POWER AND NEGOTIATION: YOUNG WOMEN'S CHOICES ABOUT SEX AND CONTRACEPTION

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This paper explores issues of power and negotiation for two decisions affecting young women's sexual lives: the decision to have sexual intercourse and the decision to contracept. Using data from two recent Australian surveys the paper explores the complexity of these decisions and the way in which gender relations between young people can influence their reproductive outcomes; young women experience a high rate of sexual coercion and violence and current data collections do not allow analysis of their cause.

The path to motherhood can be seen as a series of decisions requiring women to make choices that directly concern their fertility. These choices are related to sexual activity, contraception and resolving pregnancies. However, these choices are not always made alone, as other people may influence, or even control, an individual's decision-making. This paper analyses one national survey and one NSW statewide survey to investigate the effect of unequal power relations on two such decisions: the decision to have sex and the decision to use contraception.

Power is intrinsically linked with sexual activity and reproduction. In 1995, Amaro (1995:440) questioned theories that assume that 'sexual behaviour and encounters are controlled totally by the individual and that these encounters are always initiated under the individual's control'. She argued that theoretical models used to examine risk behaviours, such as the health belief model, the theory of reasoned action and social learning theory, do not account for gendered sexual risk behaviour.

Gender identity affects most aspects of our lives and is learned from a very early age (Charlesworth and Dzur 1987; Maccoby 1988). Psychological studies have found that boys and girls communicate differently, with girls using verbal skills and boys resorting to physical dominance (Charlesworth and Dzur 1987; Maccoby 1988). Several studies have also found that gender roles are influential in sexual relationships (Ehrhardt and Wasserheit 1991; Hudson and Ineichen 1991; Amaro and Gornemann 1992; Ehrhardt 1992; Grinstead et al. 1993; Pleck, Sonenstein and Ku 1993; Holland et al. 1994). Such studies emphasize the experiences of women whose sexual and contraceptive decision-making is controlled by others, either directly or indirectly. That is,

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women may have no choice over sexual or contraceptive decisions, or they may behave submissively or in other socially-prescribed ways. Holland et al. (1994:235) conclude that 'the pursuit of conventional femininity is an unsafe sexual strategy for young women'.

Unequal power in sexual unions can place young women — and men — at risk of having sex or not using contraception against their will. Two recent reports in Australia have heightened attention in the media and among policymakers. A study in Adelaide found that 32 per cent of young men aged 14–26 believe that it is acceptable to force a woman to have sex under certain circumstances. The most notable of these circumstances were if she had had sex with him before, if they had been going out together for a long time, or if she allowed him to touch her below the waist (Golding and Friedman 1997). Another national survey reported that 14 per cent of females aged between 12 and 20 had been raped or sexually assaulted. The same survey found that 20 per cent of young women had been in situations where their boyfriends had tried to force them to have sex and 15 per cent of young men believed that it was acceptable to pressure1 a girl to have sex (Gray 2000).

However, control of one's reproductive life is not just an issue of forced sex or violence. In some countries young men and women gain power through sexual activity and parenthood (Meekers and Ahmed 1997; Meekers and Calves 1997). In Australia sexual activity may provide status amongst peers. Motherhood gives adult status and provides some status among peers, especially in depressed areas. The move to motherhood can itself be seen as a 'power play'. Motherhood defines a female as a woman and gives her a sense of control over herself and her child and, to some extent, her income.

This paper explores issues of power and negotiation over two decisions affecting young women's sexual lives. These decisions are in response to two questions that young women might ask themselves: (1) Sexual activity — Will I have sex? (2) Contraception — Will I use contraception? Two main data sources are used in this paper: the National Survey of Australian Secondary Students HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health 1997 (NSS); and the Young Women's Pregnancy Survey 1998 (YWPS).

The NSS was conducted by the Centre for the Study of Sexually Transmissible Diseases at La Trobe University to examine issues relating to young people's knowledge, attitudes and practices towards HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmissible diseases. The study involved 3,550 secondary school students throughout Australia and included questions relating to sexual behaviour and contraceptive use (Lindsay, Smith and Rosenthal 1997b). Data from the NSS are used to examine the incidence of sexual activity among Australian teenagers. The data are also used to report on teenagers' confidence in their ability to say no to unwanted sex, and their use of condoms.

The YWPS surveyed 1,324 young women living in New South Wales or the Australian Capital Territory who were aged under 20 years and seven months, and had given birth in the year preceding the survey; or who had terminated a pregnancy at a participating abortion clinic in New South Wales before their twentieth birthday. The survey was designed to examine various aspects of the decision to terminate or

1 This term was used in the questionnaire.