

'I Needed To Be Loved Like That':
Sexual Projects and The Social Organization of Sexuality
for Married Women in Rural Mexico

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Abstract:

In contrast with the substantial published work analyzing Mexican men's extramarital relations, very little has been written about married women's practices. This paper describes and analyzes the social organization of married women's marital and extramarital relations, drawing on ethnographic research in rural Western Mexico. Methods included in-depth interviews with each partner for 17 married couples and six additional women for whom the partner was either unavailable or unwilling to participate, 39 interviews with key informants ranging from teenage girls to priests to women with reputations for sexual misbehavior, and six months of participant observation. The paper develops the notion of sexual projects as a way of incorporating both culture and agency, argues that women's marital and extramarital relations can only be understood in relation to each other, and discusses the social organization of married Mexican women's sexuality as an example of the modernization of gender inequality.

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² PLEASE NOTE: this is a 'full paper' but not a finished one. It includes almost all of the ethnographic data on which I will draw, with the exception of some stories of married women's painful or disappointing relationships, but the analysis will be further refined, and the paper cut back, between now and March.

Introduction

The vast majority of published work on married women and extramarital sex in Mexico examines how women navigate the risks created for them by their husbands' extramarital relations (Pulerwitz, Izazola-Licea, and Gortmaker 2001; Hirsch et al. 2009; Hirsch et al. 2002; Hirsch et al. 2007). This is true even in the case of work on HIV and migration, where most of the work examines migrant men and extramarital relations (Magis-Rodriguez et al. 2004; Sanchez et al. 2012; Hernandez Rosete 2012; Sanchez et al. 2012), and the scant research with migrant women discusses how migration affects their propensity to adopt protective practices with their primary partners, rather than how migration provides opportunities for extramarital partnerships (Kendall and Pelcastre 2010). Very little has been published about the extramarital sexual behavior of women themselves. This is important from a population health perspective; there is certainly evidence from other parts of the world that a substantial proportion of marital HIV transmission among sero-discordant partners, it is the women who are first infected and who later infect their husbands (Lurie 2006). It is also important from a conceptual perspective; without exploring the circumstances under which women might seek out and engage in extramarital relations, it is hard to fully understand the contours of gendered sexual agency and the social organization of sexuality.

In this paper, I draw on ethnographic data collected in rural Mexico make three broad points. First, I further develop the notion of 'sexual projects' (Hirsch 2014), which combines attention to the culturally-constructed moral terrain of gendered sexuality with an examination of women's sexual agency, to articulate the contextually-specific uses and meanings of sexuality. As a lens through which to analyze sexuality, sexual projects provides room to see sexual interactions as both a means to valued social ends – strengthening a marriage, producing children – and an end in itself, the satisfaction of desire. This provides a valuable corrective to much work on women, sexual behavior, and HIV vulnerability, which (as others have noted (Higgins, Hoffman, and Dworkin 2010)) has tended to frame women as desireless victims.

Second, I argue that it is impossible to understand married women's extramarital sexual behavior without attending also to the social meanings and organization of marital sex itself. In the same way that the historical emergence of homosexuality as a category in the late 19th and early 20th century in the West 'created' heterosexuality as a visible social fact (Katz 1995), marital and extramarital sex draw meaning from each other; the things that Mexican women do, or do not do, or dream of doing, outside of marriage are only culturally legible when read in the context of heterosexual marital intimacy.

Third, I lay out the social factors that shape married women's engagement in extramarital sex, and compare those factors to key influences on men's practices. Women's lives have changed enormously over the past few decades in this rural corner of Mexico (as have men's), with rapidly expanding educational and professional opportunities. And yet the differences between how emotion, reputation, the labor market, access to mobility, and the social organization of space

intertwine for women and men provide a paradigmatic opportunity to understand the modernization of gender inequality, and how sexuality itself continues to be a critical domain through which that inequality is reproduced.

Data and methods

This paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Degollado, a town of approximately 15,000 residents (although the actual population ebbs and flows with the patterns of seasonal migration between Mexico and the USA) situated in the semi-rural western Mexican state of Jalisco. Degollado's main sources of income have traditionally been agriculture and migrant remittances; however, the 2000 census indicates that the balance has tipped decisively away from agriculture, with only 30% of residents reporting agriculture as their main source of support, down from more than 90% in 1960 (Hirsch 2003). The area's distorted age structure reflects the institutionalisation of labor migration: 2000 census data showed that there were 702 men for every 1000 women in the 20- to 29-year age group, traditionally the peak age range for labor migration. The county seat, Degollado also has two banks, a number of schools including a high school, many small grocery stores, a central market, and two modern supermarkets, as well as a small private hospital, several Internet cafes, and a number of other local businesses.

The research was part of a larger comparative ethnographic study examining the social factors that shape married women's vulnerability to HIV in five very distinct social contexts in Mexico, Nigeria, Uganda, Vietnam, and Papua New Guinea (Hirsch et al. 2009). The shared ethnographic data collection protocol included participant observation, marital case studies, key informant interviews, and archival research, with each method contributing distinctly to the triangulation that is so critical to ethnographic reliability (Sanchez, 2004). For the Mexican site, the final sample for that project included marital case study interviews from 17 couples (with each member interviewed individually) and five additional individuals in which the spouse was either unavailable or unwilling to participate; key informant interviews with two priests, three health professionals, two lesbians, 15 adolescent girls, six feminine-appearing men who have sex with men, and nine women with local reputations for "sexual misbehavior"; and six months of participant observation. The social ties and understanding of local culture developed through 15 months of fieldwork on an earlier project conducted in this community allowed for much more rapid start-up than would normally be the case for community-based ethnographic research (Bernard, 1994).

