

# ‘I could have done everything and why not?’: Young women’s complex constructions of sexual agency in the context of sexualities education in Life Orientation in South African schools

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*Progressive policies protecting women’s rights to make reproductive decisions and the recent increase in literature exploring female sexual agency do not appear to have impacted on more equitable sexual relations in all contexts. In South Africa, gender power inequalities, intersecting with other forms of inequality in society, pose a challenge for young women’s control over their sexual and reproductive health. The article focuses on a group of young Coloured South African women’s understandings of their sexual agency, in an attempt to explore how it is explicitly and implicitly shaped by school Life Orientation (LO) sexuality programmes. We found young women constructed their agency as simultaneously enabled and constrained in complex ways: on the one hand, the explicit communication was that they should have agency and take responsibility for themselves sexually, whereas the implicit communication seemed to convey that what they really thought and felt about sex and sexuality was not important. In addition, heteronormative gender roles, in which men are assumed to take the lead in sexual matters, appear to be reproduced in LO sexuality education messages and further complicate young women’s constructions of their sexual agency. The implications of these findings for LO sexuality programmes are discussed.*

**Keywords:** female sexual agency, young women, sexuality education, Life Orientation

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## Introduction

Over the past 25 years, there has been an increase in literature exploring female sexual agency and its relation to various social issues (Fine, 1988; Lesch & Kruger, 2004; Madhok, Phillips & Wilson, 2013; Tolman, 2000, 2006; Tolman & Szalacha, 1999). Feminists have focused on the importance of granting women rights to make decisions regarding their reproductive lives. However, even in seemingly progressive countries whose policies protect such rights (e.g., South Africa, United States and United Kingdom included), women's reproductive decisions are still compromised in many ways.

Within a social constructionist framework, agency can be defined as how people construct their "capacity to define their own life-choices and to pursue their own goals, even in the face of opposition from others" (Kabeer, 1999: 438). Sexual agency can then be understood to be a subjective construction of how a person is empowered (or not) in the sexual sphere, in other words his/her sense that s/he has the right to make choices, take action and meet his/her own sexual needs. While women's agency includes "women's own ideas of what's possible for them to do", these are closely intertwined with "societal norms for what women should and should not do" (Strandberg, 2001: 4). How women construct their agency in the context of heterosexual relationships is thus powerfully located in and determined by multiple and intersecting material, social and cultural factors (e.g., Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe & Thompson 1998; Horne, 2005; Madhok et al., 2013).

In South Africa, specifically, gender power inequalities and the low status of women in society are pervasive problems and pose a challenge to women's sexual and reproductive health (Bennett & Reddy, 2009; Bhana, 2012; Bhana & Anderson, 2013a, 2013b; Bhana & Pattman, 2009; Harrison, 2008; Jewkes & Abrahams, 2002; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010, 2012; Reddy & Dunne, 2007; Shefer & Foster, 2009). For instance, while adolescence has been identified as an important time for the development of sexual agency (Tolman, 2006), South African research suggests that women themselves regard the sexual activities of young women as inevitabilities and not as something they necessarily seek, desire or feel they have control over (Jewkes, Vundule, Maforah & Jordaan, 2001; Lesch & Kruger, 2004). The finding that young women experience limited sexual agency within intimate relationships is consistent with other research done in other contexts, both in South Africa and globally (Averett et al., 2008; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Geary, Baumgartner, Wedderburn, Montoya & Catone, 2013). However, young men and women may also be attempting to exercise some form of agency by resisting normative practices in a context where gender and sexual norms linked to religion, and economic and cultural conditions are constraining (Heslop & Banda, 2013; Outwater, Abrahams & Campbell, 2005). Further, messages about agency are complicated by contradictory discourses framing young women's sexuality. For example, Macleod (2011) highlights the complex and contradictory expectations regarding reproductive issues with which young women are confronted, arguing that young women are expected to display 'feminine'

attributes, while also demonstrating the maturity of adolescence, attributes that often contradict each other.

