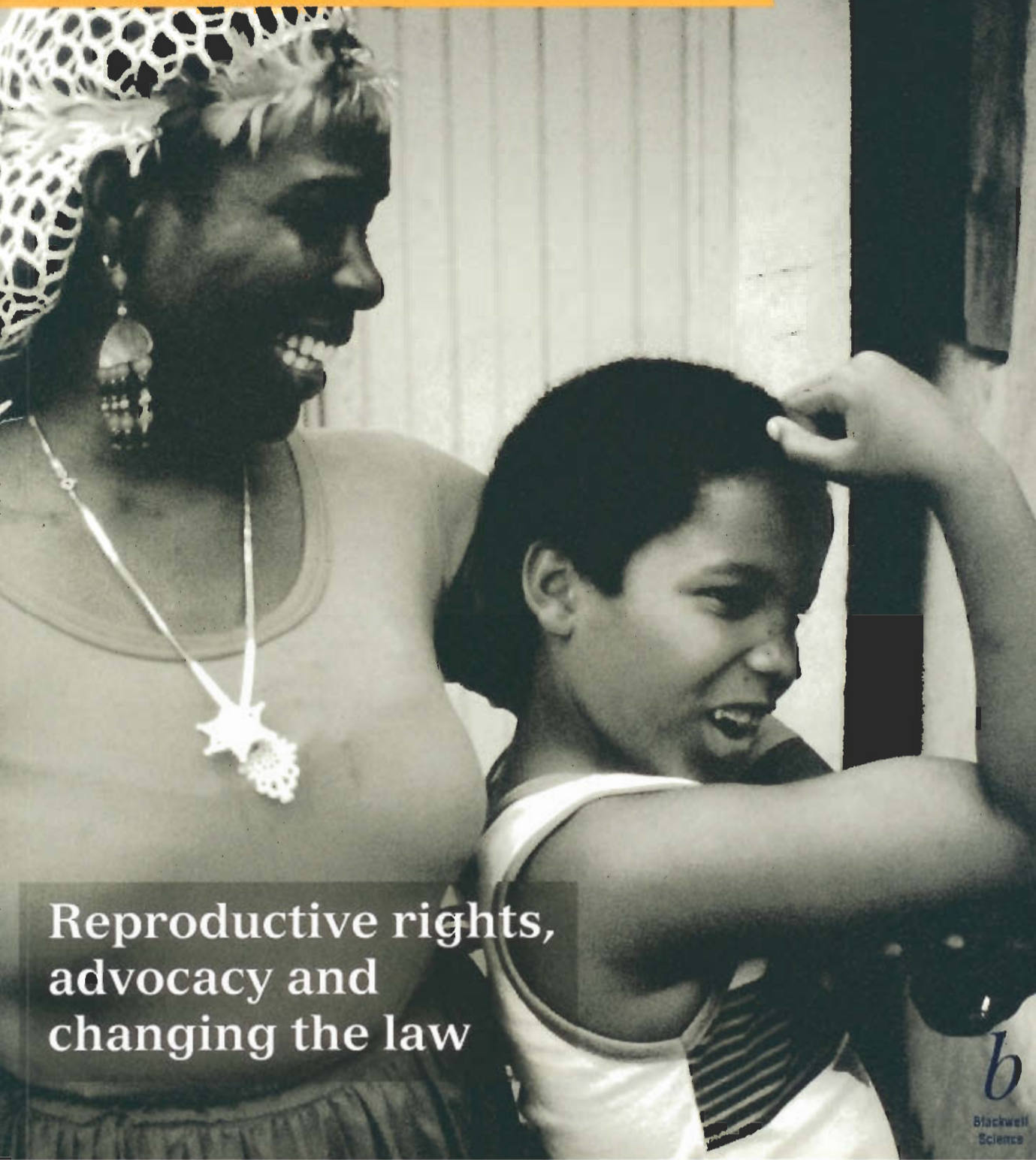


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# Quietly Working For School-Based Sexuality Education in Mexico: Strategies for Advocacy