[The empirical section of this paper is divided up into two parts. In the first part, I trace out the contours of marital sexuality, discussing the spectrum of women's experiences and emphasizing the range of sexual projects and the limits of women's agency. In the second part, I discuss women's extramarital relations, including the ways in which women's social circumstances facilitate their seeking extramarital relations, the kinds of partners women seek, the rewards of extramarital sex, and the consequences of those relations.]

As we bumped along the unpaved roads of the town's poorer neighborhoods or sat in the plaza over some tacos, my friend and fieldwork assistant Estela and I used a code to talk about other women: we called them '*peluqueras*', hair cutters, and we would joke about whose hair they would cut, how frequently they cut hair, and whether they provided haircuts only for friends or if they would also cut strangers' hair. We talked about men too, all the time, but never worried about the children understanding that. We wanted to avoid impugning women's reputations (but not, apparently, enough to refrain from gossiping – that was, after all, part of my job). Children learn early that that sort of gossip means power; Estela recounted to me how her youngest son Adonai, who was five at the time, had ambled up to a woman in the plaza who was widely thought to sell sex and ask her if she'd already been fucked by one of the town's leading citizens ("*que si ya te cogio [Fulano]?*").

In the past in this part of Mexico, for women the lines were drawn in an absolute way between those who appear to conform to the expectation of one lifetime partner and those who do not. The continued power of this classification is indicated by the ease with which women can be reputationally dismissed by a pointed index finger, waved lightly in the air and accompanied by a raised eyebrow to indicate that a particular girl or woman fails the reputational test – that she is '*una de esas*', one of those girls. Women's reputations continue to be so valuable that we took great care in even talking about who might have crossed the line: For married women, the maintenance of a publicly respectable sexual self is an ongoing demonstration of respect for one's husband, as well as an investment in the marriageability of one's children.

The 'one-lifetime partner' norm is not confined to rural areas: during a 2014 trip to Mexico City, a taxi driver, regaling me with stories of the passengers he'd carried over the years, mentioned a film star from the golden years of Mexican cinema who he'd once had the honor to transport. She was not trashy like today's celebrities, he said, as evidenced by the fact that after her husband died, she never dated or remarried. Indeed, widowhood, rather than being a pitiable state, is sometimes characterized as women's reward for enduring marriage. Estela recounted to me a conversation she had with a neighbor she found weeping on the small bus that traverses Degollado's hilly outskirts. Knowing that the woman's husband had beaten her quite badly (and not for the first time) on his final bender, Estela told her not to be a hypocrite and cry, that "after the first sadness passes and after the first shock of not knowing how she will support herself, even if she has nothing other than beans to eat, she'll see how happily she eats with her children". I heard as much among the urban educated elite in Mexico City, where an old friend joked to me that in her family they say that every woman, no matter how bad, deserves a couple years of widowhood. The notion that women could live happily ever after as widows, sitting companionably around the table eating with their children, suggests that their most important desire to sate is that for food. And yet, as I show in the section that follows, women's stories about their own marriages were full of frank characterizations of sexual desire; we can see one end of the spectrum of women's sexual projects in their discussions of how marital sex (both intercourse and oral sex) served to satisfy their own desire, as well as the ways in which, as I have described previously, it functions as a kind of 'marital glue'.

You have to be a little bit of a whore for your husband

One woman I knew, recounting to me how her marriage had endured despite her husband's serial public infidelities, said to me that she'd learned that 'you have to be a little bit of a whore for your husband'. Like readers of Marabel Morgan's Total Woman, famously instructed to greet their husbands at the door wrapped in nothing but saran wrap, all of that pole-dancing serves ultimately not to instruct women to use their sexuality for their own satisfaction, but rather to be the sort of skilled modern lover who can hold their husbands' attention.

A bridal shower held one afternoon in early February of 2004 conveyed powerful messages about the kinds of things a woman needs to know and do in her new role as a wife. While we waited for the honoree to arrive, the hosts assured me that it would not be very '*pelada*', dirty, at least in comparison with others, which were said to feature a male stripper (reportedly a Jehovah's witness who spends his days proslytizing) or else a giant dildo ("*un palo, grande, parece que es de carne*" (a giant stick, it looks like real flesh)) that people wave around to scare the bride. Some symbolic elements suggested domesticity and reproductively-oriented sexuality. Each guest was adorned with small felt heart decorated with tiny instruments of domesticity (a hot chocolate whisk or a broom) and the initials of the bride and groom, and the bride wore a much larger red felt heart, adorned with all of the tiny implements, tokens of her coming responsibilities. Maybe two dozen women, we were each also given a hard candy pacifier to suck on as we sat on chairs in a circle. We could keep the pacifiers unless we crossed our legs at any point during the afternoon, in which case they would be taken away from us; a message, as I read it, about the virtues of keeping our legs open to allow for reproductively-oriented sex.

