The most salient feature of a sexual experience is whether the sexual experience was wanted. Yet whether the experience was wanted is not always clear. Conflicted meanings and messages attached to female sexuality can leave the female unsure as to how she feels about the event. For example, while a female may want the intimacy of sexual intercourse, she may fear an unwanted pregnancy. Conversely, while a female may not want to have sexual intercourse, she may want the financial support that having sexual intercourse may bring. This chapter treats what I deem to be women’s non-coerced sexual experiences, looking at why females said they had sex for the first time, whether they planned their sexual debuts, and how they conceived of the hierarchy of sexual needs in the relationship to give the reader insight into factors which influence female decision-making about her control at her sexual debut experience from these two qualitative samples in Brazil. Beginning with a detailing of positive, agentic female sexual debuts and progressing to less positive non-coercive sexual debuts, the discussion which follows is an attempt at informing female sexual decision-making and consequently agency in that gray area between wanted and unwanted sexual debut experiences.

I invoke the dimensions laid out by Simon and Gagnon’s tri-dimensional model of sexual scripts (1987) to understand females’ reasons for engaging in sexual debut. Reasons to have sexual intercourse can be intrapsychic, meaning having sexual intercourse for personal, egoistic reasons, or cultural/interpersonal, meaning having sexual intercourse for someone else (one’s partner) or because of the social consequences of having sexual intercourse (which I am calling instrumental sex). A female who does not express agency at sexual debut may have sexual intercourse for
intrapsychic reasons just as a female who does express agency may have sex for cultural reasons. Yet I find it valuable to make the distinction between the reason for having sex and agency since I expect that a female who has sexual intercourse for intrapsychic reasons is more likely focused on the event itself whereas a female who has sexual intercourse for cultural reasons is more likely to be focused on the consummation of the act rather than on the process of the act. Thus, for females in the latter category, issues of control, respectfulness of the partner, and so forth, may be ancillary to what that female finds most important about the experience.

**Methodology**

Studying female sexual agency at sexual debut requires trusting participants' renditions of the stories they choose to tell since the event under study is by its very nature hidden from everyone but the participants and their sex partners. Although using individuals' own renditions of events may be flawed, it remains the best research method for sociologists to learn about this intimate event. I selected focus groups as my methodology, thereby privileging group interaction about sexual agency and coercion over personal disclosure. In selecting this method, I sought to capture females' observations of normal sexual experiences at sexual debut.

**Study sites:**

This study was conducted in 2002 the southeast city of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, and the northeast city of Recife, Pernambuco. Both cities are large metropolitan areas and the capitals of their respective states. With approximately 80 percent of the Brazil’s population residing in cities, 10 of which have more than a million inhabitants, it was fitting to carry out an urban study. The two cities provide an interesting comparison between the wealthier, industrial southeast and the more impoverished, agrarian northeast. I determined participants' city of residence by recruiting at locations only within the city limits of the two cities in the study.

I conducted one set of focus groups with women ages 18-21 and another set with women 30-39 to capture the sexual experiences of two different generations. The lower end of the age range began at age 18 so as to not have to worry about obtaining parental consent. I chose a narrow age range for the younger age groups since puberty and young adulthood bring with them many rapid changes. I extended the age range in the older age groups since adults do not experience such rapid social change, which facilitated recruitment. All respondents were recruited through informal networks. Within each age group, focus groups were conducted by a native Portuguese social science researcher with lower-income and middle-income respondents rendering a total of 24 focus groups.
The respondents’ demographics are presented in Table 1. The author was present at all the focus groups acting as note-taker.

The discussions covered what dating had been like when respondents had been girls; women’s expectations of their sexual debut experiences compared to the lived sexual debut experiences with which they were familiar exploring topics such as the extent to which females were able to exercise control over their sexual debut experiences (who initiated sexual intercourse, where would it take place, would the couple talk about sex, would they discuss the use of contraception, etc.); sexual communication; sexual negotiation strategies; and sexual pressures. While the moderator encouraged the participants to discuss social norms and popularly accepted behavior in the Brazilian context, the participants usually gravitated towards talking about personal experience. The focus groups ranged in length from an hour and a quarter to almost three hours. The audio tapes were transcribed and the transcripts were cleaned in Portuguese and I translated only selected quotes into English. While respondents’ thoughts and experiences regarding coercive sexual debut have been documented elsewhere (Moore 2004), the analysis below is limited to the non-coerced sexual debut experiences.