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*In the past decade, there have been dramatic changes in Mexico in public opinion and support for sexuality education. The growing recognition that young people are sexually active before marriage and need information in order to make responsible choices is the result of intensive health promotion efforts by public and private entities. This paper is about the work of a Mexican non-governmental organisation, IMIFAP, which has designed and evaluated sexuality education programmes for children from pre-school age through adolescence and for their parents, based on formative research. IMIFAP has also been advocating with others for the wider provision of sexuality and life skills education in schools, work that was rewarded in 1998 when the Ministry of Education announced its support for comprehensive sexuality education in the standard school curriculum. IMIFAP's strategies for formulating, implementing and evaluating an integrated programme of sexuality education in a developing country, and advocating for its inclusion in national curricula, could serve as a model which others can adapt.*

**Keywords:** sexuality education, life skills, adolescents, advocacy and political process, Mexico

THE aim of this article is to share the experience of IMIFAP, a non-governmental, non-profit organisation (NGO), based in Mexico, working toward national school-based life skills and sexuality education in Mexico. IMIFAP was founded in 1985. We develop educational programs for early childhood to adulthood with the goal of promoting rights and providing information and the necessary life skills so that each individual is empowered to make and carry out informed decisions about his/her health. We concentrate on sexual and reproductive health and rights, prevention of violence against women and prevention of substance abuse. We train community leaders, educators and health workers, and through them reach children, adolescents, women and men in both urban and rural areas. IMIFAP works in partnership with government institutions and NGOs, providing information, training and technical support. Our

work is concentrated in Mexico, but we have also extended our programmes to nine other countries in Latin America, the USA and Greece.

For each group we work with, the activities and the educational and training programmes and materials we design are based on a needs assessment. Each of these is evaluated in the short- and longer-term and includes advocacy activities to ensure their adoption and upscale their use. The ultimate goal of IMIFAP is to empower others through education to enhance their quality of life.

Thanks to steady pressure from civil society and the gradual increase in support in recent years of key individuals in the government, Mexico has been making great strides in the area of national, school-based sexuality education. One of the first major steps taken at governmental level was the General Education Law, passed by the legislature in July 1993, which contained clauses on sexuality education. This

law included three important elements: 1) family planning and 'responsible parenthood' should be discussed in schools, 2) education should 'contribute to the individual's integral development', and 3) parents should be involved in education. All of these are central facets of IMIFAP's educational philosophy.

In 1998, sexuality education was introduced in the fifth and sixth grades through an obligatory textbook for all students, which includes information about human biology and life skills. In September, 1999, a new school subject called *Formación Cívica y Ética* (Civic and Ethical Training) was introduced into the seventh and eighth grades nationwide, and extended to the ninth grade a year later. This subject has a strong life-skills development, and sexuality education component. Mexico's Ministry of Education then invited a number of authors and groups, including a publisher who works with IMIFAP, to participate in a competition to produce official textbooks on this topic. IMIFAP's books, among others, have already been distributed to over 1,800,000 students at this writing.<sup>1,2</sup>

Until these changes took place, policy regarding sexuality education in Mexican schools had been at the discretion of local school authorities and principals of individual schools. Many organisations, including IMIFAP, have spent considerable time and resources negotiating for these changes with public officials, and the 1998 policy represents a significant victory for all of us. However, there is still much to be done, for these advances have motivated Mexico's sexually conservative groups to mobilise against comprehensive sexuality education.

### The Mexican context

While Mexico has had a relatively successful family planning programme since 1973, significant unmet need continues to exist among adolescents and rural and indigenous populations.<sup>3</sup> Adolescents, in particular, are often not being reached or do not have access to contraception because of the fact that programmes are targeted mainly at women who want to space or stop childbearing – not those who want to postpone it. This is a troubling state of affairs, considering that the median age at first sexual intercourse in Mexico is 15 for young men and 16 for young women.<sup>4</sup>

The relatively high incidence of unplanned pregnancies and of HIV/AIDS in Mexico highlight the substantial need for closely linked or integrated sexual health and family planning programmes for adolescents. Mexico's adolescent fertility rate is 70 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19; for comparison, this is the same as Haiti and Thailand and slightly lower than Bolivia and Brazil (79 and 73 per 1,000, respectively).<sup>5</sup>

According to Mexico's National Council for AIDS Prevention and Control (Conasida), by the end of 1999 there were 42,762 AIDS cases in Mexico.<sup>6</sup> Since 1996 the number of cases has been increasing rapidly<sup>7</sup> and much needs to be done to reverse this trend.

At the end of 1996, 87.2 per cent of all reported AIDS cases were in the 20-49 age range, with 31.4 per cent aged 20 to 29.<sup>8</sup> Given the time lapse between infection and AIDS, these data indicate that many individuals are becoming HIV-infected in adolescence and early adulthood.

