



What Is the Patriarchy Doing in Our Bed? Violent Sexual-Affective Experiences Among Youth

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Abstract

Introduction In the context of a qualitative research study on sexual practices and risk among youth, repeated accounts of non-consensual sex and other forms of gender-based violence emerged. Drawing from that research, this article explores the influence of the patriarchal system on sexual-affective relationships among young people aged 18–25 years residing in Andalusia, Spain.

Methods The fieldwork was conducted between March and May 2019. Six discussion groups were held with 39 participants segmented by gender, level of education, sexual orientation, and length of relationships.

Results The results show that patriarchal constructs related to female body standards and the subordination of women's pleasure to men's, in addition to blackmail and sexual violence, continue to pervade the sexual-affective imaginaries and experiences of young people. Additionally, the participants' discourses on patriarchal and sexual violence are interwoven with critical feminist points of view, revealing timid signs of resistance to the patriarchal order.

Conclusions Women navigate inequality by assuming, negotiating, or rebelling against the different types of violence to which they are exposed in their intimate relationships. In their sexual-affective relationships, young people today are confronted with numerous tensions and contradictions. The discourse of females shifts between their right to seek pleasure and self-blaming, while trying to overcome feelings of shame and dismantling aesthetic standards or empowering themselves and claiming orgasm equality.

Policy Implications The findings are applicable for the prevention of violence against young women in relationships of trust.

Keywords Patriarchal violence · Sexual violence · Sexual-affective relationships · Female pleasure · Gender inequality · Youth

Introduction

As has been shown in the literature and as the empirical evidence indicates, legal, economic, religious, and political mechanisms and institutions (Freeman, 1995) constrain women's practices through differential gender inequalities

and expectations (Connell, 1987, 1995). Likewise, Goldrick-Jones (2002, p. 5) referred to “any practices and systems that oppress, control, or dominate women” as patriarchy. Therefore, patriarchy and, more specifically, gendered power imbalances can be considered the root causes of gender-based violence. Additionally, socialization into differential gender roles and exposure to stereotypes associated with hegemonic masculinity (i.e., males as active, controlling, competitive, aggressive, and dominant) and femininity (i.e., females as passive, vulnerable, docile, and submissive) reinforce patriarchal violence in sexual-affective relationships not only in terms of sexuality but also the emotional burden such relationships entail (Barter, 2018; Gill, 2008; York, 2011).

It is important to recognize the role of the patriarchy in creating a climate conducive to the perpetration of violence against women. In a patriarchal social structure, violence against the most vulnerable is not only permitted but also

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encouraged and normalized as a way of maintaining the status quo. Prominent among these devices to normalize violence is the use of excuses and justifications (Orbuch, 1997; Scott & Lyman, 1968).

In this article, patriarchy and gendered power imbalances are common threads because they are often viewed as being at the root of male aggression and as significant predictors of various forms of violence (Johnson, 1997; Kilmartin, 2000; Muraskin, 2007). Violence is one of the many manifestations of inequality and can be physical or psychological, but also symbolic (Bourdieu, 1998). Of the numerous mechanisms that contribute to maintaining and reproducing the patriarchal system, this article focuses on the most salient aspects identified during fieldwork conducted in the framework of a qualitative research project titled “Young people, pleasures and risks,” specifically, the imposition of bodily aesthetics, the ignorance or neglect of women’s pleasure, and patriarchal violence.

Aesthetic bodily tyrannies are stricter for women than for men, and dependence on body image and aesthetics are considered effects of patriarchal aesthetic violence (García de León, 2012). Physical appearance, especially that of women, is yet another form of discrimination that produces feelings of insecurity and fear in sexual-affective relationships, an effect that is further exacerbated by the medical-aesthetic correction of bodies that do not conform to the social norm, as evidenced by the increase in surgical cosmetic interventions (Wolf, 2002).

The patriarchal system operates not only through what it imposes but also through what it hides or makes invisible, as in the case of women’s pleasure. Indeed, female sexuality continues to be understood predominantly in relation to male sexuality and heterosexual intercourse or coitus (Nicolson & Burr, 2003). Because sexual relations are typically defined in terms of coitus and penetration (coitocentrism) or the phallus (phallogentrism), what is also known as penile-vaginal sex, they are not egalitarian but relations of power that serve to legitimize hegemonic masculinity. Such phallogentric and coitocentric models of sexuality, where women have a complacent role, are sanctioned by society (Adán, 2019; Wolf, 2012) while male aggressiveness is exalted (Mosse, 1996), as are rudeness, violence, and lack of affection (Toch, 1998). By contrast, discourses around women’s desire (Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006) and sexual pleasure, as well as the clitoris (Tuana, 2006) or female ejaculation (Korda et al., 2010), are largely ignored. Moreover, women acknowledge different reasons for faking orgasms such as to satisfy their sexual partners or to end a sexual relationship that has turned tiresome or tedious (Fahs, 2014; Opperman et al., 2014). In an even more troubling vein, a recent study on female sexual experiences noted that women link the practice of faking orgasms to accounts of consensual but unwanted sex (Thomas et al., 2017).