**Positive sexual debut experiences**

Females who experienced positive sexual debuts related a number of significant characteristics of their debuts which, taken together, sketch a portrait of common elements of wanted debuts. Some of the characteristics of positive sexual debut experiences are that the females planned their sexual debuts by choosing the partner and the time for sexual intercourse to happen and they had sexual intercourse for intrapsychic reasons.

I begin with narratives of strikingly agentic females who orchestrated their own sexual debuts. They stand out because of the control they exercised at their sexual debuts as well as the satisfaction they expressed with the event. This respondent detailed the preparations she and her partner made for her sexual debut.

We decided the date when his family was traveling. He couldn’t go because of his work. He stayed at home and we discussed at length the best time, the best day, what contraceptive method we’d use. I had never gone to a gynecologist, né? So the only option we had was condoms. The city [we were living in] was this size [using her hands to show a very small circle] and if you’d have bought condoms on whichever corner, the whole world would have found out. He went to another city to buy condoms [laughter]. It’s true.

--Belo Horizonte, middle-income, 31 years old, white, 15 years of education, not married, no children
The way this participant went about getting information about sexuality further demonstrated her high level of sexual agency.

I never had this conversation [about sexuality] in my house, I always informed myself through books, friends and all that. I went to the library and grabbed a book from the librarian, and I hid it inside another book [while I read it at the library], né? That’s how I informed myself. But in spite of that, all the information that I sought, that I collected, this did not diminish my fears and my anxieties.

--Belo Horizonte, middle-income, 31 years old, white, 15 years of education, not married, no children

In spite of her ability to obtain information, this participant still voiced experiencing fear and anxiety at sexual debut, underscoring the ubiquity of those emotions at sexual debut.

Another unusually agentic narrative emerged from another older respondent:

I arranged everything. It was a relationship that had ended; he had been my first boyfriend. I was 17 years old and he and I ended because he started having sex with a friend of mine, friend [she made air quotes around the word friend]. And I didn’t have any more emotional strength to continue in this relationship. After that, I was on vacation, I was already working, I worked since the age of 15, and I said [to myself], ‘I’m going to take a vacation and go to Maceió. I’m going to call this [ex-boyfriend] and I’m going to have sex with him there.’ So I chose the hotel, everything. I chose everything and called him. ‘Look, it’s like this, I’m on vacation and I wanted to know if you want to go with me to Maceió. Will you come?’ [He said:] ‘Geez, have you gone crazy?’ [I said:] ‘No, I’m asking you, are you going to come or not? We’ll spend a week there.’ He said, ‘Tomorrow, right?’ [I said:] ‘Tomorrow.’ [He said:] ‘Let’s go.’ So I went and got him. […] I was driving and I arrived and said, ‘It’s today.’ It was. I bled. […] I prepared myself, I permed my hair. I remember I cut it, I waxed [my body hair], and I did a spa treatment. I prepared myself for that moment, like I was going to get married. I did all the same preparations exactly as if I was going to get married, washing, bathing this, bathing that. ‘I will be beautiful, marvelous.’ Just like that. When I got to the hotel, I didn’t want to [have sexual intercourse] immediately. I will take a bath—so that everything’s just right.[I told him:] ‘You don’t take a bath with me, you stay there, be quiet, wait.’ [laughter]

--Recife, middle-income, 32 years old, morena, 15 years of education, separated/divorced, no children

This participant had a number of distinguishing characteristics that set her apart from the other focus group participants. First, she ascribed to more egalitarian gender roles than other focus group participants. She also had a very open relationship with her parents about sex. Her mother taught her feminist ideas regarding sexual issues, telling the participant that the pain females experience at sexual debut was because of psychological repression. Her father, for his part, made sure she had books about sexuality available to her. Her parents had reassured her that if she had gotten
pregnant as a teenager, they would have assumed the raising of the child. “I was very respected, very safe at home, and we talked about everything, everything openly,” she related. She explained:

My dad had a bookstore, so we had books by the mountains. He never asked us to read, he [just] always left [the books] very accessible. Books for all ages—from age nine through I don’t know when—were there on the lowest shelf. Me and my brother talked when we had any doubts. They had cartoons, I don’t know what else. Me and my brother would play. He’d show me his penis, ‘Look, Dinha, mine’s like this.’ Really little, and my mom never cooled this down. She’d say, ‘They’re touching each other, they can desire each other, they can want each other.’ Everything was very normal in the house, we talked about everything, about anal sex, the preliminaries [making out], caresses, what was cool, what is good for you and to always [have sexual intercourse] with whom you like.

