

'And I have been told that there is nothing fun about having sex while you are still in high school': Dominant discourses on women's sexual practices and desires in life Orientation programmes at school

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Abstract

Young women's sexuality is a contested terrain in multiple ways in contemporary South Africa. A growing body of work in the context of HIV and gender-based violence illustrates how young women find it challenging to negotiate safe and equitable sexual relationships with men, and are often the victims of coercive sex, unwanted early pregnancies and HIV. On the other hand, young women's sexuality is also stigmatised and responded to in punitive terms in school or community contexts, as is evident in research on teenage pregnancy and parenting in schools. Within both these bodies of work, women's own narratives are missing, as well as their agency and a positive discourse on female sexuality. Female desires are absent in heteronormative practices and ideologies, as pointed out by feminist researchers internationally. A body of work on young women who parent at school has shown that a key component of the moralistic response to women's sexuality hinges on the way in which childhood, adolescence and adulthood are popularly understood, together with dominant notions of masculinity and femininity within heteronormative and middle-class notions of family. Such discourses are also salient in the responses and understandings of sexuality education in Life Orientation, particularly the way in which young women are represented. This paper draws from qualitative research conducted with teachers, school authorities and young people on sexuality education in the Life Orientation programme at schools in the Western and Eastern Cape. Key findings reiterate disciplinary responses to young women's sexuality, often framed within 'danger' and 'damage' discourses that foreground the denial of young women's sexual desire and practices within a framework of protection, regulation and discipline in order to avoid promised punishments of being sexually active.

Introduction

Over the last two decades increasing attention has been paid to young people's sexual practices, particularly young women's. This has been largely promoted in the contexts of HIV and reported high rates of gender-based violence (GBV) and has given rise to a proliferation of governmental response, civil society measures and academic research. Much of this research has foregrounded young women's vulnerability to unwanted,

coercive and unsafe heterosexual intimacy, and a battery of research has focused on how gender normative roles and practices contribute to social problems of the high rates of HIV, unwanted early pregnancy and gender-based violence (Harrison, 2008; Wood, Lambert & Jewkes, 2007; 2008). Some authors have questioned the way in which young women have been set up as inevitable victims in this body of work and associated practices, arguing that the bulk of the literature appears to reproduce the very gender stereotypes that are seen as 'the problem' (Shefer, in press). It has similarly been argued that underlying much of this research is a regulatory imperative to control and discipline young people's sexualities and desires, in particular young women. And indeed there is little literature in which women's positive sexuality is represented; notions of young women's pleasure and desire or a discourse articulating this has been relatively silenced both in public and scholarly discourse. Similarly, while attempts to work with young people around HIV/AIDS have become more nuanced, the dominant response has historically been informed by disciplinary and constraining frameworks, most clearly illustrated by the ABC approach (Epstein, Morrell, Moletsane & Unterhalter, 2004; Lesko, 2010; Mitchell & Smith, 2001).

Perhaps the strongest illustration of the social surveillance of young women's sexuality is provided by responses to young women who become pregnant and parent in school. Teenage pregnancy remains an emotive issue in South Africa, constructed in the popular media as well as in much of the scientific literature (Macleod, 2001; 2011) as essentially problematic, 'disastrous' and 'damaging', not only for the young women, but also for broader society. At the core of this popular representation of teenage pregnancy is a range of normative assumptions about what young people should or should not do with respect to sexuality and reproduction, infused by dominant moral, cultural and ideological positions on pregnancy, parenting and families. Emerging out of recent empirical research conducted with both teachers and learners at school is a continued stigmatisation and negative judgement of young women who get pregnant and parent at school, illustrating an underlying discourse of denial and repression of young women's sexual agency (see, for example, Bhana, Clowes, Morrell & Shefer, 2008; Bhana, Morrell, Shefer & Ngabaza, 2010; Ngabaza, 2011; Nkani & Bhana, 2010; Shefer, Bhana & Morrell, 2013). Macleod (2011) has shown how both public and scholarly responses to teenage pregnancy are framed in a discourse of 'moral degeneration' with the teenage mother represented as a threat to the social order, both symptom and cause of social problems and decline. The association of young women's displays of sexual agency and activity with moral degeneration also illuminates the wider discourse in which female sexuality, especially young female sexuality, is silenced, denied and viewed as morally reprehensible.