Young women's constructions of their agency in terms of choosing to become sexually active, to obtain and use contraception (or not to) and to become pregnant are situationally located and shaped by peer, community and family relations in all contexts (Langille, 2007; Raneri & Wiemann, 2007). Life Orientation (LO) sexuality education programmes have been viewed as potential key locations for both the reproduction and the contestation of dominant gender discourses that impact on young women's understanding of their own sexuality, including their sexual agency (Bhana, Brookes, Makiwane & Naidoo, 2005; Prinsloo, 2007; Van Deventer, 2009). In South Africa, the National Curriculum Statement for Life Orientation (2008) determines that sex education should be focused on in Grade 10. Key references to notions of agency include:

*Explain changes associated with growing towards adulthood and describe values and strategies to make responsible decisions regarding sexuality and lifestyle choices in order to optimise personal potential... Describe the concepts 'power' and 'power relations' and their effect on relationships between and among genders (National Curriculum Statement, 2008: 27).*

It seems clear then that, at least in theory, LO sexuality education in South Africa is explicitly directed at addressing questions concerning sexual agency. Yet, existing research in local and international contexts emphasises abstinence in sexuality education at school, with the message being conveyed that women are responsible for saying 'no' to sex and, consequently, avoiding the consequences of sex which are negatively framed within notions of disease and danger (Epstein, Morrell, Moletsane & Unterhalter, 2004; Francis, 2013; Francis & De Palma, 2014; Froyum, 2010; Lesko, 2010; Macleod, 2009; Rooth, 2005). Such messages implicitly assume that female adolescents have agency in the context of sexual relationships.

Despite a surge in literature on the sexuality and sexual practices of young South Africans, relatively little research has been conducted on young women's own constructions of their sexuality, specifically also in terms of how they perceive and understand their own sexual agency (Furstenberg, 2003; Lesch, 2000; Lesch & Kruger, 2004; Shefer, in press). This article focuses on one group of young South African women's understanding of their sexual agency, specifically in an attempt to explore how their constructions of agency are explicitly and implicitly shaped within the context of school LO sexuality programmes.

## Methods

Situated within a social constructionist paradigm, the current study emphasizes the lived experience of young women and acknowledges that these young women actively construct the meaning of their own experiences, but that these constructions are shaped by larger societal discourses. Following the principles of social

constructionism, the participants in this study were viewed as constantly negotiating the meaning of their sexual agency within their specific social settings. To understand how these participants make sense of their sexual agency, this article explores the way in which they discuss and make sense of their sexuality, their accounts of their sexual behaviour and their sexual relationships. Researchers were concerned to unpack how different discourses prevalent in this community, and in the LO classes specifically, play a role in the participants' constructions of their sexual agency.

The participants were twelve young Coloured Grade 10 female learners between the ages of 16 and 18. The secondary school they attended is situated in a semi-rural, low-income, Coloured community in the Western Cape. Data were collected by means of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted by a postgraduate student in Psychology at Stellenbosch University (the third author of this article), trained in qualitative research methodologies and able to speak the language of participants, Afrikaans. The interview schedule explored a range of topics including gender norms, sexuality and LO sexuality programmes. Interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated. A qualitative thematic analysis, drawing on discourse analytic guidelines (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Parker, 1992), was conducted on the transcripts. After extracting dominant emerging themes, a discourse analytic reading, located in a social constructionist framework, was applied. This analytic approach places particular emphasis on how meaning is constructed through the language used and how this offers insight into larger ideological constructions of gender.

All standard and appropriate ethical measures were applied at all stages of the research process. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Western Cape Department of Education and Stellenbosch University. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants, after ensuring that they understood the study and the terms of their participation. As the study involved interviewing young people under the age of 18, written informed consent was obtained from their parents/guardians. All participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity and freedom to withdraw from the study at any point. Research on sexuality is often considered a sensitive area of exploration. Therefore, a clear referral system for participants who may have needed psychological support was put in place.

## **Findings**

In our analysis, we explored how participants come to understand sexual agency in the context of LO sexuality education programmes. While young women's constructions of their sexuality seemed to be partly shaped by the LO programme, it was clear that their peers, other teachers and authority figures, as well as their families and communities had an impact on their constructions. On the one hand, we could discern more explicit discourses that demanded of young women to take responsibility for their sexual activities and stay 'safe' and 'good', thereby suggesting

that young women should claim sexual agency. On the other hand, implicit discourses suggested that what young women think and feel about sex is not important and that existing gender norms should determine how they behave sexually – thus suggesting that young women should not have agency. Thus complex and often contradictory prescriptions about how young women should exercise agency over their sexuality were evident: while agency is promoted, abstinence is explicitly presented as the only option, with implicit messages that the desires and needs of men should determine what women do. While, in some contexts, women are hailed to be responsible for their own safety in an agentic way that implies control over their lives and sexualities, they are also presented with a set of discourses that speak of their vulnerability, lack of agency and the imperative to submit to male sexual desire and power. We unpack these apparently contradictory messages by analysing the talk of participants, focusing specifically on how dominant discourses shape the young women's constructions of their own sexual agency.