--Recife, middle-income, 32 years old, morena, 15 years of education, separated/divorced, no children

While perhaps alarming for some readers, this treatment of sexuality in her household sets her apart from the other participants who primarily related stories of sexual repression in the home.

These agentic sexual debut testimonies reflect the commonality among all the positive sexual debut testimonies shared in the focus groups which was that the participants who had positive sexual debuts had had information about sexual intercourse, whether it was presented to them or they sought it out. That both of these positive debut experiences were from middle-income participants draws attention to the fact that access to information was easier for middle-income individuals.

Abstract, active female sexual agency was endorsed by younger, lower-income participants. These participants advocated demanding sexual attention, using the Bible as a justification.

PARTICIPANT1: The Bible says, ‘Love your neighbor like you love yourself.’ I think you have to love yourself first before you can love another person. [Because it’s like] you love another person, and then what position does that leave you in? Like was already said here, ‘A woman starts having sexual relations and her partner spills his sperm before she…’ né, so…

PARTICIPANT2: It’s because it’s difficult for a woman…what’s the name? How do they say it?

PARTICIPANT3: Get to orgasm? [Everyone helps her come up with the word orgasm]

PARTICIPANT 2: That’s it. For a woman to get to orgasm. He gets there before she does.

PARTICIPANT1: So she has to open her mouth and say, ‘I haven’t reached it yet. Wait a little! [laughter] Are you thinking you’re the only one here? I also want to feel [an orgasm].’ So I think you have to say, open your mouth, because if you don’t open your mouth…

Quem não fala Deus não escuta, Deus não ouve [God doesn’t hear, God won’t listen to those who don’t open their mouths]. So you have to open your mouth, talk, bellow, and there, what will happen will happen.

--lower-income 18-21 year olds, Recife
The fact that one participant could not come up with the word orgasm and the rest of the participants helped her come up with it was indicative of the level of comfort and knowledge in this group since the word orgasm did not come up in the majority of groups. Curiosity was a motivation to have sexual intercourse in some positive sexual debut narratives.

The day that it happened, we had talked, and he was saying that he wanted to get to know me better ["Wanting to get to know her better" was a euphemism for having sexual intercourse] and I went along accepting that he would get to know me better, because I also had a certain curiosity, you know? In knowing him better, and everything, you know? And he talked to me and I asked him if he could give me some time, you know? And he gave me time, and all, and it was very well prepared. I was in a cool restaurant, I had arranged my clothes, hair, and it was this good thing, this dating, you know? The right atmosphere and all. And after that we followed the itinerary that we had planned, you understand?

--lower-income 30-39 year olds, Belo Horizonte

Desire to have sexual intercourse was discussed as the primary reason to engage in sexual intercourse among the lower-income 18-21 year olds and the middle-income 30-39 year olds in Recife. Otherwise, desire was talked about as present at other times prior to sexual debut; as a motivator to engage in sexual intercourse in the abstract sense; and imperative to the sexual experience, again in the abstract sense. Yet middle-income 30-39 year olds from Belo Horizonte and Recife named significant impediments to experiencing desire at sexual debut: general fear, fear of being abandoned, fear of becoming pregnant, fear of social taboos around sex; and predatory male sexuality. These individuals were self-aware of the cultural scenarios getting in the way of experiencing sexual intercourse for intrapsychic reasons.

A minority of participants, spanning income levels and age groups, felt that they had had positive sexual debuts because they had been treated respectfully. These narratives do not contain examples of female sexual agency, except perhaps in that the females were discerning about with whom they had their sexual debut experiences.

My [sexual debut] was different. He was concerned because he had never gone out with someone who bled [at sexual debut] because he’d always gone out with mulheres [sexually experienced women]. Then suddenly to go out with a virgin who bled—he was totally preoccupied, completely attentive. ‘How are you? How is that thing? I don’t know how! I didn’t think you were a virgin…’ (lower-income 30-39 year olds, Recife, Group 19). I was with him five years of my life, and it was three years and a little of having sexual relations and all that…in our sexual relations, he was tender with me, asked me sometimes which way I wanted it. He really concerned himself with me (lower-income 18-21 year olds, Recife, Group 21).
With me, [my sexual debut] happened with great care, [he had] a preoccupation not to hurt me, it was done with total tenderness (middle-income 30-39 year olds, Recife, Group 23).

The first participant quoted above identified that her sexual debut as different, detailing the care expressed by her partner. The quotation from the lower-income 18-21 year olds from Recife supports the contention made by the participants at large that males were more attentive to virgins than non-virgins.