Inequality between women and men fosters gender-based violence and the impunity of such acts, while the threat of violence is a political device that perpetuates this discrimination (Varela, 2017). Such institutionalized gender inequality is present in people’s values, attitudes, and behaviors (Barter, 2018; Johnson, 1997; York, 2011). This continuum of violence against women can range from symbolic violence to psychological, physical, and sexual violence, with femicide as the most extreme form of violence (Hunnicut, 2009; Varela, 2017). However, when focusing on the experiences of young people, some nuances come to light. Barter (2018), for example, noted that gender-based violence among youth manifests itself in the form of emotional abuse, controlling behavior, online abuse (Kernsmith et al., 2018), and sexual and physical abuse.

At the same time, various strategies of resistance and liberation are being deployed. Making patriarchal violence visible (World Health Organization, 2021), the development and dissemination of feminist epistemologies and discourses (Tuana, 2006), or the ideas and arguments disseminated through social networks in “the fourth wave of feminism” (Zimmerman, 2017) are key for deconstructing the patriarchy. According to Barter (2018), the most effective actions are those that challenge the established social norms, gender stereotypes, gender-based power differentials, and victim blaming. In this sense, the author recommends taking advantage of the prosocial attitudes of the peer group and recognizing the value of diverse cultural and artistic manifestations as a means to denounce patriarchal violence and an opportunity to disseminate feminist messages (Araüna et al., 2020).

The objectives of this article are fourfold. Specifically, it aims to (i) analyze discourses on patriarchal violence in the sexual-affective relationships of young people living in Andalusia, Spain; (ii) describe heteronormative and non-heteronormative influences on bodily aesthetics and perceptions of female pleasure; (iii) investigate how young women and men perceive, experience, explain, and sometimes justify normalized forms of patriarchal violence; and (iv) explore feminist discourses and other strategies of resistance against gendered power imbalances.

Method

This study forms part of the “Youth, pleasures and risks” sociological research project funded by Queen Sofia Centre for Adolescence and Youth (Gómez-Bueno et al., 2021) and draws on the results of previous research conducted by the authors (Gómez-Bueno, 2013; Gómez-Bueno et al., 2011a, b; Rodríguez-García-de-Cortázar et al., 2007). To achieve the above objectives, the qualitative methodology is the most appropriate, especially when using a discussion group (DG)

Table 1 Composition of discussion groups and participant profiles

Group	Composition	Sexual orientation	Education	Length of relationship	Age range
DG1	7 females	WSW ^a Bisexual/ homosexual	Higher education	Sporadic	23–24
DG2	8 males	MSM ^b Homosexual	Higher education	Sporadic	20–23
DG3	6 males	Heterosexual	Secondary education	Sporadic	20–25
DG4	4 females 2 males	Heterosexual	Secondary education	Sporadic	20–25
DG5	6 females	Heterosexual	Secondary education	Stable (more than 2 years)	18–23
DG6	6 females	Heterosexual	Secondary education	Sporadic	19–25

^aWSW women who have sex with women. All the women who participated in this group identified as bisexual, except for one who identified as lesbian

^bMSM men who have sex with men. All the men who participated in this group identified as homosexual

technique that gathers together individuals who do not know each other to discuss a specific topic. DGs permit analyzing the process of collective construction of meaning to gain a deeper understanding of the reality from the viewpoint of the participants with their own categories of evaluation, ambiguities, and contradictions (Callejo, 2001; Martín-Criado, 1997, 2014). The technique is open to noise and the unexpected as the discourses are not directed but allowed to take a free course and shift depending on the issues that arise during the sessions. Questions such as “What is the most difficult thing about hooking up today?” and “How do you decide with whom and in what situations to have sexual relations?” or “Do you remember any bad experiences you’d like to share?” were used to prompt, initiate, and/or redirect the group discussions (for more details, please see Gómez-Bueno et al., 2021).

A total of 39 participants aged 18 to 25 years took part in six DGs. The participants were selected by means of structural sampling, which takes into account the position individuals occupy in the social space as bearers of discourse meaning around the topic under study. The following criteria were used to select the participants: gender, sexual orientation, length of the sexual-affective relationship, and educational level (see the values and distribution in Table 1). The 39 young people that participated in the DGs identified themselves as cisgender women or cisgender men. To avoid distancing between the researchers and the participants in terms of age, gender, or sexual orientation, the criteria used to select the participants were also considered when assigning the moderators to each of the DGs. The fieldwork was carried out in the region

of Andalusia between March and May 2019 with young people from Spain.