Given the historical repression of sexuality in the history of education in South Africa and the current challenges of the HIV epidemic, sexuality education as a part of Life Orientation (LO) has been viewed as a key terrain where sexuality, gender and HIV might be addressed (Francis, 2013). Yet, there is some concern about the impact and imperatives of such programmes, with existing research illustrating how these educational spaces could rather serve to further a disciplinary and punitive response to young people, and particularly young women's sexuality (Bhana et al., 2010; Shefer et al., 2013; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2013). This is strongly evident in the literature on

pregnancy and parenting at school, some of which highlights the particular contributions of LO teachers and LO lessons to further stigmatisation and ‘othering’ of young women who are pregnant and/or parents at school, underpinned by moralistic messages about young women who are sexually active while at school (Ngabaza, 2010; Shefer et al., 2013). International and local literature provides evidence of the role that schools play in reproducing certain moralistic responses to young people’s sexualities. Writing in the context of New Zealand Allen (2007:2) argues that ‘schools are heavily invested in a particular sort of student that is “ideally” non-sexual’ and that there is ‘a gulf between schools’ perception of student sexuality and young people’s lived realities’. Similarly, local literature has shown that schools ‘are expected to be spaces of sexual innocence’ (Bhana et al., 2010: 874) and, as such, ‘pregnant or parenting learners at school destabilise traditional notions of authority and order’ (Shefer et al., 2013: 8-9). LO sexuality education is reportedly characterised by a moralistic response that emphasises abstinence, reflecting a broader national emphasis encapsulated in the public ABC message (Francis, 2013; Francis & DePalma, 2014; Epstein et al., 2004; Morrell, Moletsane, Karim, Epstein & Unterhalter, 2002). Research on LO in Southern Africa further illustrates teachers’ discomfort with teaching sexuality education (Adonis & Baxen, 2009; Francis, 2013; Macleod, 2009; Motalingaoane-Khau, 2010; Pattman & Chege, 2003; Rooth, 2005).

It remains a priority for LO and sexuality education to serve as a constructive space for young men and women to interrogate their subjectivities, relationships and practices of gender and sexuality. This paper is, therefore, directed towards an analysis of young women’s experiences of such educational spaces, with particular focus on the extent to which these speak to a positive sexual agency for young women (and men). Acknowledging within a Foucauldian framework of bio-power that a proliferation of talk and information about sex is not necessarily liberatory but rather always has a disciplinary function, we are interested in assessing the extent to which the dominant punitive response to young women’s sexuality, already documented in the literature, is reproduced and/or destabilised within sexuality education at schools.

The study

This paper draws from a larger research project that explored how sexuality programmes at selected schools in the Eastern Cape and Western Cape provinces in South Africa challenged or reproduced normative constructions of gender and gendered power relations.¹ The main concern of the project, which adopted feminist principles of research, was how a critical gender lens facilitating gender transformation and gender justice could be incorporated into LO programmes in South African schools.

The study was conducted at nine public schools in the two different provinces which represent the diversity of the former apartheid categorisations applied to secondary schools: two former white schools (former model C, both single sex girl schools), four

¹ The study was a three-year SANPAD-funded research project entitled ‘Life Orientation sexuality programmes and normative gender narratives, practices and power relations’ led by Prof Catriona Macleod, Rhodes University.

former coloured and three African schools. While such apartheid terms are contested, they continue to be drawn on for equity purposes nationally. We use these here since they still have salience in South African communities and continue to be markers of class and other social privilege. Although schools are less racialised in contemporary South Africa, this is less so in poorer communities which continue to reflect historical divides. Thus, 'township' schools remain the most disadvantaged, catering predominantly to working class, historically disenfranchised learners in communities characterised by poverty.