### **The explicit discourse: Danger and responsibility**

Participants first constructed sex as a dangerous activity that can have negative and damaging consequences for them, with emphasis on disease and unplanned pregnancy:

*Kim<sup>2</sup>: A nurse came to speak to us about sex and everything, why you shouldn't have sex ... but I don't want to have sex now ... because I think about my life, my future will be gone.*

*Wilmien: ... like the Principal always tells us, we shouldn't have sex at a young age ... but it's important to know what sex is about and that we are informed about sex, but we shouldn't have sex because it can lead to a lot of damage to you.*

*Floretta: What I know about sex is that it's between a man and a woman. There are diseases that can be transmitted if you have sex. You can fall pregnant.*

Notably much of the language used in this instance is framed in a passive way – things are done or happen to young women – they 'can fall pregnant' and 'diseases can be transmitted' and this can 'lead to a lot of damage'. This emphasis on the dangers of sex for young women has been widely documented in the literature and seems to be a pervasive way to deal with the sexual health issues young people are facing (Holzner & Oetomo, 2004; Lesch & Furphy, 2013; Lesch & Kruger, 2005). Earlier work similarly foregrounds the construction of young women's sexual agency within notions of vulnerability and victimhood. In one of the first international studies to draw attention to the sexual agency of women, Fine (1988) showed how adolescent women's sexuality is predominantly discussed in the context of victimization. Fine argues that adolescent women are taught that they are vulnerable to male sexual advances and must take the necessary precautions to protect themselves from sex and its negative consequences. Local and international literature shows how this gendered trope of sex as dangerous for young women is widespread in school's

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particular messages to young people in programmes of sexuality education and our local LO programmes (Allen, 2005; Fields, 2008; Macleod, 2009; Robinson, 2013).

While sex is clearly constructed as dangerous and young women as inevitably vulnerable and at risk, the above quotes also suggest that the young women in our study understood from adults in the school context that they themselves were responsible for protecting themselves against the dangers of sex. The assumption seems to be that young women have the power to make reproductive decisions that will keep them safe and that are morally right. Subsequently, the young women are constructed both as potential passive victims and as having agency: their knowing, thinking and doing can prevent them from becoming victims. This power seems, in some instances, to be owned: "... but I don't want to have sex now".

Participants also reported how such messages of danger and responsibility were reinforced by messages they received at home and in their communities about sex being dangerous for women:

*Lynette: My mother tells me, in our house it is almost as if you may not have a relationship with a boy or so. So, my mother always tells me the dangers of what boys do, and the difference that boys do not get pregnant, but that girls can get pregnant. That is what she always tells us in the home, she tells me and my sister, and then she tells us that we must not get involved with boys because it can be dangerous and so.*

*Jo-Anne: The girls' life is messed up [as a result of pregnancy] ... but the boy goes on with his life.*

Linking such discourses to notions of responsibility is more than evident in the reported experiences of sexualities education, for warnings on the dangers of sex are made in the expectation of responsibility for 'protecting' themselves. When the danger of sex is invoked as a way to deal with the sexuality of young women, it is assumed that they have the power to choose not to engage in sexual activity or to practise safe sex.

A key element of the explicit injunction for young women to be agents of self-regulation and self-protection is the application of a moralistic judgement on young women's sexual practices:

*Wilmien: Like the principal always tells us, we shouldn't have sex at a young age ... Because, for example, if you are standing in front of the altar with your partner, and behind you, then there's lots of men standing behind you who you've had sex with before.*

*Paula: I think, like the Bible says, sex before marriage is a sin, so I'm waiting for my turn.*

*Jo-Anne: But like I understand it is like that woman told us, sex is a sin. Some kids misuse sex, which is not nice. Sometimes children use sex without condoms,*

*which is wrong and which lead[s] them down the wrong path. Sex is, they tell us in the Bible, is for people who are married, but the children of today misuse sex.*

Recent local studies on LO have documented that teachers consider it their duty to prevent young people from engaging in sexual activity as part of a goal of moral restitution (Francis, 2011, 2013; Epstein et al., 2004; Helleve, Flisher, Onya, Mukoma & Klepp, 2009). The moralistic project embedded in LO has also been reiterated by local findings related to schools' responses to teenage pregnancy and parenting (e.g., Bhana, Morrell, Shefer & Ngabaza, 2010; Ngabaza, 2011; Shefer, Bhana & Morrell, 2013).