The participants were contacted through personal face-to-face networks, through virtual networks, and through an advertisement on the Internet, thus diversifying the means of contact (Bertaux, 2006). The DGs lasted approximately 2 h and were audio recorded. The role of the facilitator in discussion group dynamics is not to intervene in the content of the conversation or impose categories or opinions but only to invite reflection on the topic at hand. The aim of the facilitator is to draw out ideas, recap, and communicate what has already been said and avoid imposing the problematic (Bourdieu, 1993), thus leaving it up to the group to collectively construct the conversation.

The audio recordings were then transcribed literally. For purposes of identification, each participant was assigned a code consisting of a letter (F female or M male) and two numbers, one of which referred to the DG and the other to the individual (e.g., F13 female, group 1, participant 3). This ensured anonymity as established in the informed consent form. The research complied with the ethical requirements established by the University of Granada and the Queen Sofia Centre for Adolescence and Youth. All participants provided their consent for the discussion to be audio recorded and the use of the information for purposes of the research. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were guaranteed. Participants’ privacy was also protected by avoiding questions that could revive traumas or re-victimize those who had suffered sexual aggression.

The participants’ discourses were examined using a discourse analysis approach based on a theoretical scheme

that included the themes or categories which emerged during the fieldwork.¹ This approach allows focusing on the strategic component of the discourses and permits investigating the positions and oppositions, semantic attractors, rhetorical devices, inconsistencies, contradictions, and tensions that arose in the discussions (Martín-Criado, 2014). The three researchers who are the authors of this article analyzed the discourse produced in the DGs. To this end, meetings were held on a regular basis where the researchers discussed any discrepancies and made decisions collegially.

Results

Traces of Heteropatriarchy

Of the innumerable manifestations of patriarchy that arose in the DGs, those that were central to the participants' discourses about their sexual-affective relationships are examined in what follows.

Aesthetic demands, especially of women, can be considered a form of violence as they may produce feelings of insecurity and fear in sexual-affective relationships. The experiences of the bisexual female participants (DG1) were especially revealing as they pointed to marked differences in their relations with men and women. These young women perceive that both external and self-imposed demands concerning bodily aesthetics, attractiveness, and the ability to arouse the other person are much higher when their sexual partner is a man. In their relations with women, however, such feelings of insecurity, unease, or pressure to perform appear to diminish: "With a woman it's different, because she's like me.... I know she'll understand me" (F11). Women's relations with other women may even have an opposite self-affirming effect, since as F15 stated, they make "me love myself more."

The heterosexual women who engage in sporadic relationships (DG6) confirmed that aesthetic violence leads them to question their own worth, as they fear "not being able to turn them [men] on" (F61). They feel responsible for male arousal and are pressured to be physically attractive in accordance with the dominant ideals of feminine beauty. Of the participants, only the university-educated females questioned the aesthetic demands of the patriarchy and showed a greater capacity for reflection, opposition, and deconstruction:

It's true that some men are no longer so demanding of us, but it's because they no longer need to be demand-

ing, but it's called the syndrome of learned helplessness, the dog does not need to be put on a leash. (F12)

While these participants reflected on women's duty to be obedient and the role they play in their own domination, those with less education did not share these reflections.

In the male DGs, there were evident differences depending on the participant's sexual orientation. The gay men (DG2) also stated they suffer these bodily and aesthetic tyrannies. They worry about being attractive and how they dress and consider their appearance as a sign of confidence for engaging in sporadic sexual encounters: "at least someone who looks healthy, who knows how to... combine an outfit" (M25). In contrast, their heterosexual counterparts (DG3) did not talk about their appearance and instead referred to girls' physical attractiveness as a marketable commodity. Based on a girl's market value, these males gauge their chances of "getting laid" and portray their sexual interest and availability as providing an opportunity for girls they believe are less fortunate:

You say I want to get laid, and I'm not going to push my luck, so, if you know there's a girl that's kind of ugly, you see that she likes you and you really want to wet your wick. ... Well, you give the girl a chance. (M32)

Thus, in the heteropatriarchal discourse, the tension between satisfying one's sexual desire and demanding beauty is resolved through the "irrepressible biological impulse of men" to have coital sexual relations.

