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The Sexual Identities of Young Puerto Rican Mothers

Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."
In today’s society, sex is no longer simply a matter of marriage and having children. Sexuality has become integrated into social relations to such an extent that it boasts its own niche in the economy, its own subcultural expressions, and its own lifestyle segment in contemporary life. It has also become central to the controversy over early childbearing and parenting that during the decade of the nineties became known as the “problem” of teenage pregnancy. Despite all the attention about sexuality among youth as a consequence of these heated debates, we still know very little about why they become sexually active and what it means to them. More specifically, what does it mean for young women today to engage in sexual activity that results in early childbearing? What meanings and interpretations do they attach to sexual activity? As a generation of women who have inherited changes in gender and sexual relations initiated before they were born, young women today must carve out sexual identities in a hostile climate of adult authoritarianism and narrow and cultural patriarchies. The quest to explore and experience desire and bodily pleasure has a particular resonance for young women, especially if they are also poor and from socially stigmatized groups. For young Puerto Rican women who mother, decisions about engaging in sexual activity always come at a high personal cost since it also involves attempts to seek pleasure through intimate relationships in a context of social and economic marginality. Their sexual desires immediately become “outlaw” and “suspect” in a society that stigmatizes their bodies as nonproductive, their sexuality as excessive, and their fertility as pathological. Listening to young Puerto Rican mothers talk about their reproductive and sexual experiences makes it possible to offer more complex views about the political economic and cultural forces that enable and constrain their parenting that during the decade of the nineties became sexual identities than those offered by public discussions, and may even help explain the resulting early childbearing. By the mid-nineties legislators successfully targeted teenage mothers as a significant threat to moral and family values, blaming them for various social ills including rising rates of crime and incarceration, persistent poverty, and the welfare dependency of the “urban underclass.” In response, national policy reasserted control and regulation over the sexuality of young people through legislation like the Personal Responsibility and Work Reorganization Act (1996), which narrowly casts their sexuality within a discourse of admonition, danger, and fear. Instead of addressing their needs along with the concerns of parents, young mothers get talked about, talked for, and talked at. Both the media and policy arenas label young mothers as “children having children” and sexually active young women as a “reproductive underclass,” whose out-of-control sexuality leads to welfare dependency and costs taxpayers money. These kinds of images about young women highlight racial and class anxieties in U.S. society regarding early sexual activity and childbearing, especially that of poor,
minority women of color. Instead of critically examining the assumptions we hold about their sexuality, we fall prey to views about them as either active manipulators of “the system” to avoid personal responsibility for their pathological fertility or as victims of male exploitation and lust. Attempts by the state to discourage early sexual activity and encourage abstinence seem to have little effect on sexual activity of our young. The images produced through these public discussions help demonstrate how the state has a political stake in controlling the bodies and sexuality of women of color. Feminist research challenges these popular views about early childbearing and sexual activity among young women but their efforts do not necessarily allow us to understand how gender and sexual relations have changed over time, nor the connection between sexual relations and the economic changes of the last thirty years. Most perspectives on early childbearing also sever working class and poor women from the social and material conditions in which their lives are embedded. Disconnecting young mothers from their political economic and cultural contexts encourages stereotypes of teenage motherhood as irrational and irresponsible to the casual observer. Such approaches render early sexuality and childbearing as pathological or deviant by denying the complexity of the social worlds in which young women make decisions to become sexually active.

Changes in how we think about gender and sexual relations in the last thirty years help provide an important but overlooked context for contemporary early sexuality and childbearing. One important change has been the effects of the sexual revolution, which began as a cultural movement during the sixties that involved a loosening of sexual and social restrictions for heterosexual males. The image of the single “playboy,” whose masculinity was tied to numerous sexual partners, replaced the “breadwinner” role of father and husband. This changing role exempted heterosexual males from responsibility for the consequences of their sexual behavior. In contrast, women were required to agree to sex outside marriage with multiple partners in ways that still left them with much control over their bodies and sexuality. Along with sexual availability, women were still expected to be primary caretakers of children and to conform to male ideas about feminine attractiveness and sexual desirability. Whereas heterosexual masculinity became equated with sexual aggressiveness and prowess, heterosexual femininity still remained marked as passive, sexual attractiveness. Although heterosexual males experienced a loosening of sexual mores favoring them, U.S. society still maintains sexually repressive, gendered ideals about female sexuality. The legacy of these changing sexual relations still determines how we understand sexual identity and sexual desirability today. For example, women still have to deal with the virgin/whore dichotomy, still get judged by their sexual decorum, still get treated with suspicion when expressing sexual desires, and can still be personally and socially assaulted based on the verdict. As a result of these changing expectations about gender and sexuality, young women today must enact sexual identities through a sexual double standard that influences how they behave sexually.