Information about sexuality appears to be related to class. The middle-income, 30-39 year old participants who told agentic narratives of their sexual debuts also related access to information. The lower-income female who cited curiosity as a primary reason for engaging in sexual intercourse may have been motivated out of a lack of information. While one lower-income 18-21 year old participant from Recife supported advocating for one’s own sexual pleasure, that was a comparatively aggressive approach that was not advocated elsewhere. Only a few participants felt they had respectful partners at sexual debut. Agency appears not to be a prerequisite to having a positive sexual debut experience, but it seems to help.

Non-coercive instrumental reasons for having sexual intercourse

I now turn to the cultural reasons for having sex such peer pressure or wanting to leave home. Peer pressure was the most commonly cited cultural reason for having non-coercive sexual intercourse at sexual debut. It was most frequently discussed as an abstract feeling created out of a general perception about when it was appropriate to have one’s sexual debut.

PARTICIPANT1: But this question about saying ‘no,’ it’s interesting because like…there are times when things seem to be in style, right? Like, I think lots of times people make decisions, not like you’re wanting it at that time, but because you’ve become influenced. Or, like, with television, this type of media talks a lot about pleasure, sexuality. People sometimes, they get…it awakens an interest, you know? So, lots of times a person makes a decision not because she wants to be different, but to ‘follow the wave,’ you know? ‘If my colleagues, if they have kids, I’ll have to have a kid also.’ […]

PARTICIPANT2: I have a friend who’s the same age as me, and she’s a virgin, and she says, ‘Oh, I’m scared to death of dying a virgin.’ [laughter] [inaudible speech] A friend of my sister’s is 19 years old and she’s still a virgin. And they start talking, ‘But you’re a museum piece, [laughter] after 19 years, virgin!’ [laughter] And I started thinking that this thing of being a virgin has become a little bit uncommon, you know? Until like…because it’s natural that a 19 year old person’s not a virgin, you know?

--lower-income 18-21 year olds, Belo Horizonte
PARTICIPANT1: There's also the person that thinks, 'All of my friends have already had sex; I'm the only one who hasn't. I'm different...I can't be.' There's a lot of risk in thinking like this, of course.

PARTICIPANT2: You have to think like that. 'Is there some objective in not having had sex yet?' I think you have to think, you have to think like that.

PARTICIPANT3: [...] I think there are lots of girls who suffer from pressure from their own friends--

PARTICIPANT4: --from their own friends, most definitely!

PARTICIPANT5: I also think so. Sometimes you don’t feel like getting a boyfriend, you’re not interested in dating, but all of your friends have boyfriends, all of your friends already had sex, so you’ll have sex just this once, you know? [Your friends say:] 'You don’t know anything.' So you wind up feeling like, displaced, you know?

--lower-income 18-21 year olds, Belo Horizonte

PARTICIPANT1: When you asked about behavior within a circle of friends, for example one thing for me was really noteworthy. On the question of sexuality [...] after 17 [years of age], sexuality, virginity, was lived liked it was a problem, you know? So you had this thing where a friend perdeu [lost her virginity], another perdeu, I also have to perder. [...] I was 18, going on 19, and I was uncomfortable because I was a virgin [laughter].

PARTICIPANT2: [...] My group that I hung around with, young adolescents, you had to, in quotes, had to do it [have sexual intercourse] [...] 

PARTICIPANT3: There was this other thing, also, which was the question of moving to the big city because that's when one began living in dormitories. We started to drink and smoke and you had to have sex. It was to leave behind being a little girl from the Interior and to be someone from the big city. I saw lots of cases that happened like that, né? I think it was for this reason—to insert oneself socially, for many of them, to insert themselves socially.

--middle-income 30-39 year olds, Belo Horizonte

The importance of 'fitting-in' in adolescence cannot be underestimated (Wiseman 2002). Feeling singled out as the token virgin, whether overtly or simply through the absorption of social norms, plays a role in young women deciding to have sex. When females felt pressured to engage in sexual intercourse, it decreased their probability of a positive intercourse experience.

[Sex] is not like girls imagined it. [...] [Out of peer pressure], she gets a guy and finds out that he doesn’t have a drop of tenderness in him, isn’t patient, and she becomes traumatized for the rest of her life (lower-income 18-21 year olds, Belo Horizonte, Group 10).

Lower-income, older participants cited wanting to leave the house as another primary interpersonal reason for having sex. During the time of their sexual debuts, women would leave the house through marriage after having had sexual intercourse. Women most commonly wanted to
leave the house away from under a strict father. His strictness was manifested in closely controlling his daughter's behavior such as not letting her date, wear make-up, wear the types of clothes she wanted to wear, etc.