In the DGs with young women, men's lack of knowledge about the female body and female pleasure was viewed by the participants as a source of dissatisfaction and sometimes even led to sexual abstinence. Women of different sexual orientations agreed that it was more difficult to reach orgasm in relationships with men than through solo masturbation or in relations with other women. Their discourse reflects the persistence of patriarchal mandates that make it difficult for women to enjoy heterosexual relations: many men do not know how to stimulate the clitoris, do not practice oral sex, or do not help women to experience more than one orgasm, leaving women to delegate their sexual pleasure to men:

Well, the first time I had an orgasm was last year ... and after fifteen guys ... (F64)

The man assumes the role of "the one who does it to you." And that's it... if you finish (reach orgasm), great, but if I don't finish then ... I go home crying. (F15)

The bisexual women (DG1) said that they often assume the role of the one "on top" and of "the decision-maker" in their intimate relations with men (F11). When their sexual partners are women, however, the dynamics change:

¹ For more information on the methodology, see Gómez-Bueno et al. (2021).

a “trusting” relationship is built where both take part on equal terms and, through discovery and negotiation, “construct what is pleasurable for each” (F15).

The patriarchal system dictates that men exercise the dominant sexual role, while women must acquiesce to their desires, prioritize men’s pleasure over their own, repress their sexuality, and just “let them do it to you” (F11). Thus, faking an orgasm is a strategy to make men “stop and leave me alone” (F61), while sounds of pleasure (i.e., screaming, moaning) are suppressed out of embarrassment at being heard (F63; F66). Some female participants also explained that they were ashamed to ejaculate due to men’s lack of knowledge of this phenomenon: “Let’s see if they’re going to think I’ve peed” (F66). This shaming of women’s bodies is further perpetuated by the aversion to menstruation alluded to by some of the male participants. However, the members of DG3 (all males) openly admitted their ignorance of female sexuality. As M34 stated, “We men don’t have a fucking clue what women’s sexuality is all about”, a statement that none of the other members of the group refuted.

In the patriarchal system, male sexual dominance is constructed as a masculine ideal and may pose a threat to some men and many women who share the imaginary of the male as a potential sexual perpetrator. As F12 explained: “To begin with, being with a woman is much easier and more stimulating in the sense that there is less chance of her raping you.”

The bisexual women in DG1 agreed that men tend to impose their desires, even if it means forcing them to have sexual relations. According to these participants, men do not understand or refuse to recognize women’s “body language” when they are not in the mood for sex. In situations of vulnerability, men represent a threat to women: “[Men think] I don’t give a damn how drunk you are because I’m going to stick it in you, basically... and for me, I don’t know, but it’s happened to me” (F14).

In fact, some of the heterosexual males (DG3) confirmed that their strategies to “get laid” included taking advantage of this female subordination to impose their will on women, regardless of whether the women want to have sex or not: “Of course, it mostly happens when you’re alone together. And even if the chick doesn’t like you, she might do it in the end, because you’re alone...” (M31).

Gendered power imbalances contribute to women adopting a subordinate sexual role where they feel obligated to satisfy their partner, even when sex is consensual:

I have to [let him] keep on penetrating [me] and continue until he finishes because that’s the law of the land and besides, a woman can’t leave a man unsatisfied, a man can leave a woman unsatisfied, because

they’re not superheroes, but we have a vagina, and that never wears out. (F13)

The young gay men in DG2 share a fear of being abused in sexual relationships with strangers. They are afraid that their boundaries will not be respected and that they will be forced to engage in unwanted anal sex. But as M26 claimed, “if at some point during sex the thing stops working, you’re not forced to finish.” The heterosexual males did not refer to these fears in their discourse.

The Continuum of Patriarchal Violence

Many of the participants perceive patriarchal violence as a continuum. One young woman in DG4 (heterosexual men and women) described the violations of women’s rights in sexual-affective relationships in this manner:

It’s all about you valuing me, you treating me like a human being, not demeaning me, not humiliating me, not mistreating me, not raping me, of course. But ... I wasn’t so lucky as a child. Besides, I wasn’t even educated in feminism myself, so I came to think that maybe I didn’t have the right to ... that sex was a thing for men. And that I was simply an accessory. (F43)

Although having experienced violent situations was not a criterion for the sample selection, the topic emerged when the participants were prompted to reflect on bad experiences in their sexual-affective relationships. The women told stories of control, blackmail, harassment, and rape rather than the fear of unwanted pregnancies or contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Women with a high school education and stable heterosexual relationships (DG5) reported being subjected to controlling behaviors and online abuse by their partners. When they tried to defend their right to privacy, they were emotionally blackmailed by their partners or accused of being unfaithful:

F51: He hacked me, I had WhatsApp, Instagram, and all that, and he hacked me, he managed to get in and see who I was talking to, who I stopped talking to, who I was texting with, etc. ... There came a point when I stopped using WhatsApp, or Instagram, or Twitter, not because I was afraid he would see something weird, but out of fear that he would see normal things, what he had to see, a conversation with a male friend, and he was already overly jealous, and [we had] fights and arguments, and ... F52: Yeah, I agree. Me too, my toxic relationship was like “if you don’t give me your Facebook password, whatever, or your Instagram password, there must be a reason, right?”