This is made more plausible considering the low rate of condom use in Mexico in general; in 1992, condoms represented only 3.2 per cent of all contraceptive methods used in a Ministry of Health survey of reproductive-age women.<sup>9</sup> In fact, contraceptive use in general is also low among younger age groups. Among married adolescents aged 15-19, contraceptive use is estimated at 36.4 percent. Among adolescent women who have given birth one or more times, 33 per cent reported that their most recent birth was unplanned.<sup>10</sup>

Sheer numbers cannot fully convey the current situation in Mexico for organisations and individuals working in the sexuality education field. Several cultural factors unique to the Mexican experience colour such work. Culturally-based compliance with perceived gender roles and a lack of communication about sex in couple relationships are the source of many of these problems.

In-depth population research carried out by IMIFAP investigators in Mexico from 1986 to 1992 indicated that sexual health and practices are largely influenced by socio-cultural patterns.<sup>11-13</sup> Over the past decade, IMIFAP has compiled research findings on sexuality and life skills education in Mexico with the aim of developing population-specific interventions. Investigations have been focused on the psychosocial factors affecting behaviours such as



condom and contraceptive use and communication about sexual issues, as well as the effectiveness of different intervention methods. For instance, an investigation with a representative household sample of 865 adolescent girls in Mexico City who were sexually active found that those who were less accepting of socio-cultural norms were more likely to use contraceptives and less likely to become pregnant.<sup>11</sup> Two aspects that were particularly important among those norms were related to gender roles (e.g. beliefs of both sexes in men's stronger power in decision-making) and communication about sexual issues. For example, the young women considered talking about sex and contraception with their sexual partners too risky for an ongoing relationship, and much of their sexual and contraceptive behaviour was indirectly determined by their perceptions of the men's attitudes, desires and expectations within the relationship.

This was supported by results from 127 in-depth interviews (4-6 hours each) with a snowball sample of men and women of low, middle and middle-high socio-economic level aged 14 to 50 in Mexico City, which also found gender differences in communication about sexuality and sexual practices, beliefs and norms.<sup>12,13</sup> For example, communication on sexuality between fathers and sons focused mainly on sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS and pregnancy prevention. In contrast, the assumption by both adults and adolescents interviewed was that adolescent girls would not be sexually active and therefore did not need to learn about these issues. Both adolescent girls and adult women reported communication with peers about sex to be shameful and furtive. Furthermore, adolescent girls and adult women cited powerful social pressure against communicating and negotiating with their partners about desires or pregnancy/infection prevention. Such communication on the part of women was seen as a sign of mistrust and/or infidelity. Some adolescent girls – in contrast to adult women, who were more likely to mention a fear of losing their partner – did express the wish to broach the subject of condom use with their partners. But young men reported that it was unacceptable for a woman to take the initiative either in talking about sex or about having sexual intercourse. The idea of talking about what each partner expects, wants or needs was not seen as a possibility by any of the younger interviewees.

The lack of communication about sexuality within couple relationships is likely to be an extension of the taboos surrounding communication about sexuality within the family. An investigation in 1995 into popular myths about sexuality in Mexico found that adolescent women who appear sexually knowledgeable or experienced are classified as being unworthy of long-term relationships.<sup>14</sup> Pressures such as these in Mexican culture create a double standard regarding sexuality. The fact that sexuality is not a subject that can be freely talked about creates such a barrier to communication that it leaves most adolescents with few options when they need information or support.

### **Groups opposed to school-based sexuality education**

In addition to cultural obstacles, the existence of a highly vocal sexually conservative minority in Mexico has long impeded official acceptance of sexuality and life skills education programmes. As Amuchástegui Herrera writes, although modern conceptions of sexuality now compete with traditional Catholic strictures, sexually conservative Catholic constructions of morality still have an undoubted influence.<sup>15</sup> Conservative groups associated with the Catholic church, such as the National Union of Parents (UNFP) and Mexican Family (FAME), represent a minority of Mexico's population, yet they have the resources and access to the media to act as powerful players in the policy arena.<sup>16</sup>

The prohibition of a conference on abortion in 1996 in León, Guanajuato at the behest of the priest Rafael García, and the cancellation of the activities of Mexfam, a national NGO providing sexuality education and family planning information, in San Luis Potosí, are poignant examples of the influence that sexually conservative groups hold in these states. The Christian Family Movement, National Pro-life Committee (Provida), Family Educated in Faith and the State Union of Parents accused Mexfam of providing courses and distributing brochures promoting 'a focus on sexuality only as a means of delivering pleasure, reducing the true meaning of the sexual act'.<sup>17</sup>