MODERATOR: Was the desire to leave the house to gain some freedom a reason to have sex?
PARTICIPANT1: Many times.
PARTICIPANT2: You did this, or you 'lost yourself.'
MODERATOR: Lost yourself how?
PARTICIPANT2: In the arms of a man [laugher] [inaudible speech] and lost your virginity.
MODERATOR: Yeah?
PARTICIPANT3: That was one way to do it. Losing one's virginity meant that the boy was obligated to marry you or instead meant that you left the house.
MODERATOR: You had to get married?
EVERYONE: Yes.
PARTICIPANT1: It still is.
MODERATOR: It is?
PARTICIPANT1: Yeah, but it used to be even more so. [laughter] [inaudible speech]
PARTICIPANT: You don't have to do it anymore.
PARTICIPANT2: [inaudible speech] if she were no longer a virgin, she'd get married. [inaudible speech] She won, right? [inaudible speech] She'd take him to the police. It wasn't at the notary's office like today; it was at the police where she would get married. [inaudible speech] 15, 20 years ago.
PARTICIPANT3: It used to be that when a girl was no longer a virgin, it was a case for the police, she had to get married at the police

--lower-income 30-39 year olds, Belo Horizonte

MODERATOR: Do girls think about marrying when girls think about having sex?
PARTICIPANT: [A friend of mine] married at 16. She married pregnant and she only had sex because she wanted to leave the house. She said that she only had relations with him and married because she wanted to leave the house because she didn't have any freedom at home. So she thought that if she got married, she could get out from under her father and he'd [her father] leave her in peace.

--lower-income 18-21 year olds, Belo Horizonte

MODERATOR: Did they have sex to have sex or to get married?
PARTICIPANT: They wanted to get married. I had the opportunity to meet up with a friend recently who I knew as an adolescent who had sex to marry her partner, and she married him, she's still with him today

--middle-income 30-39 year olds, Belo Horizonte

This behavior was familiar to older participants in both socio-economic groups. This prescription for leaving the house is no longer as common as it was a generation ago, as the first group quoted
above pointed out. The majority of younger and middle-income participants felt that having one's sexual debut was not a reason to have to leave the house, whereas getting pregnant was.

For some lower-income, older women, sexual debut was performed as a marital obligation.

MODERATOR: In your day and age, it [having sexual intercourse] wasn't much out of impulse, was it?
PARTICIPANT1: Under no circumstances [was it out of impulse]!
MODERATOR: Yeah? Why?
PARTICIPANT1: Yeah, because you arranged a boyfriend. Your parents agreed that you could marry and you also agreed that you would marry. Do you understand?
PARTICIPANT2: It wasn't out of curiosity.
PARTICIPANT3: No, it wasn't out of curiosity.
PARTICIPANT2: No it wasn't.

--lower-income 30-39 year olds, Belo Horizonte

Just because sexual intercourse happened for the first time within the context of marriage does not necessarily mean that it was anticipated. Older, lower-income focus group participants related that they had no idea what their husband had expected on their wedding night since they did not have any information about sexual intercourse or sexual education.

These cultural reasons for having sexual intercourse: peer pressure, to get out of the house, and marital obligation, all serve to disappear females’ feelings about engaging in sexual intercourse. In these situations, females were placing instrumental reasons above personal reasons for engaging in this most intimate of acts. Adolescents’ perceptions of the level of sexual experience among their peers have a strong influence on adolescents’ sexual behavior (Kirby 1999, Bearman 1999) yet its role influences female sexual behavior as been looked at less frequently than peer as a force encouraging males to have sexual intercourse (for an Nicaraguan example, see Rani et al. 2003).

**Females placed male sexual pleasure first**

Even in these more positive sexual experiences, females across age groups, socio-economic statuses, and cities generally felt that males were extremely self-centered when it came to sexual pleasure. (However, almost all participants agreed that males were most careful, respectful and attentive to their female partners when the partner was a virgin.)

PARTICIPANT1: In my time, there were the preliminaries, there was the kiss, after the kiss there were those attempts, the hugs, a penetration. I didn't feel much. [...] Do you understand how it was? He took grabs here, there, and it all happened fast. I think with him I was looking for pleasure for him because I didn't know anything; I didn't look either
to give lots of pleasure. I think he was ignorant. He thought with penetration he was
giving pleasure.

PARTICIPANT2: I don't know if this is a question of culture. I think the guys from here...the
story is like this. Women are depositories of sperm [...] and women see at that moment
that it can't be like that and that it has to change.

PARTICIPANT1: He doesn't try to explore, look for our G-spots.