The main focus of the afternoon was sex. This included endless jokes about women's sexual voraciousness (Q: How are women like ants?; A: You cover up their hole and they go crazy) and large penises. In one of the latter genre, a father who does not want his daughter to marry puts down one condition after another, all of which the desperate suitor agrees to meet; finally, believing himself to have found a condition no man could meet, the father says that he will give his blessing for his daughter to marry, but only if her intended has a penis a meter long – to which ardent and committed *novio* replies "fine, so I will cut off a small piece". The jokes were interspersed with games that involved demonstrating sexual knowledge or desire. In one game, everyone was given a small piece of paper and instructed to write down the name of a song they liked on the front, and the name of a song they did not like on the back. The papers were then collected and read back, with the front songs representing women's responses to vaginal sex, and the back songs suggesting their responses to anal sex. In another game, the bride to be was required to do various things - peel a banana, or try to get up off the floor while her elbows are linked to a friend behind her – and her comments are written down, then read back after we were told that it was what she would say while having sex on her wedding night. One game involved a sort of musical-chairs-like activity which culminated in the loser having to do a striptease for the bride; in another, numbers are pinned on the blindfolded bride and she has to answer a series of questions by

giving the numbers. The questions (*donde quieres que empieza? Cual es tu parte mas sensible? Que es lo que te da mas miedo? Donde quieres el primer beso? Donde quieres que le chupe? Donde quieres la primera mordida?*; where do you want him to start? Which is your most sensitive place? What are you most afraid of? Where do you want the first kiss? Where do you want the first bite?) implied both knowledge about sexual play and a certain amount of desire on her part; the way the questions were framed did not allow for the possibility of not knowing which was her '*parte mas sensible*' or not wanting him to start at all. General hilarity ensued when it turned out that she had chosen the number pinned to her crotch as the place where she wanted him to start licking.

In formal interviews and casual conversations, many women (and not just women in happy marriages) joked about sex and pleasure, communicating that they enjoyed sex, that they initiated it, and that they desired varied forms of sexual play. One acquaintance joked to me, for example, that she had always heard that a man was no longer a man when he could not get an erection, but that now she knows that a man is no longer a man when they cut off his tongue. When starting the formal interviews with another woman whose decade-long married had included a fair share of conflict as well as periods in which her husband simply disappeared, I asked her where I should plug in the recorder, and she responded, laughing, "you want to know where I stick it in?" ("*y donde me lo enchufo?*"). That she cast herself as the one to 'stick it in' reflects a sexual landscape in which women demonstrate that they are active partners; this is quite distinct both from the discourse of long ago in which women described marital sex as '*cuando el me usa*' (when he uses me), but also something of a break with talking reverently about sex as 'making love' (Hirsch 2003, 214).

The interview guide left the most personal questions about sex for the third interview, under the assumption that by then we would have developed a rapport that would making asking and answering the questions more comfortable, but some women did not wait. That same informant, when asked in the first interview about what have been the best parts of her marriage, responded, well, 'standing up, sitting down, in the day, any time". She was not the only woman I interviewed who answered that question by talking about moments of erotic delight. Women seemed proud both of desiring and of being desired. One older woman, whose grandchildren we had to send off to the store with money to buy candy so that we could speak alone, described her husband as '*un chile parado*'; just the other day, she said, when he woke up, he was saying "ouch, ouch, look, I have this terrible pain", and of course she was worried and looked over – and he was just trying to get her to look at his erection! She followed that with a story about a friend of hers whose husband *ya no se le paraba* (could no longer get it up), laughingly acknowledging that she should not complain about her own husband because her friend's situation was patently so much worse.

It is important to distinguish, of course, between the norm or discourse that frames sex as an opportunity for ecstatic marital communion and the women's actually everyday lives. Women with young children talked about dropping into bed at the end of the day, bone tired from a day of laundry, ironing, mopping, dusting, shopping for food and preparing meals, in addition to bringing their children a

snack at school. Veronica and Roberto, for example, became *novios* (boyfriend and girlfriend), when she was 12 and he was 16, but they did not marry until nearly a decade later when Roberto had finished his studies. Exhausted by the care of her two immaculately dressed and groomed children, Veronica recounted to me that she frequently feigned sleep when he gets in bed at night, but she also told me that for their marriage to last, she worked to keep their sex life interesting. To that end, they occasionally splurged on a room with a Jacuzzi in the luxurious sex motel just outside of town. Roberto had downloaded the kama sutra onto his palmpilot—they call it the palma sutra—to help them be, as she called it with a laugh, ‘creative’. There were clearly limits, though, to this creativity; she said that they had never actually fought over anything related to sex but that she refuses his requests for oral sex—I was surprised by her use of the graphic phrase *chupar su pene* (to suck his penis)—because it disgusted her. She asked me if I thought she should see a psychologist to work through this disgust. Veronica’s anxiety about the revulsion she feels at the thought of giving her husband a blow job frames marital sex as work, a feminized domain of labour in which women feel pressured to develop partner-specific skills to give the gift of pleasure. Like any gift, the genius is in the way it demonstrates intimate knowledge of the other person’s tastes and preferences. Certainly, well-honed sexual skills are every bit as much an element in successful modern masculinity as are well-honed abs, and a man should satisfy his partners—but a wife must satisfy her husband. Good marital sex, like a mortgage payment, is part of a long-term plan for keeping a roof over one’s head – as well, of course, as a means of expressing love and sharing pleasure.

