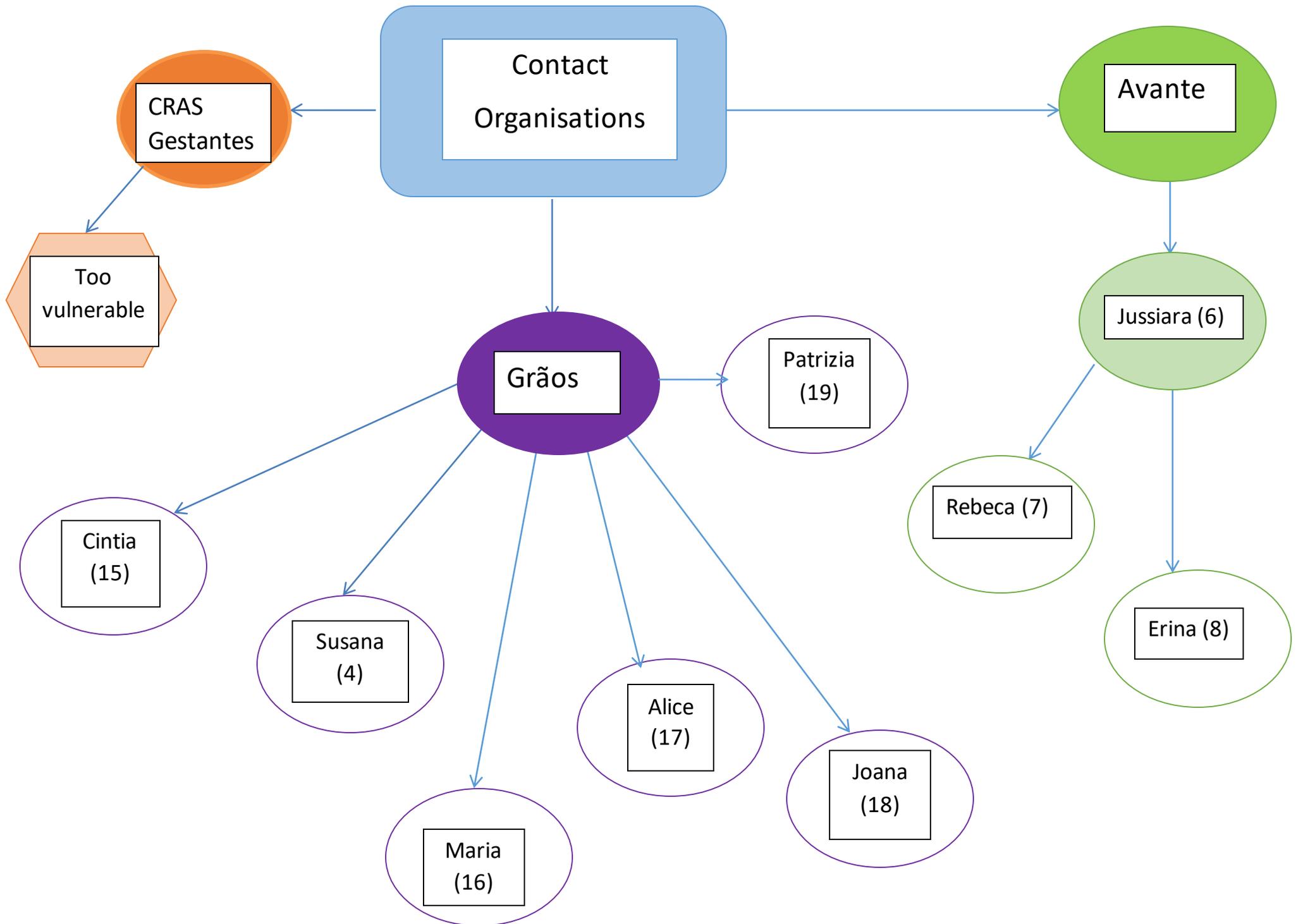
A blue banner reads "Adicione informações sobre o seu grupo.".