The study adopted an ethnographic orientation with multiple approaches to data collection, including: a textual analysis of samples of LO teaching materials and resources; in-depth interviews with school principals and LO teachers; focus group discussions and individual in-depth interviews with Grade 10 learners. Multiple methods of data collection facilitated a triangulation of data and exploration of multiple perceptions and experiences of those engaged in the sexuality education at different locations, including school management, teachers, learners and curriculum developers.

For this paper we draw on the data generated by the in-depth interviews and focus groups with learners. Twenty-one focus groups included seven young men groups, seven mixed groups and eight young women groups. The focus group discussion addressed the following key issues: learners' reflections on their learning and experiences of sexuality education in LO classes; how sexuality education in LO classes compared with how parents talk about sex and sexuality at home; and challenges in and out of school on sex and sexuality and how sexuality education dealt with these. Fifty-seven follow-up in-depth individual interviews with 21 boys and 36 girls were further conducted with some of the focus group participants. The in-depth individual interviews attempted to explore issues emerging from the focus groups in more depth and focused on reported practices of sexuality, relationships and reproductive health issues, including pregnancy and termination of pregnancy. All interviews and focus groups were recorded with permission of participants and transcribed verbatim, and translated where necessary.

Permission to access schools was granted by the relevant authority in the Department of Education in each province. Researchers worked closely with LO teachers who facilitated access to those learners who were willing to participate in all sites. Learners' participation was obtained through signed parental consent where their age was below 16 years. All participation was on a voluntary basis and informed consent forms were completed by all participants who were aware that they could leave the research at any time without prejudice. Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were all conducted in the schools at times and spaces most convenient to both educators and participating learners.

Guided by qualitative thematic analysis informed by discourse analytic readings (Braun & Clarke, 2006), our analysis foregrounds discourses which speak to the way in which young women's sexuality is reportedly represented in LO classes, with particular questions about the extent to which regulatory and punitive discourses are reproduced and/or subverted in sexuality programmes in schools. We present two linked narratives

emerging which illustrate the dominance of teaching of sexuality through a lens of danger and consequence, directed primarily at young women, and which invokes young women to feel responsible for both their own protection from (both physical and social) ‘damage’ and disease, and for upholding the larger social framework of moral practice for young people. Young female sexuality is thus located primarily within a discourse of vulnerability and fear, as well as responsibility, prohibition and control.

‘Dangerous’ outcomes

A dominant theme in sexuality education, already raised in recent literature as reviewed above, and emerging clearly in our data, is the teaching of sexualities through a lens of ‘dangerous’ outcomes. Such teaching emerges as framed primarily within the negative consequences of being sexually active, articulated within a narrative of consequence and punishment, particularly for young women. While clearly sexuality education needs to incorporate messages about the potential negative outcomes related to unsafe sex for young women and men, sexuality appears to be primarily spoken about within the dominant discourse of the ‘dangers’ and ‘consequences’ of being sexually active. The ‘risks’ for young women of engaging in sexuality, notably also always assumed to be heterosexual, are foregrounded in the lessons and the learnings of young women and school, with particular emphasis placed on the caution against pregnancy and disease. These are located as inevitable consequences of being sexually active with emphasis on how these have an impact on long-term life chances and experiences, even maybe a risk to their lives. As the learner below articulates it, ‘it is not worth it ...’ is a powerful trope within learners’ experiences of sexuality education:

And I have been told that there is nothing fun about having sex while you are still in high school. It just brings down everything that you do you now because you are gonna get pregnant at the end of the day or you might contract one of the diseases and it is just not worth it ... Because when you are older you are gonna be like okay here I am, I am old, I wanna go get married while you still had herpes and stuff like that and you know it is not worth it at the end, it is not worth it, really it is not. (Female group, Bloom High School) ²

