

MEXICO

The promise of comprehensive school-based sexuality education for preventing IPV: An evaluation study in Mexico City

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INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is common in Mexico, as in many parts of the world. According to recent estimates, 43.9% of women aged 15 years and older in Mexico report at least one incident of partner violence in their lifetime (1). A 2009 study conducted with 14,000 Mexican students found that more than half of participants reported romantic jealousy¹ in their relationship. In addition, 10% of women and 13% of men reported having engaged in controlling behavior more than once in a relationship, for example monitoring their partner's cell phone, email or social media (2). Such possessive behavior is often seen as a display of caring, but in reality may signal or lead to violence in the relationship (2). It is of great importance to identify strategies that are effective in this context to promote equitable relationships and prevent intimate partner violence.

Comprehensive sexuality education has potential to contribute to the prevention of IPV among young people by addressing the harmful gender norms and power differentials that perpetuate inequitable relationships and violence (3). Despite this possibility, few evaluations of sexuality education programs have measured effects on IPV or changes in related attitudes and social norms. Instead, they tend to document reductions in HIV, sexually transmitted infection and unintended pregnancy rates (4,5)

School-based sexuality education is positioned to reach millions of young people in Mexico (6). In 2017, Fundación Mexicana para la Planeación Familiar (Mexfam) piloted and implemented a revised version of their sexuality education curriculum that incorporates a gender-transformative lens and focuses on gender, power and violence prevention. Mexfam partnered with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and International Planned Parenthood Federation/Western Hemisphere Region on a collaborative research project in Mexico City to explore whether and how their sexuality education program might contribute to the prevention of partner violence among students aged 14 to 17 in Mexico City.

PROJECT AIM

The aim of the project is to examine the mechanisms through which comprehensive sexuality education may help to address unequal gender norms, encourage equitable relationships and prevent IPV, in order to translate findings into practice.

Drawing from qualitative and quantitative data that was collected in 2017 and 2018 in a school in the Tlalpan area in the south of Mexico City, the project objectives are to: (1) conduct longitudinal data analysis to examine the trajectories of intervention participants with respect to violence prevention; (2) translate research findings into practice in Mexfam's community programs; and (3) disseminate relevant results to policy, program and research audiences.

SEXUALIDAD-ES, DERECHOS Y EDUCACIÓN (SEXDE)—MEXFAM'S COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION INTERVENTION

SexDE, a 20-hour comprehensive sexuality intervention course is delivered weekly over a semester by trained health educators. Gender is a cross-cutting theme, and

topics include sexuality, violence, sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancy and relationship skills.

The course uses a range of participatory techniques to support self-reflection and the questioning of social norms related to gender and violence.

Initial research findings identify four elements of the course that seem central to the process of violence prevention.

1. **Critical Reflection:** Encouraging participants to reflect on romantic relationships helped them question whether jealousy and possessive behavior are signs of love.
2. **Communication Skills:** Helping young people develop skills to communicate about sexuality, inequitable relationships and reproductive health.
3. **Addressing Discrimination:** Demystifying sexual diversity to tackle harmful gender norms and related discrimination against people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and gender-non conforming.
4. **Referral and Help-Seeking:** Encouraging participants to seek health care and other support.

Building on these initial results, this project will take a deep dive into the data to examine longitudinal trajectories of intervention participants and refine our understanding of which programmatic components are central to the prevention of partner violence. Study findings will be put into practice at Mexfam and used to develop programmatic elements that support prevention programming, such as a mentoring project for health educators.

STUDY CONTRIBUTION

This study will:

- Elucidate mechanisms through which comprehensive sexuality education with a gender-transformative approach may support prevention of intimate partner violence among young people.
- Contribute to the growing evidence base of what works to prevent partner violence within programmatic timeframes.
- Translate research into practice within Mexfam's community programming and disseminated to other programmatic audiences.
- Inform local advocacy efforts in Mexico by providing evidence on viable violence prevention strategies with potential for scalability.
- Make the case for the importance of schools as a setting for violence prevention, with implications for educational policy.

1. The study defined romantic jealousy as "expressions of control that reinforce the idea that one should submit to the desires, needs and insecurities of their partner." This concept was previously defined by Gregory L. White (1981) as "a complex set of thoughts, feelings and actions that follow a threat to self-esteem and / or threaten the existence or quality of the relationship. These threats are generated by the perception of a real or potential attraction between the partner and a (perhaps imaginary) rival."

