

## Adolescent motherhood, reminiscence of an archaic inheritance; the case of a suburban neighborhood in Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico

### Maternidad adolescente, reminiscencia de una herencia arcaica; el caso de una colonia suburbana de Mérida, Yucatán, México

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DOI: 10.35429/JSR.2022.22.8.30.36

Received July 20, 2022; Accepted December 30, 2022

#### Abstract

Objective. Explore and show the similarities and differences between the discourses of adolescent women and their respective parents about pregnancy and motherhood as a social imaginary. Methodology. Qualitative research. In-depth interviews were conducted with adolescent women and their respective parents; In some cases, the adolescents preferred to conduct the interview outside their homes. Informed consent was requested for both the interview and its recording. Discourse analysis was used. This work contributes to understand the phenomenon of motherhood, through the observation of two generations to explain the phenomenon from the perspective of the same social actors, the meaning that they give it and not in the interpretation from outside of those who are dedicated to research in this field. This position from within will generate new veins for research projects that consider the cultural history of the Maya in the organization of their natural environment and the conduct of their spiritual and family life.

#### Resumen

Objetivo. Explorar y mostrar las semejanzas y diferencias entre los discursos de mujeres adolescentes y sus respectivas progenitoras acerca del embarazo y de la maternidad como imaginario social. Metodología. Investigación cualitativa. Se realizaron entrevistas a profundidad a mujeres adolescentes y sus respectivas progenitoras; en algunos casos, las adolescentes prefirieron realizar la entrevista fuera de sus casas. Se solicitó el consentimiento informado, tanto para la entrevista como para la grabación de esta. Se utilizó el análisis del discurso. Este trabajo contribuye a entender el fenómeno de la maternidad, a través de la observación de dos generaciones para explicar el fenómeno desde la visión de las mismas actrices sociales, el significado que ellas le otorgan y no en la interpretación desde afuera de quienes se dedican a la investigación en este campo. Esta posición desde adentro generará nuevas vetas para proyectos de investigación que tomen en cuenta la historia cultural de los mayas en la organización de su ambiente natural y la conducción de su vida espiritual y familiar.

Maternity, Mayan culture, Adolescence

Maternidad, Cultura maya, Adolescencia

**Citation:** ANDUEZA-PECH, Guadalupe, RODRÍGUEZ-ANGULO, Elsa, OJEDA-RODRÍGUEZ, Ricardo and LENDECHY-GRAJALES, Ángel. Adolescent motherhood, reminiscence of an archaic inheritance; the case of a suburban neighborhood in Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico. *Journal of Social Researches*. 2022. 8-22:30-36.

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## Introduction

Mayan culture is an example of what human beings are capable of doing. Capable of creating and recreating the world in which they live and in which the sum of wills makes their existence and survival possible. Studies such as that of Flores J. S (2012), Arias Reyes (2012), Montañez Patricia et al. (2012) show the modes of production of the Maya, the importance of the gardens in food, the resources that make possible the mode of production of these social groups, the value of the Maya gardens in the east of the state, as well as the meaning of the offerings as a practice that aims to reconcile man and his activity through responsible and respectful management of the environment that surrounds him.

The reproductive cycle becomes an important cultural element not only in the daily life of the Maya, but also in their modes of production and work organisation (Ortega 2010). Reproduction is not only a biological phenomenon, but also a social and cultural issue, since the behaviour of individuals is determined by the society in which they live and their conduct is governed by established norms; on many occasions, daughters are educated for the home, to assume the roles of good mothers and wives, elements that make up the axis of female subjectivity.

Normally the plot is considered a space where the determination of the existing relationships between a set of factors such as the physical and biological environment are important, also the activities developed in the plot and its temporality are part of a scheme in which the members of the family and the community itself participate and are involved in a plan of solidarity, cooperation and reciprocity (Cabrera 2014); In the same way, it could be affirmed that the organisation for work is ecosystemic, with an existential coherence in which the cognitive refers to the objective, i.e. the Mayan garden, and the subjective refers to the affective, i.e. the reproductive cycle (Ortega 2010).