In a separate but related vein, adult stereotypes about young people as hedonistic, irresponsible, and unprepared for making appropriate decisions regarding sexuality leave young people alone with their concerns about intimacy and relationships. On the one hand, adults assert that only their guidance and knowledge can provide the skills necessary for making appropriate sexual and reproductive decisions. A refusal to acknowledge the sexuality of our young masks adult discomfort in discussing sexual matters with them. Instead of a mutual exploration of sexual knowledge and concerns, adults either deny the sexuality of young people or strive to control it since they assume that informing young people about sex encourages it. Sexuality education often focuses on the mechanics of intercourse rather than on “confidence, self-esteem, nonsexual ways of showing affection, and the pleasurable, emotional, and complex aspects of sexuality.” Rarely do young people's desire for connection, “the pleasures of sexuality, about love, family, [or] intimacy” get addressed. More often than not young people hear biological explanations about “raging hormones” that place responsibility for sexuality on individuals without acknowledging that sexual behavior occurs in a social context that is also historically defined. Messages about their sexuality occur within a narrow range of risk and danger, or alternately through advocating abstinence. In contrast, the larger cultural context promotes sex as an acceptable social activity supported by the marketing of sexuality as a lifestyle option, especially to young people. It is here that media, through advertising campaigns, and youth culture, through music and music videos, play a decisive role in selling sex. Sexual intimacy becomes focused on expressions of desire and bodily pleasures. In this maze of contemporary sexual relations, young women from socially stigmatized groups that are also economically marginal must sort through various, competing meanings of contemporary sexuality. Their sexual activity becomes compounded by political perspectives that render their femininity excessive and their fertility unruly. It is within this changing cultural milieu of contemporary gender and sexual relations that young Puerto Rican mothers live out economic and cultural inequalities as they carve out social spaces where they can explore their sexual identities.

One of the more publicly troubling aspects of the sexuality of poor women of color is the growing relationship between early childbearing and dependency on the state. The emphasis by public discourses on the link between poverty and young motherhood minimizes how young women of color often come from groups whose extreme levels of concentrated poverty limit their opportunities for social mobility or economic success. Among Puerto Rican women, increased poverty since the eighties means that an early pregnancy will condemn both the mother and her child to economic hardship. Yet the poverty of Puerto Ricans is rooted in historical and political economic forces that go largely unnoticed in public discussions about teenage pregnancy. Since the seventies, changes in the economy through the expansion of capital into global markets and the changing nature of accumulation have impoverished Puerto Ricans living in the Northeast. As the economy changed, Puerto Rican women were squeezed out of one area of the economy (light manufacturing) because their skills were no longer in demand and their low levels of human capital (i.e., educational attainment) left them unprepared for entry into new jobs that required a knowledge orientation (information services). Economic recovery in the service sector occurred mostly in unstable, low-waged, and part-time jobs that did not compensate for the jobs lost. As their labor force participation declined so did their family incomes, which directly contributed to their current impoverishment and sharp increases in families headed by women dependent on the state. This situation is compounded by the fact that although
Puerto Rican men in general have more stable rates of employment than do Puerto Rican women, they remain at the bottom of the wage scale structure in New York City. High rates of unemployment and underemployment, malnutrition and health problems, and high educational attrition combine with low educational attainment, increased rates of welfare dependency, and concentration in residential areas of extreme poverty in New York City means Puerto Ricans fulfill all known indexes of social and economic disadvantage. They also have high rates of teenage pregnancy.

