

Contraceptives: Experiences of Agency and Coercion of Young People Living in Colombia

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Abstract : Contraceptive methods play a fundamental role in preventing unwanted pregnancies and protecting users from sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Despite being known to almost the entire population of reproductive age living in Colombia, there are barriers, practices and complex notions about contraceptives that affect their desired mass use and effectiveness. This work aims to analyse some of the perceptions and practices discussed with young people (13-28 years old) living in Colombia regarding the use of contraceptives in their daily lives, preferences, needs and perceived side effects. This research also examines the perceived paradox in autonomy that young people experience regarding contraceptive use: in one hand, its use (or lack of it) is interpreted as an act of self-determination and primary example of reproductive agency, on the other hand, it was frequently associated with coercion and limited autonomy derived from the gaps in reliable information available for young people, the difficulty of accessing certain preferred methods, and sometimes the experienced coercion exercise by doctors, partners and/or family members. The data and analysis discussed in this work stems from a research project whose objective was to provide information about needs and preferences in sexual and reproductive health of young people living in Colombia in relation to a possible telehealth service that could close the gap in access to quality care and safe information. Through a mixed methods approach, this study collected 5.736 responses to a virtual survey disseminated nationwide in Colombia and 47 inperson interviews (24 of them with people who were assigned female at birth and 21 with local key stakeholders in the abortion ecosystem). Quantitative data was analyzed using Stata SE Version 16.0 and qualitative analysis was completed through NVivo using thematic analysis. Key findings on contraception use in young people living in Colombia reveal that 85,8% of participants had used a contraceptive method in the last two years, and that the most commonly used methods were condoms, contraceptive pills, the morning-after pill and the method of interruption. The remaining 14,2% of respondents who declared to not have used contraceptives in the last two years expressed that the main four barriers to access were: "Lack of knowledge about contraceptive methods and where to obtain information and/or access them (13.9%)", "Have had sex with people who have vaginas (10.2%)", "Cost of contraceptive method (8.4%)" and "Difficulties in obtaining medical authorisations (7.6%)". These barriers coincided with the ones used to explain the non-use of contraceptives in young people, which reveals that limitations in information, cost, and quality care represent structural issues that need to be address in programmes, services, and public policy. Finally, interviews showed that young people perceive contraceptive use and non-use as an example of reaffirming reproductive agency and limitations to this can be explained through the widespread incomplete knowledge about how methods work and the prevalence of other social representations of contraception associated with trust, fidelity, and partner preferences, that in the end create limitations to young people's autonomy.

Keywords : contraception, family planning, premarital fertility, unplanned pregnancy

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