In some regions of the country, the National Action Party (PAN) has been elected. The PAN is supported by the National Union of Parents (UNPF), the National Pro-life Committee, the

National Female Civic Association (Ancifen) and the private and politically active organisation Integral Human Development and Civil Action (DHIAC). The alliance between some sectors of the PAN and reactionary groups operates in a rather informal manner: mutual support is given whenever necessary. As such, the members of Provida generate negative electoral propaganda against non-PAN candidates, while certain PAN members already elected as state or local representatives support the plans of these sexually conservative groups.<sup>17</sup>

Lately, a number of sexuality education texts have been published which state that the pedagogy of sexuality should be based on 'universal' values, chastity being one of them; furthermore, the texts consider the parents as the maximum authority when it comes to sexuality education, despite the fact that parents themselves have not received sexuality education.<sup>18</sup>

In October 1991, the Catholic Episcopate and the UNPF launched a media campaign against the Secretary of Education, accusing him of yielding to the 'sexual revolution' while at the same time characterising Conasida as people with 'sick minds'. As part of this campaign it accused IMIFAP of ignoring the 'universal' values of Catholicism and promoting 'sexual libertinism' by offering information on contraceptives and addressing masturbation as an alternative expression of sexuality in our two main sexuality education books, *Planeando Tu Vida* (Planning Your Life) and *Yo, Adolescente* (I, Adolescent).<sup>19,20</sup>

More recently, in September 1999, FAME sent a letter to all secondary teachers in the state of Aguascalientes, criticising three books approved by the Ministry of Education for the new Civic and Ethical Formation subject, including one by IMIFAP that had also been approved by an independent panel. FAME told teachers they do not recommend these three books because they address values 'in a context of moral relativism, circumstantial morals, subjectivism and reductionism. Clearly the books are trying to foment an anti-life attitude, destroy the value of marriage and the family, and persuade young people to live for pleasure and respond to their impulses.'

Actions such as these seek to prohibit sexuality education and when this is not possible,

to impose a conception of sexuality that does not encourage the prevention of AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases, all the while creating prejudices and feelings of guilt among adolescents.

Based on the points of view of these conservative groups, Mexican society would appear quite sexually conservative. Nonetheless, it would be incorrect to conclude that the majority of the population is opposed to sexuality and life-skills education in schools. On the contrary, national opinion polls indicate that the majority of parents in Mexico would like to see schools take on more responsibility for sexuality and life-skills education. In 1993, IMIFAP and Gallup carried out an opinion poll among a representative sample of 2,595 parents in 31 states of Mexico and the Federal District, in both rural and urban communities, and among different age groups and socio-economic levels.<sup>21</sup> We found that more than 90 percent of parents nation-wide believed that young people should be taught how to prevent unwanted pregnancies, and that teachers should have more knowledge and information about these topics, including on AIDS, contraceptive methods and how to use a condom. When asked the reasons why there had not been better sexuality education in Mexico, 38.4 per cent said they believed it was due to the resistance of conservative groups. As demonstrated by the 'abstinence only' movement in the USA, the power of such a minority cannot be discounted, broad public support in other directions notwithstanding.

### Research-based programmes in sexuality and life skills

IMIFAP's exploratory research over the past decade on knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, norms and behaviours with different age and socio-economic groups in different parts of Mexico showed that effective health education programmes should emphasise issues related to personal development, e.g. open family and partner communication, gender roles, values, assertiveness, decision-making and management of feelings. We utilised data about common myths among adolescents in order to develop activities such as workshop sessions specifically to address these myths. We always use participatory methodologies (role-play, games, question and

answer sessions or readings followed by critical analyses) to ensure dynamic interaction and discussion rather than the more traditional lecture style.