Working class youth have historically played a vital role in the survival of their households and Puerto Rican youth are no different in this respect. However, shifts in the economy of New York City affects the kinds of jobs available to young women and they mostly work in the secondary service sector of food service, cashiers, or low-waged clerical jobs. As a result of their youth and gender, the jobs they secure make economic contributions to their households unreliable. Their most sustained contributions occur through the reproductive work they perform that supports the work of adult kin. Among females. This culturally-defined gender ideology of the working class Puerto Ricans, households engage in economic strategies that use a communal ethos for interacting based on a system of mutual obligation and reciprocity to pool resources and barter, and where the exchange of goods and services is common. These households also rely on the multiple roles and obligations of women. An ideology of family helps cement this economic strategy where emphasis on the group overrides individual needs, but where women play a central role. This family ideology defines a good woman as someone one who willingly sacrifices for her loved ones and who is selfless. Children do not contribute directly to households needs, and have the relative freedom to play and interact with others. As soon as daughters reach the ages of ten to twelve, however, they become recruited into reproductive labor within the household. Thereafter the household becomes their primary responsibility. Isabel Santos, a twenty-one year old mother of three children, explains: "I had to do everything in the house. I would have to come home to cook, clean, water plants."

As girls become more restricted to the household through reproductive work, adult women move out of the household to labor across the various households in the kinship network or to work in the formal and informal economies. From a very early age, daughters become accustomed to responsibility and decision-making power through their contributions to the household. This level of responsibility has an important symbolic impact on the sexual identities they forge during their adolescent years. As young women gain competence through the completion of reproductive work, they graft a cultural script of womanhood onto their lives outside the household. As they enter adolescence they expect to make similar decisions and take on the responsibility in the forging of their sexual identities. Various social and cultural contradictions face them as they begin to both accommodate and contest both family and youth culture sexuality socialization.

Family sexuality socialization among working class Puerto Rican households draws on a cultural template of a repressive/creative sexual ideology common among Mediterranean cultures where womanhood operates within a patriarchal logic about female desire and pleasure. Sexual identities develop against a sexual double standard where the household becomes designated as the appropriate space for females. This culturally-defined gender ideology of the virgin/whore, which Puerto Rican girls experience as the good girl/bad girl dichotomy, encourages a spatial politics that determines the bounds of acceptable behavior for men and women. Restriction of women’s mobility means they become cloistered into female spaces inside the household as a natural extension of gender responsibility. Inside the household (en la casa) corresponds to being within the family. In contrast, being outside (en la calle) means being in that chaotic, risky, and dangerous domain of males and "bad" people. Women remain within the household as a spatial status of virtuous femininity. Those women defined as being en la calle become designated as outside the family, thus outside the bounds of respectability. In cultures that value virginity as a mark of femininity, family honor and shame rests on the chastity of unmarried daughters. The very presence of women outside the household implicates them in promiscuity and/or sexual misconduct. Puerto Rican girls learn this good girl/bad girl dichotomy most clearly through their recruitment into reproductive labor, where to be a muchacha de la casa (a girl from the home) means to be a good girl. A good girl cleans, cooks, takes care of younger siblings, and helps her parents. In contrast, una muchacha de la calle (a girl from the street) is a transgressive woman, someone who has gone beyond patriarchal control, whose sexuality is considered unbounded and therefore dangerous.

Women who go beyond the criteria of sexual passivity and repression, or who refuse to conform to cultural norms of women's appropriate role are considered shameful, and their virtuousness is doubted. Jasmine Garcia remarks on how culturally informed ideologies about appropriate female behavior that shaped her relationship with her mother: "Me and my mom wasn't that close. I got in trouble with her because I used to come home late. Because I was high, you know. Things like that she used to get upset. I used to hang out with a bunch of guys outside." Growing up with this good girl/bad girl dichotomy along with an inside (casa)/outside (calle) spatial politics generates a cloud of secrecy around sexual activity, especially because families refuse to acknowledge the possibility that young women may be sexually active before marriage. The equivalent of a fallen woman for working class Puerto Ricans is one who mistakenly slips from virtuousness and chastity, which they refer to as Meter Las Patas (slip up). Such a mistake can and does result in unwanted pregnancy through premarital sex, although it can be rectified through marriage or consensual union with the male partner. There is a range of acceptable sexual behavior among Puerto Ricans in the U.S. where many idealized cultural values change with class location. In adapting to their material realities, working class Puerto Rican women in this community adjust cultural expectations since their economic marginality does not allow them to completely conform to appropriate gender or sexual ideals because economic necessity often finds them engaged in activity outside the home. This repressive/creative matrix combines with dominant societal messages about gender and sexuality to produce competing ideas available to young women as they elaborate their sexual identities. Young women are initiated into the politics of sexuality and notions of femininity within their ethnic group and households. Yet it is among their peers that they learn about negotiating the sexual politics of womanhood informed by dominant ideologies about femininity and sexual desire.