Anal sex seemed to be a particular point of conflict for many couples. A psychologist I interviewed who worked with men and women in the town explained that some men are just looking for a little variety, but that women (who I sometimes heard describe anal sex as ‘*por donde no es*, (the way that it is not)) see it as a boundary not to be crossed: in the words of one interviewee, “*si me penetra por el ano, luego va a querer el oido*’ (if he sticks it in my anus, next he’ll want to stick it in my ear). Some men, the psychologist contended, seek anal sex because they are ‘*fantaseando que seria hombre*’, fantasizing that they are having sex with a man. Regardless of men’s reason for pressing for the practice, I heard from a number of women I knew well about conflicts it engendered.

One woman initially responded to her husband that she was not ‘*una de esas*’ (one of those women), that if he wanted that he should just go find someone and pay her because ‘*eso no es para un matrimonio*’ (that is not for married people to do). Seeing him unconvinced, she said gave as an additional reason that she has problems ‘*por atras*’ (back there) anyway and that if they had anal sex who knew how she would end up, to which he responded that she must have fucked a lot of guys back there to end up like that already. In the following days, he continued to call her a whore, saying that she had given it from behind to everyone else and now it was his turn.

The lines of debate about who controls women’s bodies was played out not just in sexual acts but in social and sartorial ones. Even for women in marriages that seemed either actually happy or where the conflict was kept to a low simmer, marriage seems to have started out with the underlying assumption that the women

who exercised some degree of physical autonomy were the lucky ones. During a Sunday picnic lunch at the swimming pools I was chatting about clothes with the small group of middle-class women who made up our expedition that day. One woman, who was wearing a tight, v-neck, sleeveless wrap blouse, said that she had never worn anything so daring before being married, and that after her marriage she 'breathed a sigh of relief', believing that now, as a *senora*, having successfully moved through the dangerous time of adolescence when women risked dishonor, she could dress as she pleased – only to have her husband tell her not to dress like that. She said that she deliberately refused to pay him any mind on that front, and he gradually stopped trying to control her wardrobe. Another woman said that her husband tried to intervene on the wardrobe front not after they married but rather after their first child was born, telling her "*esta ropa ya no te queda, ya eres mama*" (those clothes are no longer appropriate for you, now you are a mother) – but she also talked about resisting, saying that 'well, it's all well and good for them to go around looking at women in the street'. The logic is not perfectly parallel – men can exert their sexual agency and freedom, so women should be free to be sexual objects on display? The actual parallel, for women to go around ogling men in the street, seems unthinkable so the closest women could get to exerting their independence is to refuse to let men control them.

It is not just the adornment of bodies that is up for negotiation, but their movement; we had invited a number of other women to accompany us that day whose husbands would not let them. One in particular, married to a professional, was discussed as being the deserving of pity because he only wanted her to stay home and watch the children. Although my lucky friends nodded their head in agreement at the comment that '*estos tiempos ya pasaron*', there clearly are a substantial number of women for whom those times have in fact not passed.

Section to insert: discussion of women for whom marital sex was a calvary, including marital rape, not being allowed to use contraceptives, facing a lifetime of shaming for not having bled on her wedding night.

Early in my career I encountered some skepticism about whether it would be possible to do research about sexuality with women in rural Mexico. Perhaps picturing these women's rebozo-clad mothers or grandmothers, grant review committees returned proposals, unfunded, with doubtful comments from American academics about the feasibility of such work. I found however that with appropriate *confianza* even older women were quite willing to talk about their first sexual experiences, what they'd known about sex when they married, and to answer questions about the nature of their marital sexual relationships. Older and younger women told bawdy jokes, admitted to liking or even initiating sex and, perhaps most importantly, made it clear that it women's desire for sexual pleasure is not an index of gendered modernity – that, as one woman born in the 1940s put it, younger

people thought that they'd invented sex but they didn't know how much fun it was to screw in the middle of a cornfield³.

What I found much more challenging, both in that earlier project (Hirsch 2003) and in this more recent one, was to get women to talk about behavior that they saw as unforgiveably outside of widely shared social norms. I was told by many people, for example, that one woman of my acquaintance was well known for having cuckolded (*puesto los cuernos*) her husband – not just once, but many times, most scandalously when they (reportedly) invited some of his friends over, her husband got so drunk that he passed out, and she supposedly screwed the two friends in the same evening, under her own roof. And yet, despite many conversations, including one in which I asked her directly if she had ever had sex with anyone other than her husband, she roundly denied the rumors. She countered that people were full of envy because she was a successful businesswoman, and so they used the fact that she frequently dealt with men in the course of her work to generate those calumnies.

Of the five of us in this comparative research project who were returning to fieldsites in which we'd spent a great deal of time (the others in Nigeria, Uganda, Vietnam, and Papua New Guinea), I was by far the one who had the least success in collecting first-person stories about married women's extramarital relations. This is all the more striking given that a Huli woman whose husband discovers her infidelity is generally considered within his rights to murder both her and her lover. Not a day went by, however, without a story about some *other* woman's transgressions – Estela, Claudia, Licha, and Evita all knew that I was interested in the topic, and so they were generous in sharing breaking news, old chestnuts, and jokes that might shed light on it. It was a struggle, however, to get women to own up, in conversation with me, to that which it seemed everyone else knew.