Studies such as Jordan's in 1993 describe that, in rural Yucatán, pregnancy takes place in a state of pressure, even though it constitutes a normal stage of family life; even in the imagination of Mayan language speakers, pregnancy is conceived as an illness, since when referring to a woman who is pregnant, they express themselves by saying: "she is sick" ("K'oha'an ti' chan paal", in the Mayan language). However, pregnancy is a natural event in women's daily lives; childbirth takes place in a known, familiar environment, which is their own home, with the presence of some family members (husband, mother and/or mother-in-law) and attended by a midwife from their community who is known to the family. Ortega's study (2010) shows that the event of pregnancy favours a support network in family relations (again the husband, mother and/or mother-in-law) or a sister, but always in a known environment.

Likewise, the study by Rodríguez et al (2012) has shown that during the three stages of the reproductive process: pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum, women assume complementary practices; on the one hand, they receive care from the doctor and, on the other hand, they go to the midwife to find out if they are pregnant, to know the position of the baby in the womb and for the sobada.

Regardless of the disciplinary approach to pregnancy, it is a fact that adolescent pregnancy occupies a special place in the field of research on a daily basis. Thus, the possibility of giving women a voice in the reconstruction of their reality makes it possible to know and understand the meaning that an event such as pregnancy has in their particular lives and in that of the community to which they belong, that is, what pregnancy and the experience of motherhood mean for women and their immediate social environment.

The phenomenon of motherhood is a social construction that takes shape mainly through pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding and whose meaning is transmitted between generations, as well as through the network of social relations, with a predominance of female knowledge, however, in addition to being a biological event, pregnancy is produced within a society, therefore, women experience it differently depending on the social, cultural, economic, political and ideological context in which they move.

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Nevertheless, and as shown in the work of Díaz García Luis (2022), the personal experiences between mother and daughter are elements that show the importance of a special connection and a bond of continuity in these relationships that could maintain or transform the social meanings of motherhood.

Barrantes and Cubero (2014) point out that motherhood is a determining element in women's lives as a characteristic of women. However, this concept has not been understood, practised or felt in the same way throughout history, but has depended on multiple social and cultural factors. Pregnancy does not mean the same thing or have the same implications for a woman living in the city as it does for a woman living in a community. For rural women, it is very clear what their role in this world is and they assume it, they do not question it, unlike women in the city who face the fact of being mothers or women and who have to face a series of fears: losing their personality in front of the child, their beauty and erotic value, their professional and intellectual faculties, among others (Flores-Estrada 2014).

The study by Serrano Escobar (2022) refers to a self-fulfilling prophecy, which is a psychological process that results in an intentionality or action provoked by the expectations that others have of people, in this case, adolescent girls, and which can influence their social imaginary with respect to the notion of being a woman and motherhood.

As Flores-Valencia (2017) points out, adolescent pregnancy is considered a public health problem that requires urgent attention due to its increase and the risk to the health of mother and child. Hence, deepening the understanding of motherhood is a challenge given its complexity. It implies a revision of the conception of women at different stages of human development and today. There is evidence that research on the subject is abundant, but it is difficult to think that one discipline alone can explain this dimension of life in its entirety. It is important to consider that, if we really want to better understand this event of human life, we need flexibility in research, different approaches, theoretical approaches and empirical forms from the viewpoint of different sciences, without favouring any of those that have traditionally been used to explain it.

## Methodology

This paper presents the results of a qualitative research conducted in a suburban neighbourhood in the city of Mérida, Yucatán, with the aim of exploring and showing the similarities and differences between the discourses of adolescent women and their respective parents about pregnancy and motherhood as a social imaginary. In-depth interviews were conducted with six teenagers and six adult women, mothers of the teenagers, from a suburban neighbourhood in the city of Mérida; the interviews were conducted in their respective homes according to the time of each of the women; in some cases, the teenagers preferred to conduct the interview outside their homes. The objective of the research was explained, and informed consent was requested, both for the interview and for the recording of the interview. Discourse analysis was used to analyse the information.

## Results

### *What happens among adolescent girls in a suburban area*

In the discourse of these adolescent girls, motherhood is perceived as an essential attribute of femininity and still characterises female existence. It constitutes a primordial event in their lives as they perceive it as intimately linked to the notion of being a woman. In this way, they organise and structure their lives with motherhood in mind in the short term, but at the same time they give themselves the possibility of postponing it, although not cancelling it.

They identify motherhood with satisfying experiences obtained through children and construct representations around it that encourage them to assume it as a dimension of their lives that they cannot imagine not experiencing; this, together with the idea that it is a divine gift that not all women possess; thus, enjoying this "power" is internalised as of great value. The value placed on motherhood is related to the satisfaction of having a child and being a mother, which translates into pride in possessing the ability to procreate.