A wide range of responses from participants, across diverse contexts of schooling, foreground the ‘kneejerk’ association of sex with dire consequences of disease and unwanted pregnancy, often presented in graphic biological terms. While clearly some useful resources are provided, regarding contraception for example, it appears that the framework of instruction serves to detach the biological, ‘factual’ material from its embeddedness in material and socio-psychological frameworks of relationships, and is primarily inspired by a cautionary imperative to ‘warn’ young people of the consequences of being sexually active. Notably, it is also evident that sexuality is presented within such messages in heteronormative terms alone, with sexual activity

² Pseudonyms are used for the schools: Bloom High, a former model C school (catering predominantly to white learners but now more mixed), Lincoln, Hibiscus and Blue Lagoon high schools, former coloured schools, and Zamani High, an African ‘township’ school. Pseudonyms are used to ensure anonymity of the schools. Conventions for the referencing include: Int – the interviewer; F1 – female participant in focus group, M1 – male participants in focus group; [] left out or explanatory text; = – speaker interrupts conversation; underline – emphasis; ... – text omitted by authors.

conflated with heterosexual penetrative sexual practice, thus inadvertently reinstating a heteronormative version of sexual relationships:

F5: In Life Orientation I learnt that if I'm, if I'm having sex for the first time with my boyfriend [giggles] I must use a condom and I must also protect myself from falling pregnant = /mhh/.

F2: Well, what I have learnt from Life Orientation, first of all, others do not know what sex is all about. So in Life Orientation they explain that sex is sleeping with a male. (Female group, Lincoln High)

F5: /Uhm/, some of the things they teach us; = /mhh/ = they warn us about certain things, what to do and what not to do = /mhh/ = that is why I am saying it is relevant = /ok/.

F3: I learnt that, if I slept with someone right, there are things I can do to protect myself from diseases = /ok/ = and pregnancy. (Female group, Lincoln High)

F1: In sex education we learnt about HIV and Ukwabelana Ngesondo (STIs) and how they are spread, sexual relations, we learnt about the consequences of having sex during one's period, that one could contract AIDS. The teacher told us that there is a chance for one to contract AIDS if one has sex during one's period; however it's unlikely that one could fall pregnant as menstruation is the body's way of releasing waste (biological waste pertaining to the female reproductive system). We also learnt that during sex that vaginal fluid comes into contact with semen and thereafter the chance of contracting AIDS is greater.

F2: The teacher emphasised that what causes infection is that vaginal fluids mix with semen and as soon as this happens if one of the two is infected by the AIDS virus or STI then the infection takes place.

M3: It helps us with matters such as the spreading of diseases such as HIV... it advises us against such matters. It exposes us to domains our homes would not take us through.

F2: It has enlightened me on using of condoms...

F4: It's taught me about how to handle issues relating to STIs or HIV. For example one may think that being HIV positive is a death sentence but one can still date, within dating they have to use a condom, one has to make sure that their CD4 count does not decline, once it does that is when one develops AIDS. HIV is a recent thing but it's the most dangerous disease that one can contract at any time. One has to be honest to their partner regarding their status, after which one must continue to take their medication. If ever they have the disease. (Mixed gender group, Hibiscus High School)

Similarly in the conversation below, the discourse of consequence is powerfully associated with sexuality education, even for young men, in this case – thus sexuality education apparently cannot be thought of outside the teachings of consequence. In this respect, it is notable that even when invited to think about positive aspects of sexuality by the interviewer, no response is forthcoming from these male participants (rather the conversation turns back to talking about pregnancy) and pleasure or any positive aspects of sexual intimacy as associated with sexuality, at least within sexuality education, are rendered unimaginable or unspeakable. On the other hand, participants acknowledge the limitations of this discourse of consequence at the same time as they reinstate it. In both this conversation and the one above, young people also articulate a critical perspective on the dominant framework of sexuality education, highlighting in

particular how punitive messages are ineffective and their resistance to this methodology of sexuality education.