While the facts in terms of women's actual sexual behavior may be, at least from this remove, unknowable (and in fact I have looked hard and failed entirely to find even in one of the best demographic libraries in Mexico any population-level data on women's extramarital sexual practices), other truths emerge from this and other similar interactions. As my other work has discussed (Hirsch, Wardlow, and Phinney 2012), the social risk of reputational damage is a powerful force regulating women's sexual behavior, and conformity to expectations about appropriately-disciplined sexual behavior is a vital resource for married women. A neighbor, stopping by to drop off some clothes she'd brought back from the US for Estela, shared two phrases that conveyed this with particular piquancy. She joked that '*tardas mas en echarte uno de en que lo huelen*', (it takes more time to fart than it does for others to smell it), and in that same conversation remarked "*uno no queda bien con la gente, se escupas te dicen babosa y si no te critican por seca*" (you can't ever make people happy, if you spit they call you slobberer and if you don't they say

³ As I discuss elsewhere (Hirsch 2003), both younger and older people in this fieldsite in rural Mexico do talk about the public dimension of sexual behavior as a metric of modernity – that is, what can be seen and judged – but we should not be so taken in by that as to believe that there is necessarily a correspondence between older women's public demonstrations of desirelessness and their private experiences of intimacy.

you are uptight). Farting and spitting both involve making public that which is private and internal (gas, saliva).

One interpretation of this lack of data is that it reflects flaws in my ethnographic technique – that is, that my four other colleagues from the Love, Marriage and HIV project were all better than I was at eliciting honest stories of what actually happened. Alternatively, there may be something about the peculiarly Mexican mix of sex, gender, Catholicism and shame that made it feel worthwhile to women to deny something to a stranger (me) that was common knowledge to all of their neighbors – a chance, perhaps, at building at least momentarily a socially-respectable self. Nor did it feel possible for me to ask men directly about their sexual escapades, for the simple reason that it was socially unacceptable for me to be alone with a man. The longest conversations I remember having with the husbands of the women I was interviewing and spending time with took place when my own husband was visiting; his presence effectively neutralized me as a sexual threat, providing temporary respite from the sort of *purdah*-like state in which I generally found myself⁴.

And yet nonetheless, I did manage to learn a great deal about women's experiences with extramarital sex. Estela knew of many women who had reportedly taken lovers or even worked as sex workers while their husbands were away (the difference between these two not being so much the exchange of sex for money but the frequency of payment and the explicitness of the negotiation over price), but asking them to do an interview often failed to bear fruit in terms of getting them to share those stories with me. However, when in a conversation with a prospective informant who had a checkered past, Estela would – in front of me – mention those practices, engaging the woman in a conversation, we found that women were then much more likely to consent to doing an interview in which they would actually discuss their own practices. Although they still sometimes demurred from answering every question. Claudia, who did domestic work for us, was a rich source of stories about local goings-on. When I expressed some doubt about whether women really did have sex outside of marriage, she would just shake her head at my credulousness, and say "*Como hay de hombres, hay tambien de mujeres*" (the way that there are men like that, there are women like that too". In the section that follows, I discuss four key dimensions of these stories: the ways in which women's social circumstances facilitate their seeking extramarital relations, the kinds of partners women seek, the rewards of extramarital sex, and the consequences. Taken together, these four optics give us some sense of the social patterning of women's extramarital relations.

The stories I heard seemed to fall into a general taxonomy of three kinds of 'infidelity', when viewed in terms of women's circumstances. In the first, it is women who are separated from their husbands (*dejado del marido*), who are still spoken of

⁴ The danger of a man and woman being alone together, The way that the danger of gossip keeps men and women apart - for me, the difficulty of talking socially to men – example is how remarkable it was to talk to one man when I went out for dinner with him and his wife. Contrast with when John was visiting. Example of E and Maestro Sebas

as being unfaithful. This encompassed both cases in which the husband may have left because of the infidelity, and other times it seems as if after the separation, they take up with another man (or men) to pay the rent. That these women are spoken of as being 'unfaithful' (*infiel*) underlines that one-lifetime partner norm.

Second, I heard many stories about women whose husbands were in the US who ended up giving birth in a timeframe that made it clear that their husband was not the biological father of the child. One woman tried to pass the child off as her daughter's, convincing her husband that their daughter had *fracasada*, had a premarital pregnancy, so that he came home to baptize what he thought was his grandchild. That was told with revulsion – really, what kind of mother would ruin her daughter's reputation to save her own? In another story, a woman whose lover had gotten her pregnant called her husband and urged him to come home quickly; she wanted to have sex with him before too much time passed so that she could pass the baby off as his. He did return home, but someone tipped him off to the ruse and he stayed at his mother's house and did not have sex with his wife; when it turned out that she was pregnant, he left her.

Third, people told stories about married women whose husbands were not out of town – some of those were women who screwed around on their husbands "*nomas por gusto*", while others did it either to revenge themselves on their husbands (*pagarles con la misma moneda*) or because they needed money (*porque no les daba la raya*). In some cases, familial reputation was an issue; there was one family in which all the adult sisters had children who did not resemble those women's husbands. Whether nature or nurture, people believe that '*hijo de tigre sale pintito*', the son of the tiger turns out striped. (Individual character is not of course entirely determined by family reputation; despite the mother being so brazen as to appear in public at one of the town's annual festivals with her lover, one of her daughters turned out '*mas puta que nada*' (more of a whore than anything else) and the other one '*bastante recatada*' (very well-controlled.)