PARTICIPANT3: He's not concerned about this. The majority of men just want it [sexual
intercourse] to happen and it doesn't matter at all to them if she's being satisfied, if you're
liking it or not.

MODERATOR: The first time is it like this?

PARTICIPANT3: For me it was. [...] ParticIpant4: It was [like that] the first time. [...] ParticIPant3: It was on the thigh. The making out, the kisses, the hugs, the grabby-
grabby, but he masturbated himself on my thighs. That is to say, he satisfied himself,
I didn't orgasm at all, né, it was just that, just that for him. To have a boyfriend who is
satisfied...he thought that he was loving me.

PARTICIPANT5: And you thought so too.

PARTICIPANT3: I did. It's because I hadn't had experience with an orgasm. I didn't have
penetration, anything. He was the one who was rubbing himself, he was feeling excited,
and you? Only in the kisses [did I experience sexual excitement]. The experience that I
had was this.

--middle-income 30-39 year olds, Recife

I had the preconception that a woman was obligated. If males wanted to have sex,
women were obligated to satisfy their male desire, you understand? I never thought
that males...like...had, that is to say, that a male had to give pleasure to a woman. What
kind of pleasure would he give? What is a woman's pleasure when she's with a man? He'd
arrive and want to have relations with her and not even want to know if she liked it, that's
what happened, right?

--lower-income 30-39 year olds, Belo Horizonte

MODERATOR: Do you think the first time females had sex that they were concerned
about giving tenderness to the male?

PARTICIPANT1: [We thought about] pleasing him. You have to please him so as not to
lose him. [You'd think:] 'I'm already having sex with him, I'm with him,' let's say for the first
time,'and I have to please him.'

PARTICIPANT2: The females thought more about pleasing him than pleasing herself.

PARTICIPANT3: Yeah.

PARTICIPANT4: Yeah. [...] ParticIPant4: Sex used to be very oppressed, it didn't exist [i.e. no one talked about it].
Today we have the knowledge that women can experience various types of pleasure.
Before, we didn't know this. Lots of times, men only thought of themselves. He didn't
look to the woman to see if she was satisfied or not.

--lower-income 30-39 year olds, Recife
While there was wide recognition of the male behavior of masturbating himself against women’s thighs in the middle-income group quoted above, this male behavior was acknowledged with rue and disbelief. Since vaginal penetration did not happen, this experience did not constitute sexual debut yet it frequently was a precursor to sexual debut. Females looked back in resentment at how the males acted selfishly as well as their own ignorance at that time about their bodies. A lower-income female quoted in the second group expressed trying to cater to her partners’ sexual needs, demonstrating that some females further reified this selfish male behavior by striving for the males’ sexual satisfaction too.

Older participants perceived males of today to be less sexually self-centered than when they were adolescents because of the changes underway in gender roles moving in the direction of a more egalitarian treatment of the sexes. In addition, older participants perceived younger people to possess greater sexual knowledge than they did at that age. However, data from the majority of younger groups of both socio-economic statuses in both cities did not substantiate this perception.

MODERATOR: The first time [a female has sexual intercourse], are males concerned about a female’s orgasm?

PARTICIPANT1: No. Normally a man isn’t concerned with a woman’s orgasm at all.

MODERATOR: No?

PARTICIPANT1: They’re more concerned with their own orgasm, né?

MODERATOR: Really?

PARTICIPANT1: Really. They…when they orgasm…that’s it. If they orgasm, they’ve reached their goal. That’s it.

--lower-income 18-21 year olds, Belo Horizonte

PARTICIPANT1: I was emotionally chantageada [tricked].

MODERATOR: What happened?

PARTICIPANT1: He was like, ‘Oh, my darling, if you don’t want to now, that’s okay. I want to. But if you want to marry a virgin, if you want to, I’ll wait. I’ll wait, of course I’ll wait for you. But think about me a little bit also.’ [inaudible syntax] That’s why I did it. I wasn’t forced. But it also wasn’t because I wanted to. It was like that. I think like this. He does everything I want to, do you understand? He’s the guy that I want. I think I have to stop being egotistical, né? That’s how it happened.