Based on this research process, IMIFAP designed and developed sexuality and life skills courses for children, adolescents, and their parents. For children and adolescents we developed age-specific courses (by school year), called *Yo Quiero, Yo Puedo* (I Want To, I Can).<sup>22</sup> For parents, the course for those with children under 12 is called *Aprendiendo a Ser Papá y Mamá* (Learning to be a Dad and a Mom) and, for parents of adolescents, *Deja Volar a Tu Adolescente y Será un Gran Adulto* (Let your Adolescent Fly and He/She Will Be a Great Adult).<sup>23,24</sup> Trainers are first given the basic course *Planeando Tu Vida*, which provides them with sexuality and life-skills training, and then they receive the specific programme for children, adolescents or parents.<sup>19</sup> In 1999 we added an advanced facilitators' training programme, which provides additional tools for group dynamics and management. The course includes training in conflict resolution, leadership development, teamwork and providing constructive feedback.

*Planeando Tu Vida* and *Yo Quiero, Yo Puedo* are optional programmes for public school teachers. They are part of a group of courses offered by the Ministry of Education to teachers as a means for them to obtain career points which lead to salary increases.

### **Strategies for the advocacy of sexuality and life-skills education**

As most advocates for comprehensive sexuality education are aware, even the best research-based programmes are of little use if the political atmosphere is not conducive to their implementation. For this reason, advocacy for increased governmental support of sexuality and life skills education should be as much of a priority as research and development. IMIFAP has used a steady and often discreet process of advocacy to promote comprehensive sexuality education with the general public and the Mexican authorities, described below. Not all of these elements will be appropriate for use in other countries, and in the hope that models such as these can be developed and applied more widely, we encourage organisations from

developing countries to share their experiences with us and each other. While most of the strategies mentioned below are based on common sense principles, taken together they represent a comprehensive set of ingredients for making progress with government officials.<sup>25</sup>

### **Negotiate by compromise**

Compromise has been the only way for us to achieve some of our goals. Change has come about as a slow process and with careful political timing. In one of our first breakthroughs on the political level in the early 1990s, an IMIFAP administrator, after unsuccessfully attempting to schedule a meeting with a high-level Ministry of Education official, decided to wait outside the official's office until he agreed to see her. For three long weeks the IMIFAP staff member sat on a bench outside his office, working on a stack of papers and explaining to the official's assistant why it was so important that she meet with her superior. Finally, at the end of the third week the IMIFAP administrator was told, 'The official will see you now'. After a 20-minute conversation the Ministry official said that he agreed in principle with IMIFAP's proposals and referred her to a second Ministry of Education authority to work out the details. Based on subsequent meetings, the Ministry of Education and IMIFAP planned the first-ever national conference of head teachers from each Mexican state for training in IMIFAP's *Planeando Tu Vida* sexuality education programme.<sup>12</sup>

However, the day before the training was to begin, the high-level official called the organisers to his office and said that the conference would have to be cancelled, because, among other reasons, the trainers were going to discuss homosexuality which was, according to the Ministry, too controversial and sensitive an issue to be addressed in a Ministry of Education-supported event.

In spite of our aversion to dropping an important element from the programme, IMIFAP promised the official that homosexuality would not be covered, and the conference was allowed to take place. Without this compromise, the entire training, a major breakthrough in getting officially-sanctioned sexuality education training for teachers off the ground, would not have occurred. As it turned out, conference participants were eager to discuss homosexuality and

raised the topic themselves in discussion groups, even though the issue was not on the official programme.

### **Start by proposing programmes with more innocuous topics**

As demonstrated by IMIFAP's experience with the Ministry, the reality in many countries is that issues such as homosexuality, masturbation and abortion are highly controversial and may become the reason for rejecting comprehensive programmes which include them. Topics that are accepted for inclusion in life-skills education by a broad range of sectors in Mexico include gender roles, self-esteem, contraception, HIV/AIDS prevention, communication, assertiveness and the family. Focusing on more acceptable issues such as these is one way to open doors to sexuality education that later also touches upon more controversial topics.

Programmes that emphasise improving skills useful in all aspects of life may be easier to promote than those that focus specifically on sexuality, especially now that the World Health Organization (WHO) has identified the provision of life-skills education as a priority, highlighted in the Convention of the Rights of the Child and numerous other international agreements.<sup>26</sup> The development of life skills that stress mental and emotional well-being and the importance of intimacy – such as decision-making, taking responsibility, openly communicating, negotiating, and self-awareness, empathy and coping with emotions – provide a broader definition of sexual health, which emphasises more than just the ability to use contraception and protect oneself from STDs. Particularly in countries where talk of sexuality is taboo, a focus on life-skills may make programmes more palatable.