The circumstances of these relations are just one way of categorizing them. Another analytic approach is to group them by the kinds of partners women have. Jokes and gossip made it clear that pretty much any man with whom a woman had the opportunity to be alone was suspect. This included the man who delivered tanks of cooking gas or water, who necessarily entered many women's houses, and even the priest, with whom I was quite explicitly instructed never to be alone. A psychologist I interviewed told many stories – not necessarily identifying them as from her patients, of course, which would violate professional ethics, but more generally from her position as a well-informed observer – of women's extramarital relations, all of which were either with neighbors or *compadres*. *Compadres* (the godfathers of one's children) were constantly under the veil of suspicion; social intercourse between women and men to whom they are not related was so restricted that for many women their *compadres* were the only men to whom they were not related by blood with whom they had any *confianza* at all. This explains, perhaps, the almost baroque recourse to formal speech ('*usted*' rather than the more familiar '*tu*') I frequently heard between women and their *compadres*, particularly working class women; the use of formal speech, as I have learned myself over time,

is a sort of moral fence, a way of asserting that the relation falls within the bounds of propriety and appropriately acknowledges social hierarchies.

Invisible in that list of those who threaten sexual danger is other women; this is yet another way in which the intense heteronormativity of everyday life actually facilitates extramarital relations. I heard a number of stories about women who had had affairs with other women. In some ways, this is the safest kind of infidelity because it is the easiest one for a married woman to hide; women go in and out of each other's houses without causing comment, can walk together on the street with raising an eyebrow, and can travel to another town for a day of errands (or an afternoon in a sex motel) without anyone pausing to question their honor.

A discreet lesbian dalliance is quite different, however, from a publicly visible lesbian courtship. Even in the late 1990s, I had heard about a young woman who dressed like a man and would supposedly roar through town on her motorcycle, sweeping young virgins off their feet and taking them to live with her in the US. Sitting in the kitchen one morning with Evita and Claudia, our conversation moved from homosexuality in general to lesbian intrigues, and when Evita said that *'ya son mas destapados'* (now they don't hide it so much), Claudia launched into the story of Fryda, who was the cousin of a friend of hers. Fryda goes back and forth to the US, working to support her mother 'like a man', and Claudia said that at first she was afraid of her because she had heard Fryda say *'donde pone el ojo, pone la bala, a mi la vieja que me gusta, yo la tengo'* (where I look, that's where my bullet goes, I'll take the woman I like), at which point Evita chimed in, saying *"macha, no?"* (she is macho, no?) and laughing. Claudia recounted walking with Fryda, who saw a girl she liked on the street and tried to engage her in conversation, like a man (*le empezaba a decir cosas, como un hombre*) (she started to say things to her [on the street], like a man), and then stood flirting with a little circle of young women – but then Claudia stopped to clarify, "they were girls from another town, from La Piedad or a ranch, she's never been disrespectful to us" (*fueron muchachas de afuera, de La Piedad o de los ranchos, a nosotras nunca nos llego a faltar el respeto [they were girls not from here, from La Piedad or some small farm, they were never disrespectful to us.]*) I asked her what people thought of Fryda and she said *"la ven como una persona normal, un hombre pues"* (she's seen like a normal person – well, like a man). Claudia recounted other anecdotes that underlined how conceptually Fryda was categorized as a man, or at least acting publicly with a level of sexual aggression associated more with men than with women. In one, she humiliated a girlfriend with whom she was sharing a long weekend lunch by getting drunk and flirting openly with a woman at another table. In another, Fryda supposedly "kidnapped" (*robó*) a young woman; the woman's family sued her and had her put in jail, although later the girl came home and told her parents that she had gone of her own free will.

The stigma associated with these same-sex sexual relations is suggested by my experience interviewing someone who (I knew from other sources) had lived for two years with Fryda as her lover. We talked about many of the sexual relationships she had had, and discussed masturbation and sex toys, and yet she chose not to reveal to me one of the longer-lasting intimate relationships of her adult life. While it was taking place, apparently, it was not so hidden; someone else recounted to me seeing that woman and Fryda kissing on the street in broad daylight.

Yet another lens through which to view women's extramarital relations is in terms of the social factors that facilitate them. No woman who lived with her husband directly admitted to me that she had had extramarital sex, but women's behavior during their spouses' long absences is a topic of almost constant joking, gossip, and speculation. The relatively common occurrence of pregnancies during these absences provides concrete evidence that this sexual gossip is not just a discourse that serves to socially control women's sexuality, although it certainly does remind women of the limits of acceptable behavior. Nonetheless, married women also engage in extramarital sex, forming sexual liaisons in search of pleasure, affect, excitement, or a feeling of power. Women do not, however, pay for sex, pursue extramarital sex in semi-public social venues or in the presence of peers, or seek casual sex in the absence of an affective relationship. Women's talk about getting carried away by emotion is every bit as socially-organized as is men's talk of being carried away by alcohol.

Cristina did tell me at some length about her extramarital relationship⁵. Her story began with her own mother, who had 15 children. Landless, with so many to feed and limited resources, they sent Cristina at the age of eight to work as a domestic servant, but at 13, her developing womanhood made it unsafe to live under another man's roof, and she returned home. She eloped at 16 with her boyfriend, a heavy drinker from a family of drinkers, against her family's advice. She describes being unhappy from the beginning, noting that her husband never even suggested to her that they go to Mass together. The watershed moment, though, was when her third child was born, and he failed to show up at the hospital to see the baby (and to pay the bill). She was forced, humiliated, to call her mother and have her mother borrow the money. "From there on in", Cristina said, "something changed". Reflecting back, she said:

He would never say, 'let's go to a party', or anything. As a woman, all of that hurts – that is, you feel it. I would say to myself, thinking of the telenovelas... when is a man going to talk to me that like, of luxuries, or give me a gift? Who is going to speak to me the way I wish my husband would? He never talks to me, to tell me if he loves me or not. I was the one, all the time, I would say to him, "do you love me?" It was always me. "Yes". That's all he would say, so that you would say who knows if he loves me or not? because the way he said it was so curt. I would say, "do you really love me?". He would just say 'yes'. "And are you ever going to leave me?" All I'd get was a 'no'. And now I think back, and wonder, why did I ask him those questions? Maybe I always had it in the back of my mind to betray him someday, because maybe, the way he was, I needed someone to love me more.