Relationships characterized by jealousy, manipulation, emotional blackmail, threats, and verbal and psychological violence were referred to as “toxic” by the participants in the groups, experiences that all the female participants in the study had suffered.

The young heterosexual women in DG6 also referred to the fact that their present or former partners used tactics such as manipulation and emotional blackmail to coerce them to have sex when they did not feel like it: “You don’t love me, I don’t turn you on” (F61). Their partners also threatened to go public: “Either you do it with me or I’m going to tell your mother” (F63) and demanded “proof of their love” (F61; F63) such as exchanging sexually explicit photographs that could be used later to blackmail them (sexting). These are just some of the many examples of the continuum of patriarchal violence to which the female participants had been subjected.

The participants in all the groups, except for the group of heterosexual males (DG3), shared accounts of personal experiences of violence and/or rape. The heterosexual women who were in stable relationships (DG5) referred to situations of psychological and sometimes also physical violence in some of their first intimate relationships. Together, the participants in this group reconstructed the cycle of violence as formulated by Walker (1979):

F52: Well, it starts off really well, they seem to be one way [and] little by little they isolate you from your environment, from your friends, from your family, don’t let you go out. ... But they do it in such a manipulative way, such ... you don’t realize it, I mean, they sweet talk you, so since you already create this dependence on that person, well, it seems like the world is going to come to an end if you leave, there were even times when I was physically abused and when it was over, when there was already ... it sounds terrible, but after ... the physical violence, I’d say I was sorry, go and tell him it was my fault.

F51: They make it seem as if it’s not their fault. I mean, they are so abusive and so manipulative that they do it in a way that you are always to blame for everything.

In their accounts of rape, participants from all the groups alluded to the bond of trust between the victim and the aggressor. Several heterosexual female participants (DG6) stated that their former partners took advantage of them by forcing them to engage in sex. This closeness to the perpetrator seems to contradict media stereotypes and legal definitions of what is socially understood and agreed upon as “rape” (Hlavka, 2014), thus creating conflicting feelings and obliging the women to reconceptualize their lived experiences:

F61: One of the times I was asleep and, all of a sudden. I woke up because he was sticking it in and I said: What the hell are you doing, or something like that ...! Well, he wouldn’t stop ... and I had to start shouting at him and he kept on going and I said [to myself] “Come on, it’s not such a big deal and all that, and look, since he’s already started, I’m going to let him.” But then when he fell asleep, I was crying, and I was like ... I felt like I had been raped, I don’t know ... I had said no forty times, but like it or not it had to be a yes.

F64: There’s only one name for that, rape ... that’s exactly what it is.

F66: In reality, people think that rape, like, it happens on the street, that’s typical, but no, rape is a big part of being a couple, you know?

Two of the young heterosexual women in DG6 had been raped in their first sexual encounter because their male partners could not restrain their sexual impulses. As the following exchange reveals, the excuse of “biological need” is a recurrent theme:

F63: My first partner who I lost it [my virginity] to forced me to do it ... it was super hard; I cried all the way home ... I cried for days. My friend was in the next room and didn’t do anything ... but nothing, huh? ... I really hadn’t done anything with anyone in my life. And the boy started to feel me up, and all that kind of stuff, and I said: “Stop, stop.” ... and he said, “No, I can’t” ... he began to go too far, and he grabbed me and started telling me to shut up ... and he forced himself on me and I was screaming, crying, with him right there ... and he hurt me ... it was horrible. And then on top of that he said: “You haven’t bled, you’re not a virgin.” ... It was really hard.

F61: Man, sometimes they seem just like animals.

F64: I lost my virginity that way too ... with my partner.

In this particular account, the rape was compounded by the fact that the victim’s sincerity (about her virginity) was questioned and her friend’s disregard for what had happened to her. However, not all female participants referred to their first sexual experience as “losing their virginity” (on occasion in a violent manner). In fact, some perceived it as a positive experience.

In the group of heterosexual males and females (DG4), another female participant shared an account of how she was raped by a male “friend.” The fact that she had a previous relationship of “trust” with her rapist exacerbated the victim’s suffering and led to her decision not to report him.