What is more, programmes that integrate life-skills training have proven to be effective in promoting contraceptive use. In a research study by IMIFAP 1,076 high school students who took a 24-hour *Planeando Tu Vida* sexuality and life-skills course were compared to a control group of 556 high school students. The average age of the students was 16.7 years. The groups were compared using a baseline and a six-month follow-up questionnaire that measured changes in sexual and contraceptive knowledge and behaviour. After six months it was found that the *Planeando Tu Vida* course had had no effect on

the sexual activity of the adolescents, but for study participants who attended the course before having their sexual debut, contraceptive use increased significantly (57.6 per cent of men who attended the course and had their sexual debut between the course and the six-month follow-up used contraceptives, as compared to 36 per cent of men in the control group; 81.8 per cent of women who took the course used contraceptives, compared to 75.0 per cent of women in the control group).<sup>27</sup>

### **Collaborate and negotiate with individuals and organisations at different levels**

The work required to bring about policy change is almost always the result of cumulative efforts on the part of many organisations and individuals. The challenge is to strike a balance between time and energy spent on work with colleagues and the creation of a concrete product, such as an educational programme.

When negotiating with a governmental body such as the Ministry of Education, it is important to communicate with functionaries at various levels and to keep everyone fully informed during the process. In this way no one will be left out and unpleasantly surprised when advances occur. For example, when IMIFAP was working to convene the first nation-wide training conference for head teachers, we spoke not just with the top Ministry official, but also with the senior official's special assistant. Hence, when the senior official said that he intended to cancel the conference, his assistant, who had already been sensitised to the cause of sexuality education through meetings with IMIFAP staff, pressed the senior official to express his specific fears, which allowed those fears to be addressed, one-by-one, by the conference organisers.

### **Include parents and other stakeholders**

Other sectors which should be targeted for advocacy work include parents, teachers who will be implementing programmes and mid-level civil servants who will remain working after a political administration leaves office and top-level officials are replaced, as is often the case in Mexico after a six-year election cycle. In IMIFAP's experience, parents often express concern when their children begin a sexuality education programme, but this concern arises primarily from a sense of being left behind or left

out, rather than from outright opposition. In fact, teachers giving sexuality and life education courses have consistently requested courses for parents in order to gain their support for the process. We have found that many parents with whom we have worked in our courses, such as *Escuela para Padres* (School for Parents), have gone on to be advocates for sexuality education in their children's schools.

### **Establish representatives and allies in different regions of the country**

IMIFAP's experience is that being located in Mexico's capital has limited our ability to take advantage quickly of expressions of interest in our programmes at the state and municipal levels. For this reason, we have found that establishing representatives who are familiar with local bureaucracies and politics in states or provincial cities is crucial for successful advocacy below the federal level. These contacts can work as formal consultants or friendly advocates, and may come from local NGOs or even local government.

### **Develop age-appropriate curricula**

The development of sexual identity and the skills necessary to navigate healthy sexual relationships should begin early and continue through adulthood. As young people who participate in a life-skills education programme *before* initiating sexual relations are more likely to use contraceptives and less likely to experience an unwanted pregnancy, it is important to begin providing the basic knowledge and skills upon which full sexuality education can be built from pre-school level onwards. In keeping the emphasis on life-skills and in order to design age-appropriate programmes, a broad perspective on sexuality is needed, one that goes beyond the traditional focus on intercourse and its consequences. IMIFAP's *Yo Quiero, Yo Puedo* series begins with getting to know one's body for pre-school students; by fifth and sixth grade, students learn about puberty and menstruation; in later grades, contraception is introduced.

### **Use polls in countries where they are uncommon**

Especially in countries where a minority controls most of the discourse, opinion polls are an excellent way to show the majority of the public

that other people think similarly. For example, the 1993 IMIFAP and Gallup opinion poll revealed the surprising finding that a majority of parents supported sexuality and life-skills education.<sup>21</sup> Through extensive press, radio and TV coverage we disseminated these results nationally. For example, IMIFAP sent a letter to the Secretary of Education and the Under-Secretary for Primary Education, informing them of the results. After the information was released to the press, responses favourable to sexuality education were observed in numerous states across the country, although opposition responses were also noted in states where sexually conservative groups mobilised immediately against sexuality education. The results also sparked local debates and encouraged parents to speak out. Parents in favour of sexuality education in schools mobilised and made statements to the press.