Peer relationships become increasingly important in adolescence and result in a movement by young women away
from their household obligations. Sexuality socialization among peers becomes a central aspect of defining their identities. Working class youth often become economically and sexually autonomous at younger ages than middle-class youth because their economic positions expose them to more and sooner. They experience the adult world and act adult-like much sooner.31 Peers thus introduce young women to local youth cultures that impart values shaping their emerging notions of sexual identity. These alternate notions of sexuality make it important to be part of the “slick” group or “in crowd” who are fast and knowledgeable because they have tried everything at an early age. Since young women become responsible and contributing members of their households at a young age, they learn to make important reproductive decisions in relation to the household. They come to expect that they will also make decisions about their sexual identities in the same way that adults do. Marissa points out the way that young people experience the movement toward peer-oriented youth cultures: “As you get older you want to experience things, you know. Like you want to go out dancing, go to clubs, and stay out ‘til past a normal curfew. You want to do things. A lot of kids want to experience drinking and see what it feels like. Others get into drugs. You want to do things.”

When daughters express a desire to go out with friends, wear makeup, and date, there is a quick censorship and silencing about sexuality in their families. Both parents and the culture caution, “no habra las pata” (don’t open your legs), holding up examples of women who transgress the bounds of acceptable gender and sexual behavior. The request for freedom to participate in peer group activities by daughters increases tension with parents because parents interpret the request through the cultural notion of libertad, which translates literally to mean liberty, but which contextually connotes sexual license. Daughters often hear the charge that tu lo que quieres es hacer lo que te da la gana (you just want to do whatever you want). Since “doing what you want” is a male prerogative that infers sexual license and freedom, the sexual double standard of Puerto Rican culture interprets a daughter’s request for increased autonomy as a desire to have unsanctioned, numerous sexual relations simply by wanting to go outside. Parents assert their control by confining daughters to the household.

Young women resent the sexual double standard imposed by parents, especially in lieu of all the reproductive labor they perform for their households. As they assert themselves through claims for autonomy from the kin network, the conflicts between parents and daughters increase. It is at this point of intense familial conflict where the contradictions of their social and economic marginality surface, and where many pregnancies occur. Parents confine daughters to the household like children needing supervision, yet treat them like adults when it comes to reproductive matters within the household. This contradiction is not lost on the young women who quickly use it to assert their demands for autonomy. Many young women express a desire to move away from a girlhood filled with the pressures of household responsibilities to the perceived freedom of womanhood. Their participation in local youth cultures through involvement with peers emphasizes romance and sexuality. In their attempts to become “grown” as soon as possible, bodily pleasures through sexual activity become an easy, clear, and quick route to womanhood, especially for working class and impoverished young women. In the two brief sketches that follow it becomes clear how the young women negotiate family sexuality and peer group socialization regarding sexual intimacy and reproductive matters in their elaborations on becoming sexually active.