As with the danger discourses, when moralistic discourses are evoked, the assumption that young women have the power to do "the right thing" is reinvoked: "... we shouldn't have sex". While some kind of agency in responding to these messages is evident in this instance: "... so I'm waiting for my turn", the assumption prevails that women are able to and 'should' be the ones who ensure that 'the right thing' is done.

### **The implicit messages: Silencing of female desire and privileging of male power**

Infusing fear and shame, by linking sexuality with danger and moral transgression, into discussions taking place in sexuality education, the message to young women seems to be that they have the power to abstain from sexual activity (Irvine, 2000). The two implicit assumptions in such an imperative are that what young women feel and think and want sexually does not matter – abstinence is the only possible decision, and that young women do indeed have power in the context of a sexual or potential sexual encounter with a young man. In addition, another implicit message conveyed is that, while abstinence is the ideal, men ultimately should be in power. The young women themselves clearly articulate these assumptions and discuss vividly the confusing and contradictory messages that they have to navigate.

Participants explicitly stated that, in their experience, sex was either not spoken about, or when it was spoken about, their voices were not listened to or taken seriously. This was specifically true for LO classes, and even more so when the teacher was male:

*Tessa: We don't actually talk about it. The Menere [male teachers] that give us LO, they are all shy... so they don't want to speak to the girls about it [sex]. So we mostly do exercises, play outside and so. We never have classes about sex and so.*

*Amy: Or if the children also later want to talk about sex and such, then the Meneer [male teacher] will maybe tell us "No, we are not on that topic. We already talked about most of that stuff".*

*Annelise: Not really a lot, because Meneer [male teacher] does not really talk with us about sex and so. For me it is almost as if he is holding back. Like our teacher from last year that taught us LO and so, she was a woman and she*

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*talked openly about sex and such, when it is time to have sex and so. So Meneer that we have now does not talk openly with us about sex.*

Participants further appear to be acutely aware of the gendered dynamics of classroom interactions, thus further constraining possibilities of talking more openly about their own experiences. They claimed that men (including male teachers) do not want to talk to them about sex and certainly not about their feelings about sex. While there clearly is an injunction to talk about sex in some contexts, there is also an injunction not to speak about sex, specifically in the company of men. The participants do not speculate about the reasons for the male teachers' reticence to have these conversations, apart from suggesting that he is *skaam*, an Afrikaans word meaning either 'shy' or 'ashamed'.

In addition, according to the participants, the voices of young men are rendered more important, both in the classroom and during sexual interactions where normative gender roles in heterosexual practices are legitimized:

*Annelise: We also did an activity in LO, and like Meneer [male teacher] said, the man is the head – if I can put it that way – in the home. He rules over everything. So for me it's like the man is the one that asks for sex and things ... Like when we girls were speaking, it was always but I don't want to have sex now like – how can I put this – a boy's thing and a girl's thing, then the teacher will always take the boys' side. He will always agree with what they say, but he never heard the girls' side of the story. So it was almost like – how can I put this – almost like we're on different sides.*

However, the participant was clear that there is "the girls' side of the story", in this case "I don't want to have sex now". Another participant articulated how being silenced in this way is hurtful, but also indicated that the young women do resist being silenced and do talk about sex when they are on their own:

*Annelise: It actually hurt me a bit, but then I got over it ... then we girls spoke about sex and things, because we don't let it get us down.*

The participants expressed a pronounced interest in sex and a desire to have a space within which to talk about sex openly.