--lower-income 18-21 year olds, Belo Horizonte

1 Female sexual pleasure was interpreted to mean almost uniformly female orgasm. Therefore, in spite of the fact that extremely few females experience orgasm at sexual debut and that there are many other ways of experiencing sexual pleasure than sexual orgasm, this question is indicative of the way that the focus group respondents spoke about female sexual pleasure.
MODERATOR: Now I’m curious about something. You said you thought about what the boy would think: ‘If he’ll stay with me, if he won’t stay with me!’ And the girl, did she think of herself?
PARTICIPANT1 and Participant2: No.
PARTICIPANT3: No. For her desire?
PARTICIPANT4: We thought more about satisfying the partner than we did about satisfying ourselves. We satisfied him. We thought like this. What he thought was good for us was completely perfect.
PARTICIPANT5: I am not like that.
PARTICIPANT2: But the majority of women are…
PARTICIPANT4: There are women who don’t have the courage to go to him and say, ‘I am not liking it like this.’ But the thing is she sees the guy likes it, the guy is excited to do it, so she continues, even until…women know how to fake [an orgasm] and males don’t. There’s no way they can fake [an orgasm] for women.

--lower-income 18-21 year olds, Recife

Using the sexual pleasure argument, females related how males were able to dissuade females from using condoms at sexual debut.

PARTICIPANT1: They really did it [had sex without contraception] to satisfy the guy because guys don’t like having sex with a condom. They allege that it’s uncomfortable. So the woman does it to satisfy him since he wants to have sex without a condom.
PARTICIPANT2: The guys say, ‘Having sex with a condom is like sucking a candy with the paper on.’
MODERATOR: And you think girls do it that way just to satisfy the guy?
EVERYONE: Yeah [loudly].
PARTICIPANT3: Yeah, it’s just to satisfy…because they’re scared of losing the guy and they think that they’ll lose him. ‘I’ll have sex with him before marriage, practicing sex all the different ways, all the different modes, without a condom, without anything, so that I can keep the guy.’

--lower-income 18-21 year olds, Recife

MODERATOR: When girls start thinking about their first sexual relation, do they or do they not think about contraception?
PARTICIPANT1: There are some who I think thought about it. Then there are others that do not think about it because at the moment of truth, it all happens according to the criteria of the males. They [males] have the power to say, ‘Oh, no, with a condom it’s lousy, and it hurts a lot.’ They can stick those ideas in the head of the girl, who will have rubber.

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2 Faking sexual pleasure was discussed as a common occurrence by many of the focus group participants.
3 The word ‘rubber’ is not used to denote condoms in Brazil, as it is in the United States. The way it is used in this quote is to say “rubber” and not “a rubber” would be entering inside of her.
entering inside of her, so she'll be less interested [in using contraception]…[The males say:] 'It’s a candy with paper' 

PARTICIPANT2/3/4: [Laughing and covering their faces].

PARTICIPANT1: They [males] always say the same thing. We could protect ourselves. We could say, 'Oh, no, my first time I want it to be with a condom.' But at the moment when it's going to happen, he arrives [and says:] 'No, because it's a really lousy thing [to use a condom], and you will feel bad.' They want it more like this, they want to feel good and they don't even think about the woman at all. The majority of times she's giving pleasure to him and that's it. So her passing pleasure to him is what's important, irrespective of whether condoms were used or not.

--lower-income 18-21 year olds, Recife

The expectation that males know more about sexual matters than do females facilitates males' manipulation of the sexual encounter to maximize their own sexual pleasure. The fact that females accepted foregoing contraception to maximize male sexual pleasure shows how far females were willing to go to accommodate male sexual pleasure. The anger these younger females feel about being sexually manipulated was clearly palpable.

There was a consensus across all the focus groups that males are in general sexually self-centered but they were presumed to be the least sexually self-centered at a partner's sexual debut. While older respondents perceived this to be changing, younger respondents still believed that males were sexually self-centered to the point of cajoling their partner into having sex without a condom because it would reduce his pleasure. With hindsight, females were angry about how self-centeredly males acted. The anger females expressed regarding males' self-serving sexual interests is an example of the disjuncture between females' intellectual grasp of their rights and their ability to enforce adherence to those rights. They understood that they were more than "sperm receptacles" but did not have the ability to enforce greater sexual respect from their partners.

Conclusion

The reasons participants gave for having sexual intercourse at sexual debut came from an open-ended question about why they and their peers had had sex the first time. The fact that peer pressure was only cited in Belo Horizonte and not Recife may reveal something about the different sexual cultures of the two cities. In Belo Horizonte, it was mentioned within all the divisions of focus groups. The fact that females said they had sexual intercourse most frequently out of instrumental reasons may indicate that females' interest in and expectations of control at sexual debut are being

4 The common expression, which this participant was abbreviating, was "Having sex with a condom is like eating a candy with the wrapper on."
moderated by an ultimate focus in the consummation of the sexual encounter. Curiosity was the only intrapsychic reason cited with regularity for engaging in sexual intercourse, and that reason was cited much more frequently in Recife than in Belo Horizonte.