Clarissa is the oldest of two daughters in a solidly working class Puerto Rican family in Far Rockaway, Queens. Both her parents work and her extended family migrated from Puerto Rico during the sixties to work in the landscaping business on Long Island.32 By family and community standards Clarissa was considered a “good girl,” una muchacha de la casa. She never went out unaccompanied by an adult during her teenage years, and was a top student at school. As a daughter she was obedient, helped her parents, and rarely challenged their authority. Yet at the age of sixteen Clarissa found herself caring for her first child. Her life began in the cloistered and confined manner of so many other Puerto Rican girls. She says: “They watched me a lot, kept me in the house.” Despite an upbringing that attempted to protect her from the external world, and that warned her about the consequences of early childbearing, she became pregnant at the age of fifteen. Her first sexual encounter was not with the young man who would become the father of her child but would occur as a way of testing her emerging sense of sexuality. “The first time I tried it [sex], when I lost my virginity, it was out of curiosity [because] I just wanted to know what it felt like. And after that it was my daughter’s father, my true love.” She explains that her parents did not talk about sexuality: “That was taboo in my family.” Instead, she learned about sexuality by reading about it at school and through friends. While Clarissa expressed no emotional conflict about becoming sexually active and seemed comfortable with her sexual behavior, she did fear its discovery by her parents. Meeting her daughter’s father, and the excitement of falling in love, however, lessened her concerns about her parents: “Seriously, seriously, my first love was my daughter’s father. He was my first love. I just thought he was very different from everybody else I had dated. He had a good job. At that point he was working at a travel agency. He was working pretty good. He looked like he came from a good family. You know, his mother worked and everything. His sister was going to college upstate. It was a nice family. He was good looking. So, you know, what the hell. He was the second [sexual partner]. I went to the Museum of Modern Art. I had to do a term paper on Van Gogh. And he went with me. And then I went back to his house. And one thing led to another. And it was like I never thought about until afterwards. That’s the moment I got pregnant. [Was that the first time you had sex?] That wasn’t the first time. No we had sex before. And the thing is that we have always used protection. But that one time that we didn’t, you know. Just that one time that we didn’t.” When Clarissa found out she was pregnant it made her feel ashamed and like a failure: “When I found out I was very exasperated. I was like ‘oh my god, what am I gonna do, what am I gonna do. I can’t do this’. “ Her first concern was the disappointment she had caused her parents because of the intense stigma of early pregnancy among her extended kin. While she considered an abortion, her lack of economic resources independent of her parents prohibited her from obtaining one within the first trimester. Although she was a “good girl,” she had sex regularly before she got pregnant. Her lack of economic resources outside those of her parent’s, combined with cultural and social sanctions against sexual intercourse among minors hindered her ability to negotiate her sexuality in a beneficial way.

Everyone considers Maria una muchacha de la calle (a street girl). By her own admission Maria says she loves being on the
street: “Half the time I'm basically wanting to be out in the street.” Her mother was much more permissive than other mothers and was very open with her daughter about sexuality and reproductive issues, preparing her to take control of her body and her sexuality by providing her with information. Maria, however, was no better equipped to make informed sexual and reproductive decisions and choices: “I didn’t use birth control. I didn’t believe in it.” Maria had her first sexual encounter at a younger age than many other women. She was curious about sex, and like Clarissa, wanted to know what it was like: “The first guy I was with was this guy named Paul from Florida when I was fourteen years old, because I was curious, because of my friends.” She admits that she became “very sexually active” soon after that experience. At sixteen she met the father of her children and fell in love, but after four years the relationship ended. She describes their relationship in the following way: “But I really hit my sexual peak after my kids’ father, which wasn’t that long ago. I loved the sex. He was one of my favorite lovers. He had no shame. He was my ninth guy. He did everything, wasn’t disgusted by it. We used to have fun together when we first started. We used to do a lot of things together. We used to go out to the park and run around like kids. Roll in the grass. We used to go to the beach together, to the pool. Ride bikes. Do stupid things. It was a cute relationship. I was with him for a month before I got pregnant.” When Maria found out she was pregnant she had mixed feelings and felt confused. After her partner demonstrated his delight about the news she became more amenable to the idea: “I wound up getting pregnant. I did not want to get pregnant at all. It just happened. I was just shocked.” Her partner’s willingness to establish a permanent relationship with her made her feel secure about having the baby. She recalls his reaction: “He said ‘I knew it.’ He was pretty excited for the first one.” Her brother’s reaction, on the other hand, hurt her feelings and encouraged her own ambivalence about being pregnant. Her early childbearing has placed her in an economically vulnerable position, a situation she readily acknowledges. It never crossed her mind that she would be a single adolescent mother on welfare. When she began her relationship with the father of her children she expected love, support, and commitment. Instead, her partner became addicted to crack and the life she had envisioned for herself quickly disappeared. After four years with their father, she finds herself alone with her two children.