*Jo-Anne: ... he [LO teacher] must talk about everything that comes in a woman or man's path who is sexually active.*

*Susan: I want to learn more about teenage pregnancy, and about the sexuality stuff. I want to learn more about that, because we never actually spoke about that, in class, with the LO teacher.*

*Floretta: [Our teacher must speak about] for example girls and boys that are in a relationship, how it really is, how they communicate with each other, what they speak about, and if they talk about sex, and do they want to have sex.*

They may be silenced, but, at least in the context of the interview, they constructed themselves as active subjects, demanding to know and demanding to speak. While the young women indicated that they are interested not only in the mechanics of sex, but also in sexual and intimate relationships, there is reportedly no space in the classroom to talk about this. According to them, there is no space to talk about feelings and desire. Lesch and Furphy's (2013) finding that the discourses to which South African adolescents are exposed are both limited and limiting is relevant in this instance. The messages received by the participants in their study were similar to the messages participants in our study received in the LO classroom: "... adolescents should not have sex, abstain from sex till marriage, men initiate sex, sex will lead to pregnancy and ruin chances for a better life" (Lesch & Furphy 2013: 18). Young women are taught that, while they should take responsibility for their sexual activities, the responsibility is to abstain, but also, and rather paradoxically, to follow the men's lead.

The complex message that the young women reportedly receive is that, while they have the responsibility to abstain from sex, men have, in fact, the power in sexual relationships. When speaking about sex, the participants made constant reference to concepts such as force, power, control and their own lack of control and disempowerment – apparently acutely aware of the underlying power struggles inherent in heterosexual interactions.

*Paula: What happens is you [men] do not respect that person's choice. It is almost like you only want what you want, you want to have sex, and you place pressure on the other person, because that person is not ready yet. So you force that person to have sex.*

*Frieda: If the man wants to have sex, he will force his way.*

Many participants described how women are manipulated by their partners to engage in sexual activity, highlighting the contradictory expectation of their responsibility to regulate their own and their male partner's practices and to give in to male power. As has been documented in many local studies over the past two decades of research on heterosexual practices and young women's sexual agency (e.g., Bhana & Anderson, 2013a, 2013b; MacPhail & Campbell, 2001; Shefer et al., 2013; Varga, 1997; Wood, Maforah & Jewkes, 1998), participants describe the different dynamics of coercion, including the use of a discourse of love, a threat of loss of the relationship, and physical violence:

*Erin: Or the boy manipulates the girl. Tells her "I love you" and then "You will have sex with me".*

*Annelise: ... for boys it's almost like "if you love me, prove it to me", then the girl will always ask "how?", and then the boy will say "With sex".*

*Susan: The guy will maybe force her to do it [have sex], and if she doesn't want to, he will maybe leave her just because she doesn't want to have sex with him. That is what happens in relationships.*

Participants suggested that, in the context of coercive sex, young women may ask questions and may even refuse, but questions and refusals come with consequences: the women may be left, or, in the worst instances, beaten and/or raped:

*Tessa: Then let us say the man wants to have sex and the girl does not want to have sex, then let us say the man forces the girl to have sex, then he will hit her, or he just leaves her because he says he is a part of the relationship for a long time and his girl does not want to give him sex ...*

*Annelise: Sometimes the boy gets angry if he wants to have sex with the girl and the girl does not want to. Sometimes they get out, Juffrou [female teacher], and they hit the girl.*

*Tessa: Like in our community I see the boys hit their girlfriends if they don't want to do it. Or they rape their girlfriends, without the girlfriends saying yes .... If the boy wants to have sex, then he will nag the girl and if she really does not want to, he will rape her ... Usually they remain silent. They don't tell anyone. And then at a time, they can't tolerate it, then it comes out. Some girls immediately tell. They complain with someone, with his parents or so. But then the parents will say, "but no, the girl lies". This is why girls don't always want to tell.*

Participants talked about young women who "don't want to do it", young women who "really" do not want to do it and "(s)ome girls [who] immediately tell". They also, however, are aware of the fact that raped women "usually" remain silent and that those who do tell are typically not believed. This suggests that participants do not construct themselves as having no voice or no agency; they are simply acutely aware of how their voices are silenced in different ways and how their attempts at agency are undermined.