My sex life has been total crap. I mean, a year ago now ... I was raped. Plus, he was this typical punky guy, super feminist, the typical feminist ally, of the

type “you have to defend women” and all that. And he raped me. ... At first, he lay down for about an hour feeling me up, especially my tits. ... And the whole time I was like, no, don’t do that, stop, please, I have to go, etc. ... Then he started groping my crotch, and I said, stop, and stuff like that, the moment came when my mind went “click!” and I said, this can’t be happening to me, and I just froze up, like a statue. And ... he just went and stuck it in me, and without a condom too, and ... he lay there for about 15 minutes, I was very still, I mean, I just lay there the whole time ... covering my face and ... until he finally realized I was crying. (F45)

In the group of gay men (DG2), the participants discussed the boundaries of rape and cooperatively constructed the meaning of rape as opposed to being pressured to engage in undesired sex or to please your partner:

M22: And that happens a lot in couples, for example, one person isn’t in the mood and the other one is, and the other person finally gives in and does it reluctantly and that’s rape.

M24: I don’t think that’s rape.

M21: I think that screwing when you don’t feel like it isn’t so ... I mean ... it’s forced, yeah ... I’ve screwed when I haven’t felt like it because my partner wanted to and so what? I mean ... I didn’t enjoy it ... that’s all ... cuz’ if he wanted to, well...

M26: I’ve had sex with my partner and kept on going, even though I didn’t want to, and it was like ... come on, just get it over with.

The discussion revolved around the boundaries between the permissible, the acceptable, and the unacceptable, rape. This tension over boundaries between categories was reproduced in several groups and associated with other aspects of sexual-affective relationships: toxic/healthy, love/jealousy, attention/control, and trust/betrayal. The way each of these tensions was resolved indicates the moral and power struggles of each social group at each moment and in each context.

Mechanisms for Normalizing Sexual Violence

When confronted with actions that may be judged inappropriate, people try to preserve a positive image and present the act as legitimate (justifications) or deny responsibility (excuses) (Orbuch, 1997; Scott & Lyman, 1968). Both the female and male participants offered diverse excuses and justifications for abuse and other forms of patriarchal sexual violence that, when generalized, contribute to the normalization of such violence. Among the most recurrent excuses are social naturalization strategies (i.e., the

biologization of sexual impulses and the psychologization of sexism) and the use of psychoactive substances (Gómez-Bueno et al., 2021).

Hegemonic forms of masculinity have perpetuated the myth of the hypersexualized male as a victim of an innate and untamable desire associated with male virility, a myth that serves to justify abuse and rape as mentioned above.

F63: According to them [men], they can’t help it, because they’re men and ...

F64: No, of course not ... my ex was so crazy he’d bite himself here [she points to her arm] to show me he couldn’t hold back and that he was doing it ... he was biting himself to ... to not stick it in me, I mean, he was crazy.

In her story, F64 appears to excuse her partner’s behavior when she states that he was driven by a fit of madness, thus contributing to the psychologization of male sexual violence. Likewise, the heterosexual males in the DGs psychologized men’s abuse by attributing such abusive behavior to past infidelities that prevent men from trusting women (M34).

Another traditional excuse for non-consensual sexual practices is acting under the influence of alcohol or other psychoactive substances: “I didn’t know what I was doing, I blacked out.” In F45’s account of her rape, the perpetrator, a habitual consumer of these substances, only realized what he had done after the fact:

That man, that guy, that scum, was and is always on speed, on M [MDMA], and all that stuff. And ... when he realized I was crying he stopped, and [said] ‘Oh, I’m sorry I didn’t realize, I misinterpreted everything,’ and things like that. I had an anxiety attack and left. (F45)

A male participant in DG4 (comprised of males and females) highlighted just how common such excuses are:

A lot of people hide behind those kinds of excuses, like: ‘I just didn’t realize, I don’t know what happened, I was drunk.’ ... That’s where empathy comes in, you realize you’ve done harm, you stop. The moment we don’t stop, that line is crossed. (M41)

On the other hand, justifications attempt to redefine or legitimize violence by either appealing to the partner’s loyalty, commitment, or trust, or by blaming the victim. For instance, a certain degree of control appears to be normalized in stable couples (DG5) who, with the argument of creating an ideal relationship of trust with no secrets, share their passwords. This idyllic notion of sharing everything serves to justify the implementation of control mechanisms that entail renouncing one’s personal autonomy and submitting to the dominant partner:

Sometimes he uses my phone, he already knows my password, and that's that. But if he ever goes into my WhatsApp ... I'm going to tell him: 'Hey look, you don't have to be checking my WhatsApp or getting in without my permission.' But if he goes in my WhatsApp, nothing will happen, because I know he won't see anything weird, we won't have a fight about it, and it's not like I'd be hiding anything from him either. (F51)

Blaming victims of sexual violence is often justified by denying them their status as victims under the suspicion that they have not done everything possible to protect or defend themselves. The spontaneous intervention of a male participant from the group of heterosexual women and men (DG4) clearly reflects this manner of thinking:

M42: And why didn't you do it before?