M1: Even though we do learn about sex in class, we don't even go out there, and like ... We know, OK, we know, once you have sex, all these consequences, you might fall pregnant, you might get STDs, etc., etc. We know about this stuff, but we still go out there, and we still have sex. But unprotected sex, but ... and we still know what's going to happen after that. So for me, I could say that, even though the teachers say, like, about sex in class, we don't listen. It's like, OK, if I'm having sex right now, nobody's going to tell me what, you know. If I feel like, if I know how to protect myself, I know to protect myself, so we don't listen. Don't listen, at all.

Int: OK, so it sounds like that's the negative part about it for you, hey? Are there any positive aspects about it, that you can think of, that's come out of being in class? (3) Positives? Can't really think of anything? ... So it's mostly on the whole been negative? Or ... and uncomfortable, as well, hey, it sounds like? Yes.

M1: Another thing, too, even my class, there's this thing that, for girls, like, having a child, it's like you're taking off, like, every problem that you have on your shoulder, it's like you're lifting it off, then that child is going to ... the child is a solution, because my class, there is this one girl that is pregnant, and then there's two girls that already have kids ... er, babies. (Lincoln High School, Mixed group; our emphasis)

That LO teachers reproduce the equation of pregnancy with consequence/ punishment for sexual activity is also evident in this study as evident in research on pregnancy and parenting at schools (Ngabaza, 2010; Shefer et al., 2013). In the conversation below, the use of a pregnant or parenting learner 'as example' of the 'dangers' of sex is evident as is the silences that are then produced among learners. It is interesting that these young women share how they would rather be silent than invoke such a blaming discourse. While this could be viewed as their resistance to the stigmatisation of pregnant learners, the lesson of sex = danger = consequences/ punishment is nonetheless promoted in the teaching of sexuality:

F1: Well, she [referring to a young woman in their class] is pregnant.

...

Int: Okay. So does it become uncomfortable to talk about ...?

F2: About sex, in class.

Int: Because of her experience?

F2: Because ... Yes.

F1: Teenage pregnancy, we can't, like, talk about it, really, because it hurts her feelings, so that's why we never brought it up. And the teacher that gives us LO, she's, like ... she's always, like ... How can I say? She's explaining about it, but then we feel bored, because now, we don't know, how does she feel about it, and then she makes an example of her. That's not right. That, we don't actually like about it, that's why we never talk about it, we never think about that stuff. (Mixed group, Blue Lagoon High School)

While the dangers of sex as leading to unwanted pregnancies and illnesses are shown above to be central in the teaching of sexuality education through the trope of sex as being 'naturally' punished, sexuality also appears to be taught strongly within the context of the additional danger of sexual violence and other forms of 'damage' for girls. Thus, when

asked about what she learned about sex at school, the learner below first explains theoretical inputs on how sex (biological aspects, reproduction no doubt) takes place, but the strongest image emerging is the association between sex and rape and sexual violence. In this way, sexuality is presented strongly through concern, if sexuality is only dealt with within in the framework of sexual violence, learners are clearly not gaining an opportunity to think about sexuality as a realm of pleasure, of agency, within a positive and equal relationship:

Not learn about sex, sex you don't learn about. I don't know, we never learnt about it. You learnt about it in LO class theoretically in Grade 8 and then you got to see scenarios like [inaudible], a person maybe is raped and then that is what the media taught me basically, then you got to watch movies where maybe a child was being sexually abused by her step dad. Those things are like the basic things, otherwise every other thing you never got to learn about. (Female, Bloom High School)

Responsible 'agents'

Within these dominant discourses of sex as dangerous for young women's current lives and futures, women appear to be set up as primarily responsible for policing young people's sexual practices. This hinges mostly around the gendering of consequences, directed at young women in particular ways, as articulated so clearly in the dialogue below:

F4: You are forbidden to have sex and then it just ... that just arouses your curiosity and ... =

F1: = Forbidden fruit always tastes the best.