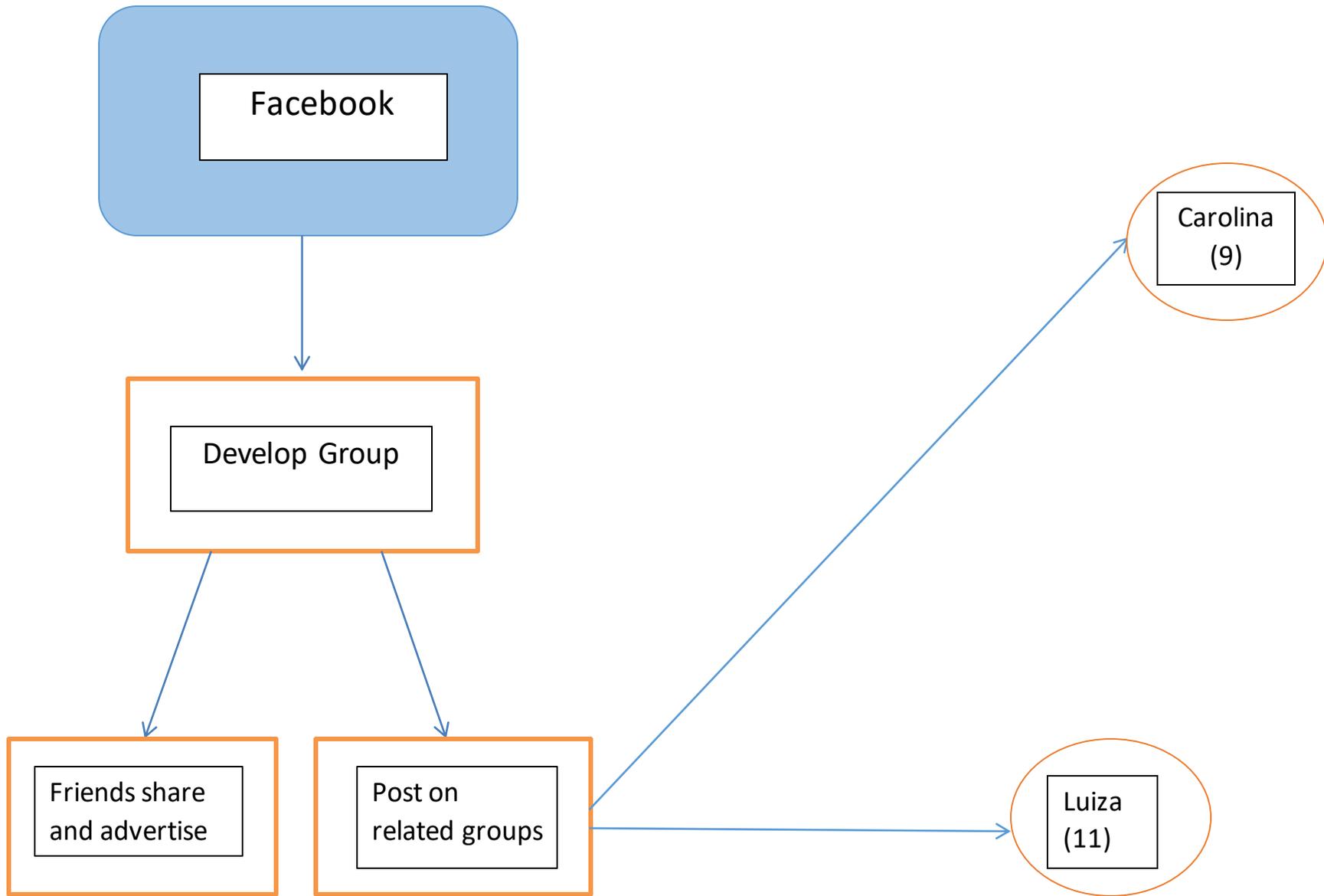
The "ATIVIDADE RECENTE" section shows a post by "Natalie Hoskin" dated "15 de abril de 2014". The post text is: "Boa tarde a todos! A semana passada eu voltei para Inglaterra, mas queria agradecer a todos que ajudaram com a minha pesquisa - estou realmente muito grata pela ajuda, apoio e colaboração! As pesquisas não são feitas pelo pesquisador só, senão em conjunto, e eu devo tudo às outros membros da comunidade que fizeram".

The right sidebar contains a section "ADICIONAR MEMBROS" with a search input field "+ Insira o nome ou endereço de email...". Below it is a "MEMBROS" section with a redacted list of names. At the bottom of the sidebar is the "DESCRIÇÃO" section, which includes the text: "A pesquisa: Eu sou Natalie, uma pesquisadora inglesa, fazendo entrevistas com mulheres aqui em Lençóis sobre experiências de educação sexual. Preciso da sua ajuda nisso! Eu quero saber suas opiniões e idéias sobre o que vocês aprendem na escola e como poderia melhorar essa educação. As entrevistas geralmente".

Appendix F – Recruitment Flowcharts







Appendix G – Chart of Interview Locations

<u>Participant Name</u>	<u>Location of Interview</u>
Ana	Natalie's House
Daniela	Natalie's House
Juliette	Natalie's House
Susana	Natalie's House
Janaina	Natalie's House
Jussiara	NGO
Rebeca	NGO
Erina	Public space - street
Carolina	Natalie's House
Elena	Natalie's House
Luiza	Participant's Home
Fernanda	Participant's Home
Gabriela	Public space – snack bar
Claudia	Public space – snack bar
Cintia	NGO
Maria	NGO
Alice	NGO
Joana	NGO
Patrizia	NGO
Betina	Natalie's House
Daiane	Natalie's House
Gina	Participant's Home
Rayssa	Participant's Home
Michele	Natalie's House
Sara	Natalie's House
Priscila	Natalie's House
Marcela	Natalie's House

Appendix H – Summary of Local Collaborators - NGOs and other organisations

Associação Casa Grande – a children’s charity, based in *Bairro do Gato*. I worked for this charity for 5 months in 2009 – 2010, and this is how I was known to many within Lençóis.

Avante – an NGO working with children and young people in the second most socio-economically deprived neighbourhoods in Lençóis. Avante employs young people as “monitors” to run sessions for younger children, as well as involving adult members of the community in community radio, a community library, and a variety of workshops and activities, such as arts and crafts, music, and gardening.

CRAS Gestantes – a group for pregnant women, based within the Social Welfare Reference Centre, CRAS. The women met on a weekly basis, firstly with a social worker who facilitated group sessions to help the women prepare emotionally and practically for the arrival of their babies, and then with a local artisan who taught them to make useful handicraft items, such as nappy bags, for use when their babies were born.

Grãos de Luz e Griô - an NGO which works to strengthen education, culture and sustainable development in rural and peripheral communities in the municipality, focusing on celebrating the lives, identities and ancestry of the Brazilian people. It runs various activities, including tours celebrating local knowledge, educational courses based around oral traditions, workshops for children in music, art, handicrafts and drama, and training programmes for young people

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