Considerations about early sexuality childbearing among poor Puerto Rican women must take into account those factors that enable and constrain their sexual activities and that shape their sexual identity. In an economic context of globalization, deindustrialization, and the expansion of the service economy where their households are increasingly impoverished, young Puerto Rican women shoulder the bulk of reproductive work. New York City’s restructured economy positions young women as surplus labor. Young women themselves do not expect that they, nor their male partners, will be able to support themselves or their children.33 Living in impoverished communities determines access to and availability of waged work, educational opportunities, and other measures of social well-being that influences gender and sexual relations among Puerto Ricans. Their declining economic position means male authority with limited economic potential and female subordination with increased exploitative, productive and reproductive labor creates tensions that explode around sexually-defined gender roles and expectations within their households. In a context where there is little material advancement, control of young women’s bodies may translate into a tightening grip on the behavior of young, unmarried women. Public discussions about the sexuality of young people use descriptive terms such as “children having children” and “reproductive underclass” in conjunction with early childbearing that hint at racial and class ideologies regarding the fertility of young women of color. These terms resonate loudly for young Puerto Rican mothers given the rise of female-headship, poverty, and increased dependency on the state among them.

Yet these young women do not necessarily want to become mothers. What concerns them most are romantic notions of love, establishing committed relationship, and exploring sexuality and pleasure in their bodies. Multiple, competing gender and sexual ideologies along with sanctions against their sexuality may influence whether and how they guard against unwanted pregnancy. The cultural templates like muchachas de la casa and muchachas de la calle help emphasize how young Puerto Rican women today combine and move beyond the cultural dictates of female desire and sexuality they inherit. Both Clarissa and Maria provide alternate perspectives about what sexual activity means in their lives not captured by the public discussions on sexuality among youth. Their sense of entitlement about pleasure and desire coincide with shifting notions of gender and sexual relations in U.S. society. These brief sketches about their lives show how young women interpret sexual activity as exploratory and pleasurable yet they also risk becoming pregnant and bearing children in the process of exploring the sexual identities. Despite important differences in the lives of each woman they must still negotiate multiple messages that instruct them about appropriate standards of femininity and sexual desire that have profound material consequences for their lives.

The promotion of sexuality in the media and the entertainment industry makes images of sex easily available to young people that reinforce the desirability of sexual freedom and expression. Television, music, and other media bombard young people with messages about the glamour and desirability of sex.34 In contrast, messages from parents and other authority figures instill fear and admonitions that do not deter sexual activity. In the Puerto Rican context I worked in, young women were perceived as promiscuous often even when they were not. One young woman’s mother commented after hearing her daughter ask me to explain the types of contraceptives available beyond the pill and condoms that her daughter needed to “keep [her] legs closed, just don’t have it[sex].” You don’t need to be asking that ‘cause you shouldn’t be having it anyway.” Parents often waited until their daughters went to school to check their personal spaces and belongings searching for evidence of sexual activity and drug use things, and maintained a vigilant eye towards any discrepancies in behavior and affect. Such tactics just make young people more secretive and less communicative about sexual matters.

The contradictory messages they receive compel young women to learn about love, romance, and sexuality from their friends. Enshrouded in a repressive/creative matrix, pleasure and desire become articulated through an ideology of romantic love that opens up a space for young women to explore sexuality in culturally sanctioned ways. Note, for example, how eighteen year old Marissa Montalvo uses the discourse of romantic love to explain why she got pregnant when she was seventeen:
I thought I was in love with Eddie. I didn't plan my pregnancy. I didn't mean for it to happen, you know. I never thought I would get pregnant. That's how I thought. I wouldn't get pregnant. [Why is that?] Why? I just wasn't thinking about pregnancy at the time I did what I did. I was young when I started with him. I was only fifteen years old. So at that time I thought I was really in love with him. So that's all I thought about was him, him, him. I didn't stop to think about 'well if I do this with him I'm gonna wind up pregnant,' or I could get a disease 'cause I was in love with him. So that wasn't going through my mind at the time. All I was thinking about was how I was gonna be happy with him. How we was gonna be together. Day by Day. Like what me and Eddie are gonna do tomorrow. Or how he's gonna take me out. And how good it feels to have somebody to care for you. That's all I was thinking about. I wasn't thinking about getting pregnant, about no disease, about using birth control. Nothing. None of that was in my head until I got pregnant. That's when I decided to sit and think. When it was already too late."