These adolescents associate having a child with life as a couple within a formal commitment; this is manifested at the level of representations and not necessarily in practice. This dissociation between representation and practice is due to the fact that on the one hand they support the construction of the ideal, which they all forge, of having a child within marriage as a way of strengthening the bond of union, and on the other, they assume the idea of being mothers even without the marriage bond; that is, at times marriage can take a back seat to the longing to live the experience of motherhood.

The economy is referred to by these adolescents as another important factor to take into account when deciding to have a child; they relate the number of children to the cost they represent and express their preference to have few children.

The close mother-woman relationship constantly seeps into the discourse of adolescent girls; it is impossible to conceptualise women without the idea of being mothers. While it is true that they express other attributes that identify women and provide them with satisfaction, they also assure, at sublimation levels, that being a mother gives meaning to feminine existence and a sense of fulfilment. The other attributes referred to, of an affective nature, are intelligence, responsibility, sensuality of the body, visual attractiveness and the need to feel desired.

Although motherhood is still considered fundamental to female existence, closely linked to the meaning of being a woman and seen as a gift, it is possible to perceive transformations in terms of considering it as a non-immediate expectation in the lives of these adolescents. Thus, the desire to explore life as a couple and to initiate premarital coital relations begins to gain ground in their expectations, without detracting from the aspiration to marry.

Having a partner without a marital commitment may be pleasant and enjoyable, but at the same time, they do not deny the desire to formalise a union and show it as such to society; therefore, they express the pretension of organising and structuring their life in such a way that they can live and exercise their sexuality satisfactorily before the experience of motherhood, but at the same time, they let their longing to be a mother and to get married be glimpsed.

It should be noted that, for these adolescents, sexual relations do not necessarily have to be legitimised by marriage in the name of motherhood; for them, the marriage contract will rather allow sexual relations to be lived and enjoyed without fear of being questioned by society.

Without leaving aside the sublimation of motherhood that exists in these female groups, sexuality is filtering into their representations and practices; expressly in the desire to enjoy the couple's relationship and achieve sexual satisfaction through pleasure or love. However, for some of them, after the beginning of their life as a couple, the desire to satisfy their desire to be mothers is stronger. Another element that they incorporate as important in their lives and that affects the notion of motherhood is the personal expectations of life, expressed in the desire to finish a professional career and to work.

#### *What is said among adult women*

In the analysis of the discourse of these women, it is common to observe the conception of motherhood as a fundamental aspect of gender identity. The close mother-woman relationship is clearly evident, and they show that the purpose and importance of female existence lies in having offspring, together with the satisfaction it provides; thus, motherhood is seen as a vital expression of the feminine. The meaning of having a child is that of the continuity of the family; a notion which they see as closely linked to life as a couple and which, for this reason, becomes a longed-for event after the union is consummated. In this way, having a child confirms the aptitude for motherhood, that "divine gift given to women".

It is clear that motherhood constitutes the fulfilment of a woman, therefore, to be a mother is to feel fulfilled. The value of motherhood is related to the ability to procreate; giving life is seen as a power of divine origin that makes women feel fortunate. In addition, there is the idea that having children constitutes the security of having company and protection in the future. These women live motherhood as an essential dimension in their lives, so their representations define that being a woman means being a mother.

They maintain the idea that being a mother must take place within the framework of a marriage contract that legitimises sexual relations. While they seek to emphasise the latter, it is also clear that they are willing to accept that a woman can be a mother before marriage on the chance that one of their daughters might be involved. Motherhood, according to the aforementioned conception, also vindicates the woman who has a child without being married.

Life as a couple is seen as an expectation as soon as they reach adolescence. In this way, women are given the opportunity to exercise not only motherhood, but also the possibility of having a partner and satisfying sexual desire. Despite the fact that sexual desire appears to be limited in terms of the expression of one's own desire, they emphasise that it is considered natural in a couple's relationship. They also recognise that the expression of desire is more freely expressed by men. On the other hand, they assert that sexual desire decreases in the couple as the years go by and also as an effect of infidelity and/or alcoholism of the male partner.

This group of women have incorporated into their discourse the idea that sexual desire is permitted as long as the purpose of the sexual relationship is a possible pregnancy. They also affirm that sexual desire manifests itself in both women and men; although the attachment to religiosity permeates this vision of sexual desire when on occasions they deny the possibility of female enjoyment in the couple's relationship; for them, having had a child is the way to have fulfilled their reproductive function.