"He lacked for nothing", she recalls, talking about how she always had his food cooked, even if all she could prepare with the money he gave her was beans, his clothes ironed and ready for him after a bath, and how she never denied him sex—

⁵ While all of the names and key identifying characteristics of the men and women in this paper have been modified to protect their identities, Cristina's is the most heavily redacted and transformed.

especially not that, since she was eager for any sort of tenderness. It was her husband, ironically, who provided her with a way to find someone who could love her more: he bought a small store, with the idea that he could eventually stop working in Chicago and stay in Degollado year round. While working behind the counter at the store she met the man who would become her lover. Carried away by the romance, by the roses sent by her admirer (which she hid under the counter at her store so she could savor them throughout the day), and by the attention for which she had longed, they took up together.

Cristina's desire for a specific genre of sweet talk draws meaning from a broad set of social factors, including her access to a television likely paid for by the remittances of her migrant husband, the opportunity for infidelity created by that same husband's extended absence, and the cultural constructions of sexuality and romance that form the context for the production of these novellas in which she first heard the type of verbal lovemaking she learned to crave. These cultural forms tie emotional intimacy and pleasure together in the social imaginary as goals that are desirable not just in and of themselves but also as symbols of modernity and prestige (Hirsch 2003). Gendered social space played a critical role in her tale: she met her lover by spending time in public, talking with men, and she got to know him as she developed a skill at banter with strange men she did not know she had—a skill which moved her mother to protest that she did not like Catarina to be working because she was becoming too '*habladora*', too much of a talker. She used the excuse of restocking the store to meet her lover, in a way that parallels those men who use trips to Guadalajara as a cover for a massage or a blow job.

As she explained it to me, Cristina's search for affection, attention, excitement, and romance made her extramarital affair an expression of her femininity. Her concern with respectability also reveals the gendered contours of extramarital sex: she compared her own dignified demeanor, which she describes as "like a wife", with the way her lover's wife verbally attacked her in the street with crude insults (saying that if her own husband didn't satisfy her why didn't she find a donkey to fuck).

More generally, migration is one of the key underlying contexts in which women engage in extramarital sex; with their husbands away for months or even years at a time, some women are spoken of as not being able to live up to the ideal of celibacy, while others are driven to take up with a lover while their husband is away out of loneliness, a need for money, or a desire to *pagarle con la misma moneda* (to pay him back in the same coin) for infidelities committed on the other side of the border. One of the women we knew, for example, ran her husband's agricultural business during the years that he worked as a labor migrant in the US, and the frequency with which she was seen talking in public with the laborers she employed, and the fact that she would sometimes invite them to share a beer or a meal with her at the sorts of watering holes where decent women are not usually seen, led to him bearing the nickname (behind his back, of course) of *Don Cornelio* – Mr. Cuckold. Some of our acquaintances vehemently insisted that reliable sources had had proof of her infidelities, though she just as vehemently argued to me that this was the sort of malicious gossip to which any woman who did not conform to local standards was subject.

A final way to think about the taxonomy of women's extramarital relations is

in terms of the consequences. Some women are said to take lovers in full view of their husbands; these men are said to have been '*hechizados*', bewitched, by their wives. One woman I knew told me quite earnestly about how her aunt had bewitched her uncle, sprinkling some herbs in his food so that her lover could come and go. I responded with disbelief to the notion that a man would tolerate public knowledge of his having been cuckolded. Evita, in turn, said that "*los cuernos son como los dientes, duelen al salir pero luego ayudan para comer*" (horns are like teeth; they hurt when they are growing but then they help you eat), and then Claudai followed with a joke:

"A man comes home and discovers his wife *in flagrante* with her lover, his compadre. He says, 'Son of a bitch, How could you do this to me? I'll kill you!' His wife says 'honey, not so fast. See that new refrigerator?' 'Yes', he responds, somewhat confused. 'Well, he bought it for me.' 'I don't care', he says, though a bit deflated. 'I still want him out of here!' But she persists: 'see our new dining room set?' 'Yes', he replies, with a pause. 'He bought that too', she says, smiling. 'Still', he mutters, 'you can't do this to me.' 'And our new living room furniture', she continues, 'that was a gift from him as well'. 'Oh', he finally concedes, 'well in that case, cover up his feet and take good care of him, we don't want to him to catch a cold.'

What's funny (because it is unthinkable) is that a man could sacrifice his masculine pride to better his standard of living.

There are instances in which men who were not bewitched apparently decided to accept their wife's infidelity: in one story, a woman confessed to having become pregnant during her husband's absence, only to have him confess to having fathered a child in North Carolina. They decided to reconcile and raise all their children together. In another, a man whose wife had had a lesbian affair reconciled with her at the urging of their priest (see Hirsch 2007). More commonly, however, the story will unfold as did the tale of our neighbors across the street: when the man found his wife in bed with another man, he took their children and left town, finding it unbearable both to continue with her and to continue in a community in which his wife had publicly announced that she sought out another man because of his inadequacies as a lover.