F45: Huh?

M42: Left or stopped him.

F45: Well, because ...

M42: Because I would never let a guy stick it in me.

Thus, after F45 recounted in detail an episode of rape (DG4), the first response she received was that it was her fault for not preventing the aggression, although several other participants objected to this response.

The Incorporation of Feminist and Liberationist Discourses

The persistence of the patriarchal order is also reflected in the discourses of participants who try to break away from sex/gender asymmetries and seek alternative ways of relating. For the female participants with higher education, the *deconstruction of sexuality* is the semantic attractor, while for those with a secondary education, it is *empowerment*. For the young bisexual women (DG1), whose accounts are framed in feminist theory, it is important to "unlearn" the myths of romantic love and preconceived ways of understanding sexuality and monogamy and "deconstruct" traditional gender roles. That is, they believe it is necessary to demystify phallocentrism and the imposition of penetration as the "essential" and most effective means to reach climax. The young women in DG1 stated that penetration alone is not pleasurable and described their first sexual encounters as "disappointing" due to this practice. Moreover, they believe that little importance is attached to other sexual practices and semanticize them as "foreplay":

Me, for example, I like oral sex in the middle or at the end, not as foreplay... With both men and women ... I don't know, I don't consider it foreplay, it's another form of sex, just another position, but the very concept of foreplay ... foreplay to what? To penetration, which is the main show. (F11)

These young women (GD1) present their sexual preferences and the fact of dispensing with men in their affective bonds as a strategy of resistance to the patriarchy:

In reality, it's that guys ... don't understand, don't understand our language. In that sense I also blame my female friends a lot of times because ... they didn't even want to have a male dog, you know? (F14).

In contrast, the heterosexual female participants with secondary education (DG5 and DG6) expressed more ambiguous views. On the one hand, they complained when men "have a small one," "finish too fast," or do not know how to move properly, thus subscribing to myths of hegemonic masculinity to ridicule them. At the same time, they refuse to portray themselves as victims and shared stories of sexual encounters where they were "in charge." These accounts demonstrate that women are faced with contradictory and conflicting social demands: they are expected to assume the traditional role assigned to their gender but must adhere to notions of female autonomy and empowerment. This gender syncretism (Lagarde, 2004) manifests itself in young women who actively engage in sexual practices, while feeling distressed by traditional expectations (such as always being pretty and sexually enticing):

I told one of them, come to my room... three hours and he was so stoned he couldn't get it up ... and me there feeling so stupid, trying to give him handjobs, suck his limp dick. [...] Then I started freaking out, like, man, if I don't turn him on, I don't know, it made me feel so frickin insecure (F61).

Empowerment is seen as an experiential learning process in which women gradually develop gender awareness. The non-heterosexual female participants with higher education in DG1 were critical of the fact that, as a result of their socialization, they began their sexual lives without being empowered and that only through a process of emancipatory affirmation were some able to free themselves from certain social norms and constrictions. Among these women in DG1, the "we" emerged as an active subject with the freedom to "impose" desires or realities on men. For example, many said that refusing to remove their pubic hair was an act of resistance against the tyrannies imposed on women's bodies:

And then, I had sex with those guys, I got naked in front of them with my full bush and I said: Something wrong? You okay? Did you like it? Well, we're the ones who have to impose it on them. What's the problem? ... just because you tell me I have to go completely bare ... no. (F13)

The heterosexual female participants with secondary education question the anti-feminist discourses they observe in their environment and in the media: "That you let yourself be

raped..., it's you who provoked it [...] If you were drunk, you were raped because you were drunk, if you were dressed like that..." (F61). Nonetheless, the counterarguments they deploy make reference to religion and tradition as forms of legitimization: "They sin because they want to, not that I make them sin, because I can wear whatever I feel like..." (F64).

The accounts of the female participants are not the only ones interwoven with notions of feminism. Some young heterosexual men also questioned their sexual practices in a process of self-analysis (DG3 and DG4). In the opinion of these male participants, education plays an important role in eradicating dominant, patriarchal attitudes:

M36: Because there's always a problem in that; when we think girls have a certain predisposition toward us, then we screw it up by being impulsive, we hound them...

M35: Yeah, that's exactly it ...

M36: We need to educate ourselves more about that.

The higher educated women in DG1 also acknowledged that some young men have modified their behavior to a certain extent as a result of the current wave of feminism: "Boys are changing a lot"; "They're learning too, just like us" (F14). In contrast, the higher educated women in DG6 insisted that men still "have no idea" and that is why women must "guide," "teach," or "mold" their sexual partners. Both groups discussed whether women should "educate" men or whether the men themselves should be responsible for effecting change: "Come on, what we need to say is that we're not their mothers... I mean, the media is there, all the information is there" (F12).