While most participants denied that they were sexually active, two of those who spoke about their sexual activities described their first experience of sexual intercourse as something that "just happened" or "just started". This may reflect the silencing and shaming of sexual activity and desire of young women. The narratives do indeed seem to be framed within a discourse of submission to pressure ('I gave in') and transgression ('what we were doing was wrong'):

*Interviewer: Did you want to have sex?*

*Jo-Anne: Not really ... Because I knew what we were doing was wrong and that I would never be a virgin again, and it just happened.*

*Interviewer: Were you pressured or was it your choice?*

*Jo-Anne: He pressured me. He said we've been in a relationship for so long but we've never done it [have sex] ... We were at a party and it was time for me to go home, and he went on and on, and so I gave in.*

*Interviewer: So how did you make the decision to begin a sexual relationship?*

*Roberta: It was just, because we were in a relationship with each other for so long, I'm not saying we should have started a sexual relationship, but it's*

*probably because he, he asked if we couldn't start having sex, and I didn't say anything, and he just started.*

It is interesting to note that participants did not mention that they made a conscious decision to have sex: "I didn't say anything, and he just started". Significantly, they did not mention that they protested. While rape, coercive sex and/or emotional pressure have been found to be common in young people's accounts of their sexual experiences (Jewkes et al., 2001; Shefer & Foster, 2009; Varga & Makubalo, 1996; Wood et al., 1998), these participants told a more complex story. There was male pressure and they related their lack of agency in the sense of not having made conscious decisions. However, we are not clear as to what they really wanted or felt, because, even in telling these stories to the interviewer, the participants did not say what they really wanted or felt – even though they clearly thought "what we were doing was wrong". When the interviewer asked "Did you want to have sex?", the participant's vague response, "Not really", glossed over her own desire and feelings. Ironically, not even the interviewer pursued the matter of what the participant really wanted. In this instance, the young women who were sexually active, were effectively silenced.

While participants who were sexually active denied agency, those participants who said that they were not sexually active, claimed to be able to make decisions about sexual activities and to act upon those decisions:

*Tessa: Like in our community I see the guys hitting their girls if they don't want to do it [have sex], or they just rape their girls, without their girls saying yes ... so I think I'm going to wait for the right guy.*

*Interviewer: So did sex ever come up in that relationship?*

*Frieda: In that relationship it came up a lot, but I told him straight 'no, and if you don't accept it what am I doing in this relationship? If my no is no, and you want to make my no a yes, what is the use of this relationship?'*

*Interviewer: So did he pressure you?*

*Frieda: I wouldn't say he pressured me, but it came up a lot, and then I said no.*

*Interviewer: And did you have sex with him again?*

*Jo-Anne: No.*

*Interviewer: So just that one time. So he did not pressure you again?*

*Jo-Anne: He did, and then he said if we are not going to again, then he will leave me, and then I accepted it. I left him now because he said that night when he was with me that he is going to leave me, and then I left him.*

*Wilmien: Girls, sometimes, like me, I have not had, but if a boy asks me for sex and such, then I will tell him directly "no" because my thing is I do not want to have a boyfriend at this age, and then he wants sex, and then in 15 years' time, then I meet my right man.*

It seems obvious, then, that those participants who said that they abstained from having sex, experienced themselves as being empowered to say "no". Those who were sexually active related that they had no agency in the context of first sexual encounters, but it is not clear whether they did not deny agency, because their unconscious or conscious decisions were not in line with expectations of adults. Thus, they might not have felt that they can admit to an adult (the interviewer) that it was something they wanted.

The complexity of the situation is articulated by one of the participants whose boyfriend tried to force her to have sex. She left him, but feels ambivalent about her decision:

*Tessa: It was alright, but later in time, I just because why my boyfriend hit me so and he just all the time, he just all the time because he was older than me, he always went on for sex and so. So I thought enough is enough and I don't need people like this in my life, so I broke up with him. But at the moment, he still stalks me. Like this morning, I found him again. But I don't worry about him, I am not scared of him. I am not scared of him anymore, I will stand up for myself. My friends tell me what they went through, then they tell me it was sore and so, and some people say you bleed, so then I am scared of it.*

*Interviewer: And the stories that you hear from friends, when they talk about sex, how did they decide to start having sex?*

*Tessa: They mostly decided because they were raped and so and then they decide, okay, I am not a virgin anymore, so I can just as well keep on doing it, because in a way it was a lekker [good] feeling. And then I sometimes feel out, because I am the only one who is still a virgin and I am actually scared, because in some conversations I can't participate.*

*Interviewer: Do you feel out when they talk about sex?*

*Tessa: Sometimes yes, because sometimes I can't participate, because I have not done it yet. So they will sommer [just] tell me, shut your trap, Tessa, or so. And they will sommer kick me out.*

*Interviewer: And then, what do you think when they talk to you like this?*

*Tessa: Sometimes I am not bothered by it. So I will just think it is alright, I am not dirty and so. But other times I think, I could have done everything and why not? I always have 'why' in my head.*

In this long narrative, many of the complexities of being a young woman in this community are highlighted. There is the imperative to abstain, to not abstain; to follow the boy's lead, to resist; to be afraid, to have pleasure; to be included, to not be included. Nothing is simple and stable. The participant is clearly conflicted: while the messages about abstinence that she receives in the LO class are already conflicting, she also gets other messages when she listens to the conversations between her female friends, conversations about aspects of sex that are not addressed in the LO class, conversations about pain and pleasure.