There are, of course, all kinds of punishment inflicted by living in a small town, and the scorn of one's neighbors can be quite cruel; talking about a young woman who was killed by a drunk driver over the weekend, I got an earful about that woman's mother, who was described as very pretty, always very well turned out, but also excessively '*egoista*', self-involved, and rumored to be so busy with her lovers that she did not have time to raise her children properly, letting them run around with all kinds of people. It seemed quite cruel to me that this woman, who had just lost her daughter, would fail to generate even a shred of sympathy, but apparently she lost the right to sympathy when she failed to comport herself as a mother should, putting her children before her own (reported) search for pleasure.

Conclusion

These narratives about marital, and extramarital sexuality – both what can be known about the range of actual practice and the more easily knowable moral

landscape –speak to some of the key questions in this paper. First, they shed light on how looking at sexuality can help us trace the outline of gender inequality. The pains to which women go to please their husbands – not to suggest that men do not also aspire to please their wives, but the note of anxiety does not ring quite the same – reminds us that in heterosexual relations, access to women’s bodies continues to have an exchange value which depends on its regulated scarcity. That scarcity, in turn, depends on the collective belief that however much they may want to have sex, women want it less, or can control their desires better, than can men. Women can extract value from access to their bodies in a way that men can only do when they are desired by other men. And, to be sure, they only need that transactional value because their access to material resources is more limited than men’s.

Women’s goals, to be sure, are hardly captured by this notion of ‘extracting value from their bodies’, and in fact I am quite sure that they would universally find the idea insulting because of the suggestion of transactionality. And yet, ‘le mujer pierde todo, el hombre no pierde nada’, (women lose everything, men lose nothing[from being publicly known to have had sex]), which young girls today still hear from their mothers, suggests that there is still a ‘something’ that women have that is in some way detachable or losable in their sexuality.

The line is drawn between deployment of sexuality that is socially-useful versus that which is purely pleasure-oriented. The reason that there are no bars where women can go to drink and watch men swivel their pelvises is that there is no social prestige in terms of their status as a successful woman to be gained by doing so, nor would that serve to solidify their relations with other women – indeed, the notion of a Chippendale’s-like experience in rural Mexico seems absurd, though as even a cursory google search reveals it certainly does exist for the elites in urban Mexico (with a 20% discount for early booking, no less, and packages that include a party animator, lights, sound, and a private dance for the bride (<http://www.stripersmexico.com/paquetes.php>)). The ways in which men – at least some men – are schooled in the separation of interpersonal affect and sex was made most apparent by the jokes about which men had grown up screwing the sheep or goats for which they had cared as youth. Estela recounted to me, laughing, the chagrin of her neighbor when the donkey that had been routinely left tied up on the corner, and which she herself had seen that neighbor enjoy on more than one occasion, was sold, so it might certainly be possible to develop a special fondness for a particular animal⁶, but by and large it seems like the fact that at least in the past, when Degollado was more rural than it is today, the fact that fucking an animal was regarded both as a relatively common and normal experience provides some good evidence for the ways in which men were schooled to separate pleasure and affect. Catherine the Great notwithstanding, I never heard even a joke about a woman pleasuring or being pleased by an animal.

Affect is certainly a part of this; the harshest judgements were visited on women who screwed around on their husbands ‘*nomas por gusto*’, just because they enjoyed it – harsher even than those who traded sex for money, who could at least

⁶ Nor is this notion confined to developing world contexts – see, for example, the Edward Albee play, “The Goat, or Who is Silvia?”

be seen as doing their part to provide for their children; fulfilling a maternal obligation cleanses in part, though not entirely, the stain of transactional sex. Love is not exactly the coin that makes sex safe from sin for women, because no matter how much they love a suitor, if he fails to *'responder'*, to do his duty, in response to a premarital pregnancy, there is still shame. It is ok to 'be a little bit of a whore' for your husband because, Marabel Morgan-like, keeping one's husband satisfied is a wife's job. The fundamental difference between social understandings of men's and women's sexuality is that women's is ideally directed only towards building kin relationships (either by connecting appropriately to a husband, by honoring and respecting children and parents), while men deploy their sexuality for building intimate relations with their wives, for building intimate relations with other people, and just for fun⁷. This reflects both the enduring unequal social control of women's sexuality –men's is certainly regulated, but not in the same way – and women's more limited access to other resources.

In terms of the social factors that shape women's engagement in extramarital sex, the landscape clearly also differs. Affect is prominent; Cristina's desire 'to be loved like that' reflects her ideals, shaped by a particular Mexico-City produced media environment as well as by the severe material and affective deprivation she had endured for much of her life. But this is hardly just a 'private' affair; it reveals every bit as much about the social factors facilitating extramarital relations as do men's extramarital relations, just in a slightly different way. The television she watched and the store in which she worked were the product of migrant remittances, and her husband's absence reflected his participation in international labor migration; without those conditions, she would not have been in the store or learned to 'talk to men' in that way her mother found so disturbing.

Conclusion:

- sexual projects as a concept
- inextricability of marital and extramarital sex
- the modernization of gender inequality: visible through the social factors that shape women's access to extramarital sex

⁷ What about girls getting dressed together, telling dirty jokes, talking about sex? Maybe it is just that it is not oriented towards the same consumption of actual sex?

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