The most typical profile of a lower-income, 18-21 year old woman's non-coercive sexual debut experience from Belo Horizonte was that the female engaged in sexual intercourse out of peer pressure with the male's sexual pleasure demanding preeminence in the sexual interaction. Lower-income, 30-39 year olds in Belo Horizonte typically had their sexual debuts to leave the house or as a marriage obligation. Middle-income, 30-39 year olds in Belo Horizonte primarily had sexual intercourse out of peer pressure and to leave the house. Lower-income 18-21 year olds from Recife were most likely to cite curiosity as their reason for engaging in sexual intercourse. The amount of control wielded by males in the sexual interaction—control that he either claimed or that she gave him—was made clear by the respondents. These experiences represented the most positive experiences at sexual debut of women in the sample. Therefore, the fact that so few of the cases happened on the woman's terms or transpired in a way that left the woman feeling positively is discouraging and worrying.

The most outstanding characteristic of females who were more in control of their sexual experiences than their peers was that these females possessed information and a sense of entitlement to determine what happened to their bodies. Aside from the minority of participants whose partners treated them thoughtfully and with respect at sexual debut, the rest of the focus group participants expressed anger at how males had placed their own sexual interests first at the participants' sexual debuts. One participant related how she collaborated with the male so that he could achieve the maximum amount of pleasure without either of them paying attention to her own needs. Some women related how they would go so far as to fake orgasm. There could be many reasons for why women found it to their advantage to fake sexual pleasure. Possibilities include to validate male sexual prowess, to demonstrate her sexual responsiveness (connoted with being good in bed), or simply a desire to bring about the end of the sexual interaction. The few overtly positive experiences related by the respondents do provide a blueprint for tools that should be imparted to young women to increase the probability that their debuts will happen more on their own terms.

As long as gender inequalities in other aspects of life remain unaddressed, any attempt at changing females' power at the sexual debut dynamic is unlikely to succeed (Salgado de Snyder, 2000).
Acevedo et al. 2000). Villela and Barbosa concluded that reproductive health must be addressed through the power differential between males and females in Brazil (Villela and Barbosa 1996). Yet how does one address these power differences without overhauling gendered social interaction writ large? Assuming that a consummate overhaul of gender interactions is beyond the scope of a policy solution, the challenge lies in females gaining more control in the sexual sphere even in the absence of a more egalitarian restructuring of Brazilian gender relations.

Involving the parents of youth in discussions about traditional gender roles so as to get their assistance in encouraging a more egalitarian distribution of responsibilities within the home could provide a good example for young people (Paiva 1994, Paiva 1996). Bringing males into the process of change is vital not only so that they understand the implications of their actions but also in the hopes that they will consequently reject the sexually dominant roles into which they were socialized. Freire's conscientização could be a model to educate boys that sexual disregard for one's partner is not erotic. Solutions have to be arrived at in conjunction with the disenfranchised, the females, and in particular, the poor, with the aim of gradually establishing a new idea among females regarding their consciousness on the topic of sexual agency. When females experience their negative sexual experiences as an individual problem, they fail to see how their experience is indicative of a greater social dynamic.

References


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6 Conscientização (“consciousness-raising”) was coined by Freire (1970) in his famous book “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” which he used to mean bottom-up cultural change so that the most disenfranchised can set the agenda regarding what they need to reach empowerment which he formulated specifically having to do with education.


Annex

TABLE 1
Respondents’ Demographic Characteristics
(BH=Belo Horizonte; L=Lower-income; M=Middle-income; RE=Recife)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BH L 18-21 (n=26)</th>
<th>BH L 30-39 (n=20)</th>
<th>BH M 18-21 (n=20)</th>
<th>BH M 30-39 (n=24)</th>
<th>RE L 18-21 (n=25)</th>
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| Marital status |                    |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Never in union | 22                | 4                 | 17                | 10                | 17                | 7                 | 12                | 4                 |
| In union       | 1                 | 9                 | 2                 | 1                 | 1                 | 2                 | 1                 | 3                 |
| Married        | 0                 | 5                 | 0                 | 5                 | 6                 | 12                | 0                 | 7                 |
| Separated/Divorced | 2       | 2                 | 0                 | 0                 | 1                 | 7                 | 0                 | 9                 |
| Missing        | 1                 | 0                 | 1                 | 8*                | 0                 | 0                 | 0                 | 0                 |

* Data were not collected on this question from one of the focus groups in this cell.