## **Conclusions**

In this article, we explored how one group of young South African women speak of sexual agency in the context of their talk on LO sexuality education programmes. Our most pertinent finding was that, with regard to constructions of their sexual agency, young women are receiving a double message: on the one hand, the explicit communication is that they should have agency and take responsibility for themselves sexually, but the implicit communication seemed to convey that what they really thought and felt about sex and sexuality was not important. Heteronormative gender roles, in which men are assumed to take the lead in sexual matters, appear to be reproduced in LO sexuality education messages and more broadly in their experiences at school and in the community, thus further complicating the notion of sexual agency. In other words, while it was explicitly conveyed to participants that they have to take responsibility for their sexual activities, there was an implicit communication that these activities should be in line with existing gender norms, not with what they themselves necessarily seek, desire or feel. They were simultaneously told that they have agency and that they do not have agency. This may imply that, if they do make decisions (conscious or unconscious) or engage in sexual activities that are not in line with existing norms, they will be unlikely to admit that those decisions or activities were in line with their own desires or feelings. Consequently, there is a further silencing of the voices of young women. They cannot talk about forced sex, nor about consensual sex. They cannot talk about bad sex or good sex, about not wanting sex or about wanting sex.

These findings suggest that sexuality education programmes need to facilitate more focus on finding out from young women themselves what they are struggling with and providing a constructive and supportive space for them to speak about sexuality and sex. If young women are to have more agency with respect to their sexuality, they will have to come to believe that what they think and feel is important. This should be included in sexuality classes, not only through didactics, but also by giving young women opportunities to talk about their feelings and thoughts. In addition, LO teachers will have to acknowledge that women's constructions of their sexuality seems to be shaped not only by programmes, but also by their peers, other teachers and authority figures as well as their families and communities. The contradictory messages that young women are likely to receive should be acknowledged (made explicit) and discussed in LO classes. Although based on a small sample, this study also reinforced the findings of other local studies that foreground discomfort and lack of capacity among teachers who work with the sexualities component of LO (Adonis & Baxen, 2009; Francis, 2013; Macleod, 2009; Rooth, 2005). In this study, it appeared that teachers mostly avoid direct discussions about sexuality, and when they do, it apparently is mostly through a more didactic, disciplinary and punitive framework that emphasises danger, disease and damage. Also of concern is the lack of a critical gender consciousness among teachers who appear to respond to learners in gender stereotypic ways, for example, focusing on young men and valuing their

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contributions higher, as well as actively reinforcing normative and unequal gender practices. Working with teachers and the school on their overt and hidden curriculum as well as methodologies of working with young people on life skills remains an important priority in ensuring any value in the LO curriculum.

While a handful of recent local studies reveal that young women in different contexts are beginning to challenge male dominance in social and sexual contexts (see, for example, Anderson, 2013; Bhana & Anderson, 2013a, 2013b), this study highlighted continued practices of normative gender roles in heterosexual relationships among young people that are strongly associated with inequitable and coercive sexual practices. It was apparent in this study that sexualities education may not be assisting in challenging or at least raising questions concerning such gender performances and heterosexual practices, nor supporting young women's positive sexual agency. Of concern are the contradictory messages that are finding their way to young women through LO sexuality education and within the school more generally and reinforced in their families and communities. What young women are being told, both explicitly and implicitly, seems to not only fall short of supporting them in developing a strong and positive sense of themselves and their sexuality, but rather exacerbates the challenging location in which they find themselves, always already vulnerable, yet always already responsible.

## Endnotes

1. In using these racial distinctions, we acknowledge them as social constructs that have, and continue to have, a profound impact on material lives and experiences and the meanings attributed to them by South African citizens.
2. Pseudonyms are used for participants. All excerpts are from separate conversations.

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