The way these women perceive men shows their clarity about the established gender differences of the past. They refer to the subordinate role of women and that men have more rights to express their sexuality and enjoy freedom. Moreover, in some of these women, the lack of knowledge of their own bodies, their physiology and their eroticism may be the motives that prevent them from perceiving their bodies as a mediator of the expression of their sexuality.

Pregnancy is registered as a physiological process that manifests itself and is experienced as a pleasurable stage for women. It is a process that causes physical and emotional changes, and in which the support received from the man is acknowledged; some of them refer to this support as comforting and gratifying both during pregnancy and after childbirth. For others, the absence of their husbands at this stage of their lives is common.

According to their knowledge, these women experience their lives as partners during pregnancy in terms of their efforts to protect their baby. While they affirm that having sex during the first months is not bad and they consent to it, it is also true that for them it is better to avoid it; they resort to evasions based on the possibility of harming the baby.

### **Conclusions**

The analysis of the information allows us to obtain a first approximation of the reality in which we recognise that the ideas and notions of adolescent girls about motherhood have not changed with respect to those of their parents, at least at the level of discourse. The latter continues to reflect a strong link between being a woman and being a mother or the notion of motherhood as a gift given to women and to be proud of. Thus, for adolescent girls, being a woman is related to the task of being a mother and female existence is organised around motherhood as a reference point. It is evident that from the point of view of these actors, motherhood does not constitute a problem in their lives.

The transformations or differences between adolescents and their parents appear at the level of practices in the sense that adolescents can postpone the experience of motherhood in order to make room for other youthful expectations, such as sexuality, which is increasingly filtering through and beginning to occupy a preferential place. Thus, experiencing life as a couple becomes a strong desire, in which the pleasure associated with love acquires a personal and intense meaning that legitimises the initiation of sexual relations before marriage.

Adolescent girls initiate sexual relations with the intention of exploring their sexuality and not with the immediate idea of motherhood. Their female parents, on the other hand, initiate sex for the purpose of fulfilling their role as women, that is, as mothers. These women value motherhood more as a primary or even the only life goal. In this sense, the exercise of sexuality is tinged by the representations regarding motherhood, since for these adolescents motherhood may be postponed, but not cancelled. Hence the desire not to use contraceptive methods before a first child, based on the belief that they could cause sterility and prevent them from demonstrating their reproductive capacity.

It is evident that these adolescents maintain an interest in differentiating themselves from the model of mothers around them, and strive to be different by questioning norms and identifying with their peers. Undoubtedly, traditional patterns of behaviour are no longer acceptable or useful for them to guide their relationships with their own children; they are in search of a different type of family relationship to the one they had at home, they are trying to overcome the authoritarian model, in which women had a subordinate role to men.

The body, besides being perceived as a source of life, is also lived as a space, which has a cultural value that is consolidated and transformed according to the demands of current life and the satisfaction of daily needs, precisely like the plot of land for the Mayas, as an inherent unit of Mayan culture where cultural elements are lost or gained or refunctionalised to be used again and which are reflected in the patterns of behaviour of the peasants today.

Thus, in the 21st century, it is possible to find women who seek to break with the woman-mother binomial and fulfil expectations other than this. It seems that this is what is happening with motherhood, sexuality and the meaning of being a woman in these family groups; they certainly share some cultural elements, but these are adapted to the different scenarios and are related to other local ones.

It is worth mentioning that these results are applicable to the group studied, perhaps they cannot be applied to a larger population but the richness of the information obtained allows for a better and deeper understanding of the adolescent women and their parents, who in different ways and from different perspectives participated in this research and who still today do not cease to amaze us with all the wisdom contained in their words, learned truths that they share with people when they allow entry to their homes.

Social representations undoubtedly play an active role in people's daily lives, and therefore constitute a fundamental element in understanding the phenomenon of motherhood. People permanently construct and reconstruct their representations in order to give meaning to their own experiences. In this sense, the diachronic study focused on the observation of two generations in order to explain the phenomenon from the point of view of the social actors themselves, the meaning they give it and not on the interpretation from the outside of those who dedicate themselves to research in this field. This position from the inside will generate new avenues for future research projects that take into account the cultural history of the Maya in the organisation of their natural environment and the conduct of their spiritual and family life.

### **Acknowledgements**

To the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán for the permissions granted to allow the fieldwork to be carried out.

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