Among the new learnings, the heterosexual females in stable relationships (DG5) who had suffered previous experiences of abuse re-assessed the negative effects that past toxic relationships had in their lives and realized the importance of setting boundaries on their partners.

And then from there [came] insults, threats, total psychological abuse. But no, I don't share a password with my [current] partner, he knows my mobile phone unlock pattern and that's about it ... just like I know his. Your privacy is yours and my privacy is mine. (F51)

In general, the female participants in the DGs encouraged each other to engage in self-exploration to gain a deeper understanding of their bodies and sexuality and enjoy a more fulfilling sexual life.

Concluding Remarks

Women navigate inequality by assuming, negotiating, or rebelling against the different types of violence to which they are exposed in their intimate relationships. In their

sexual-affective relationships, young people today are confronted with numerous tensions and contradictions (Gomez-Bueno et al., 2022). The discourse of females shifts between their right to seek pleasure and self-blaming, while trying to overcome feelings of shame and dismantling aesthetic standards or empowering themselves and claiming orgasm equality. Unlike heterosexual relationships, which are built upon unequal roles and positions, sexual relations between women entail a process of discovery and negotiation as an equitable alternative for the deconstruction of heteronormative dictates. Experimenting open sexual orientations stands in contrast to the ideological imposition of binarism and heteropatriarchal violence. Yet, experiences of control, jealousy, and abuse still prevail among young heterosexual males and females (Helm et al., 2017). For women, self-demands (bodily, affective, emotional, etc.) and self-blame, as well as deep gender differences regarding fears and the violence that sustains them, continue to form part of the patriarchal stronghold. Women sometimes remain silent out of fear, while men who do not respect consent remain silent out of interest. Sexual consent should not only be given verbally but also non-verbally. Silence does not always mean "yes."² While women fear rape, men fear rejection or ridicule; and it is only men of homosexual orientation who perceive a reasonable risk of sexual violence (Hequembourg et al., 2015). The normalization and impunity of sexual violence against women in Spain are due to the low—albeit increasing—reporting rates: 9 out of 10 victims of sexual violence and 8 out of 10 victims of non-partner rape do not report sexual aggressions, while 3 out of 4 victims do not report intimate partner violence (Government Delegation against Gender Violence, 2020). As the results of this research have shown, gender-based violence remains prevalent in the 18–25 age group and there continue to exist certain forms of violence against women that are neither detected nor reported (National Statistics Institute, 2023).

Excuses such as men's unrestrained sexual desires (Orbuch, 1997), the normalization of manipulation and blackmail (Kernsmith et al., 2018) in sexual relations, and the conceptualization of women as instruments of men's pleasure (Contreras et al., 2010) coexist with new forms of resistance. Against such gendered power imbalances, role deconstruction, empowerment, and other feminist proposals are emerging (Barter, 2018).

It is worth inquiring into how the current social context—in which a broad spectrum of feminist practices and points of view have entered the public and political arena in Spain (Martínez, 2018) and other countries of the world—incites women to put a name to experiences that they

² We thank an anonymous reviewer for providing us this idea.

did not dare to recognize or acknowledge before, such as rape by a trusted person.

For reasons of time and budgetary constraints, it was not possible to include in the fieldwork young people of other sexual orientations and gender identities who may differ in terms of their sexual experiences and encounters and the stability of their sexual-affective relationships. In future research, it would be advisable to examine these issues taking into account a wider diversity of genders and sexualities, especially with a view to designing specific education, equality, and public health policies to address the problems facing young people today. The excessive heteronormativity of official sex education programs (Burkill & Waterhouse, 2019) and the role of informal knowledge networks as sources of information about sex (Byron & Hunt, 2017) also merit attention. To continue giving visibility to the problem of sexual and gender-based violence among youth, our research team organized a participatory radio workshop for young people in higher education, where the results of this research were discussed and disseminated through the Internet in a series of radio podcasts (Gómez-Bueno et al., 2021).

The conclusions of this work suggest certain measures that should be considered when designing public policies and initiatives to promote equality and equity or to prevent sexual and gender-based violence among youth. These include campaigns aimed at changes in advertising, series, video games, and pornography; the inclusion of sexual-affective education in schools; and promoting reflection on the heteropatriarchal system and its effects on sexual-affective relationships.

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Data Availability The data supporting the findings of this study are available to those who request it to the authors for academic purposes and with the authorization of the Queen Sofia Centre for Adolescence and Youth.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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