Love becomes entwined with pleasure and desire in ways that maintain the bounds of appropriate femininity as they engage in emotional and sexual attachments with their peers. It also simultaneously constrains a critical sense about the multiple layers of the public and cultural patriarchies through which they must construct sexual identities. The broader political economic and cultural context of their lives, however, determines whether one slip from virtuousness will organize the rest of their lives.

Sexual activity that results in early childbearing occurs in a society that is already extremely ambivalent about adult female sexuality. The sexual double standard and ideology of male sexual needs among working class Puerto Ricans relegates female sexuality to a subordinate position that dominant capitalist, patriarchal norms bolsters. The multiple constraints on female sexual desire makes sexual activity among poor, young women of color seem almost an assertion of womanhood, a way of practicing womanhood in a similar way that they practice being wives and mothers within their households through their reproduction. Young women themselves understand their behavior as part of the process of growing up and experiencing life. The way they engage in romantic entanglements, however, does not demonstrate a consciousness about how sexual and gender relations, among Puerto Ricans and in the larger society, still get structured in unequal ways where male social power predominates and places women at a disadvantage. The added issue of economic and racialized ethnic social stigma creates an even more complicated context for constructing sexual identities among them. The irony here is that the manner in which young women establish social spaces separate from their parent's expectations—through sexual activity—has specific consequences that place them right back into the domain of la casa they want to escape. Instead of the perceived freedom from parental control and authority, they risk becoming scripted into the very context they want to move away from through the event of early childbearing. They also ensure their own and their children's impoverishment.

Most approaches to early childbearing rarely question how labeling all young women who mother as "children having children" and all sexually active poor women as a "reproductive underclass" and obscure the social and material conditions under which they labor, where they take on adult responsibilities sooner than their middle-class, often white and suburban, counterparts. The narratives of young Puerto Rican mothers help nuance these debates by reconnecting them to the political economic and cultural contexts in which they become sexually active. Sexual activity, and the resulting pregnancies, does not occur in a vacuum but in relation to specific historical and material forces shaping their lives and sexual activity. Early childbearing has everything to do with how their age, their class, their racialized ethnicity, and their gender combine to promote unfavorable outcomes for them. The invisibility and erasure of their extensive reproductive labor within households allows distorted images of them to circulate unchallenged in public discussions, where they bear the brunt of changing economic structures and shifting understandings of femininity and sexual relations they have inherited. Attempts by young women to carve out spaces for sexual exploration and pleasure within such a context means they must both accommodate and contest the norms of femininity and sexuality available to them within the limited cultural and economic scope.

NOTES


3. The narratives in this essay are based on ethnographic research among Puerto Rican mothers in Queens during the nineties. All names used in this essay are pseudonyms and all locational identifiers have been changed to protect the privacy of the study participants. Cognizant of usage and grammatical differences in their narratives, I nonetheless quote each speaker verbatim to preserve the integrity of both the syntax and rhythm of regional speech and code switching among working class, urban Puerto Rican residents.


5. Rhodes (1993, 312) points out that: "Most liberal begin with the premise that teenagers should not have babies [while most] conservatives begin with the premise that single teenagers should not have sex. For conservatives, the problem involves primarily moral and fiscal concerns: premarital sexuality is not objectionable itself, it promotes other objectionable practices, such as abortion and the destruction of fetal 'life,' or non-marital childbearing and the erosion of traditional values and financial self-sufficiency. For liberals, the problem involves primarily health and socioeconomic status: single parenthood is linked with disrupted education, reduced employment opportunities, and an increased likelihood of poverty for mothers, as well as heightened medical risks and developmental difficulties for their children. Rhodes, Deborah L. "Adolescent Pregnancy and Public Policy" in The Politics of Pregnancy: Adolescent Sexuality and Public Policy, ed. By Annette Lawson and Deborah L. Rhodes. New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press; See also Children's Defense Fund and Joffe, Carole. 1993. "Sexual Politics and the Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Worker in the United States," In The Politics of Pregnancy: Adolescent Sexuality and Public Policy.


32. A paternal uncle was the first person contracted to work in the local landscaping business, recruited directly from his hometown of Orocos, Puerto Rico during the early sixties. As soon as he could, Mr. Rodriguez bought his own landscaping business. The business helped various family members and town folk migrate and work, becoming a thriving enterprise for all involved.