Int: But more for the boys or more for girls? Are you saying, like, is this a general thing for boys and girls, or mostly for girls?

F4: It's, sort of, mostly for girls, because we are told not to have sex because we are going to get pregnant, and the boys won't get pregnant, so we are told, Don't have sex, don't have sex, because you will fall pregnant and you will ... =

F2: = You will be the one with the baby.

F4: And they will make you pregnant and then they will leave. (Female group, Blue Lagoon High School)

The notion that girls are the ones who will bear 'the consequences' and are therefore the ones 'at risk' is reportedly a popular warning by teachers in LO classes:

So we're basically, they're really trying to make us aware of those kind of things because girls they have to take on more responsibilities once they fall pregnant than boys ... Because boys you know they just go to school every day you know those kind of things, so we sort of we're more at risk than they are. (Female, Bloom High School)

Such discourse is taken up by women participants who reiterate this narrative of damage in which young women are 'spoiled' while young men are immune from any consequence:

F4: Like, what we have been taught is that when you are busy with your boyfriend, there are things that you do and things that you don't do. If I am a virgin, I must choose one person and not date this one and that one, if maybe I see that he is also dating. This spoils you as the girl and at the end you are the one that is being finished, not him. (Female group, Zamani High School)

Given the framing of women as those who 'naturally' stand to lose from sexual activity, who will inevitably bear the consequences, such lessons also hail women as responsible for not only protecting themselves from desired or undesired sexual engagement, the consequences and potential violence, but also for keeping larger social moralities in place. The quote from a participant at a single sex girls' school is illustrative of how she has internalised such messages and promotes the notion of girls' responsibility to protect themselves and the wider familial and social system:

... honestly speaking I feel like the whole teenage pregnancy is really, really, really bringing down our system in education and stuff because more girls are falling pregnant and STIs and stuff like you that ... Our education and uhm, uhm, there are many diseases contracted during that time and it is not going well. I think we as teenagers we need to protect ourselves and not being out there doing all this kind of stuff that put you in risk because you still got a future ahead of you and you still need to think about that and the money, I mean the money that goes into this school thing that your parents have to pay it is just not worth it. (Individual interview, Bloom High School)

Research on gender-based violence shows how young women live in a state of high alert of the possibility of sexual violence (Radford & Stanko, 1996) and consequently are expected to, and reportedly do, respond in protective ways to avoid such 'danger' through a regime of self-regulation and 'precautionary strategies' (Sanger, 2008; Gordon & Collins, 2013: 98). Invocations of practices of protection are similarly directed at young women at school. In the conversation below, which focused initially on a rich dialogue about 'the double standards', the notion of women's need to be 'in control' and to protect themselves, whether from 'losing' their virginity (represented as something to 'hold on to'), or whether from the consequences of pregnancy or STIs, is clearly evident:

Int: You guys are talking about important things. You guys are talking about gender roles, you know. Where a girl is supposed to be, where a boy is supposed to be, and how that creates a situation where the boy will lose interest in the girl, and the girl is left feeling, it's my fault because I'm confused, so I need to know if I want to do this but I don't want to do it. So, that's an interesting situation, and then you guys are talking about, also, the roles being swapped, where ... it doesn't mean the boys have to initiate sex; you're saying that girls are coming to the point where they are initiating sex. How do you guys feel about that? Is that OK or is that not OK?

F6: It's not OK.

Int: It's bad. It's not OK?

F1: It's not part of the girl-code.

Int: OK, so, you're saying that it's normal for the boy to initiate sex. The girls need to be the ones who have to wait for the boy to come and ask them.

F1: Yes, because if we girls initiate the sex, then we are going to be seen as a B I T C H [spells out the word].

F8: Sluts.

Int: OK, so, if you ask for sex from your boyfriend, you're going to be seen ... or from a guy, you're going to be seen as a bitch?

Participants [in unison]: Yes, or a slut.

Int: OK, a slut, and a bitch. So, in some ways there's also pressure on the girls to be a certain way, hey? Boys have more freedom.

Participants [in unison]: Yes, it is.

Int: Is it like this in your school and community?

F2: Yes. That's how it is.

F1: Girls are more closely guarded than boys.

Int: So, girls have to watch ... you have to watch yourselves?

F6: Yes. Self-control always. (Female group, Blue Lagoon High; our emphasis)

Discussion

Sexuality education within the LO programme at schools is clearly an opportunity to work with young people around challenging gender and power inequalities, including the associated problems of coercive and unwanted sexual practices and violence. Yet, as we have seen from existing research and this study, adding a component on sexuality education in the curriculum, does not necessarily ensure a constructive and appropriate approach that promotes young women's positive sexual agency. On the contrary, such lessons might re-inscribe the very inequalities, stereotypes and stigma that such education could consciously hope to destabilise. Thus, while there has been a particular call to work with young women in facilitating their agency to negotiate safe and equitable sexual practices, they appear to be receiving messages that arguably reinstate a form of femininity as vulnerable, submissive and inherently victimised.

These research findings reinforce other work, elaborated earlier, that shows how schools are invested in reproducing dominant gendered norms that for young women could mean a reinstatement of a submissive and vulnerable femininity and a denial of their sexual desires and agency. The lessons young women are taught is that active sexuality while still at school is not only euphemistically not 'fun,' but indeed represents doom and despair. Sexuality education emerges here and elsewhere as powerfully gendered with different emphasis in the narrative of consequence and responsibility being directed at young women versus young men. Messages that are directed very specifically to young women learners, and which they appear to be invested in, foreground a punitive response to the merest sign of their sexual desires and activity, constructing it as morally reprehensible and inherently punishable. This function, as illuminated through the narratives of a group of young people on their experiences of sexuality education, is achieved through the dominant trope of danger, risk and consequence, in which young women are constructed as those responsible for avoiding such consequences, both for their own sakes and for the larger social and moral landscape. The construction of the school as a sanitised space where signs of young sexualities are not tolerated but rendered 'a problem' instead, further serves to reinforce a notion that young women's sexuality is unacceptable and will result in 'punishment' (the inevitable consequences of pregnancy, illness, damage and/or loss of future).

Conclusion

It remains a challenge to ensure that young women are adequately prepared for dealing with existing inequalities in their relationships with men and within patriarchal social contexts, while also inspiring their sense of confidence, agency and strength. The sexuality education component of the LO curriculum has been viewed as one resource for facilitating young people's development of life skills to challenge normative gender roles that facilitate unsafe, inequitable and coercive sexual practices. While it is of course important that young women (and young men) know and understand the constraints and risks of the context in which they will engage in sexuality and relationships, the prevailing image of young women as inevitably a victim, in need of protection and vulnerable to 'damage' of moral, emotional or physical kind, proliferating within the endless 'warnings' and calls for their self-policing and control, is arguably problematic for any practices of gender justice. It appears that far more work is required to challenge the way in which dominant gendered and moralistic discourses shape the kinds of messages that are conveyed to young men and women in the LO classroom. While LO teachers themselves are important figures in this project, it is also the responsibility of those who manage schools and those who write the curriculum and develop policy to generate a more critical and reflexive approach to working with young people. It is undoubtedly a complex project to work with young people towards equitable sexual and gender practices and in particular to promote young women's sexual agency in a context which is still powerfully shaped by gender inequalities, normative violence and poverty. The challenges of LO education is to work within this contested space, harnessing the complexities as a resource, rather than reiterating the reductive and constraining messages which reduce sexual practices to danger, disease and damage and young women to unfortunate agents of negative social and personal consequences.

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