IMIFAP also produced a video *Platicame de eso* (Tell me about it) that narrates the story of a family in which the father has problems confronting sexuality issues in relation to his adolescent daughter. The video was broadcast once or twice a week nationally for over a year through the Ministry of Education's Educational Television programme. In addition, we distributed the video to interested parents, teachers and schools.

### **Meet one-to-one with sexually conservative opponents and emphasise common goals**

Socio-cultural norms and taboos regarding sexuality and gender roles play a strong role in Mexican society. Many Mexican opponents of sexuality education are not wholly convinced that theirs is the best position but are simply following what is socially expected of them. It is with these individuals that meetings can be productive.

On one occasion a high-level government official met with an IMIFAP administrator and said that he would love to further the cause of sexuality education in Mexico, but the minute he took a step in that direction, sexually conservative groups would mobilise and use their considerable influence to pressure the Ministry. So he suggested that IMIFAP meet with the leaders of several of these conservative groups in order to convince them of the importance of school-based sexuality education, which we did.

IMIFAP's experience in negotiating with those



opposed to sexuality education is that large meetings are rarely successful, as they turn into a no-win ideological battle in which the sexually conservative group casts itself as morally righteous and IMIFAP as vulgar and corrupting. For this reason, in this instance an IMIFAP representative asked to meet with the women leaders of these groups one-to-one. The women agreed to this at the recommendation of the Ministry of Education official. In the first meetings, the IMIFAP representative focussed on the differences between their opposition and IMIFAP, an approach that garnered tepid results. But when she emphasised commonalities, such as helping women, education, and parenting, the women were more open to the positive aspects of sexuality education and no longer considered themselves enemies of IMIFAP and its goals. Generally these opponents of school-based sexuality education did not become fervent friends or cheerleaders for the cause, but at least these private conversations removed significant obstacles to the implementation of programmes at the national level.

### **Win the support of the moderate opposition first**

By beginning with the more moderate members of a group, or those who feel isolated by extreme policies, one can gradually form a network of individuals who view sex education in a more positive light. Eventually there are enough individuals interested in the idea that informational talks, workshops and support groups will have a better chance of success.

One example of this strategy is our on-going work with government authorities in a traditionally conservative state in Mexico's central region. Although conservative elements have risen to power in several states through political party structures, there are often internal divisions within parties – many members are more moderate and open to IMIFAP's work.<sup>28</sup> For instance, authorities in the central Mexican state government asked us to provide training to all teachers in our *Yo Quiero, Yo Puedo* programme if we could find funding for the books. The authorities asked that our programmes begin with a focus on the issue of drug prevention (as a way to integrate more controversial elements later). In addition, the authorities in one state have complained to us that one particular ultra-conservative group has been misinforming

public school teachers through so-called 'family orientation' sessions. 'Fix what this sexually conservative group messed up,' moderate state officials pleaded with us in a recent meeting.

### **Reinforce learning and training with long-term follow-up whenever possible**

Attitude and behaviour change is a drawn-out process, requiring reinforcement over time. We recommend using quantitative instruments to measure changes in knowledge, and utilising qualitative post-intervention methods, such as interviews, to assess programme impact on the life-skills, self-efficacy level. It is not possible to reinforce behaviour change with one week of follow-up. Instead we recommend conducting focus groups and feedback sessions months after completion of a programme or training session. In general terms we have found that at least during the first year of programme replication (or 'training of trainers') the quality and frequency of the intervention strongly benefits from a one- or two-day follow-up and refresher sessions every two months. In the case of preventing HIV-related risk behaviours, scholars such as Kelly have stressed the importance of reinforcing and providing support for individuals after an intervention, in order to prevent relapses to risky behaviours.<sup>29</sup>

### **Rigorously evaluate programmes and disseminate results at all levels**

Once an intervention has been designed, it should be pilot tested, re-evaluated and modified based on the results. Even the best of programme designs will have unseen flaws that become apparent as soon as they are pilot tested. Programmes need to be ready for implementation before they are presented to the authorities.

In addition to strengthening programme content, pilot test results can be used to garner support for implementation of the programme on a larger scale. Strong evidence that a new programme helps to achieve desired outcomes can provide important leverage when negotiating with officials. Timing and strategy for presenting programmes are key. It is best to focus on those aspects of programmes that are most congruent with the current political climate. For example, if there is a wave of support for domestic violence prevention, a programme of violence prevention interventions

can be used to address many of the same life-skills and gender-role issues that apply to comprehensive sexuality education.

### Looking ahead in Mexico

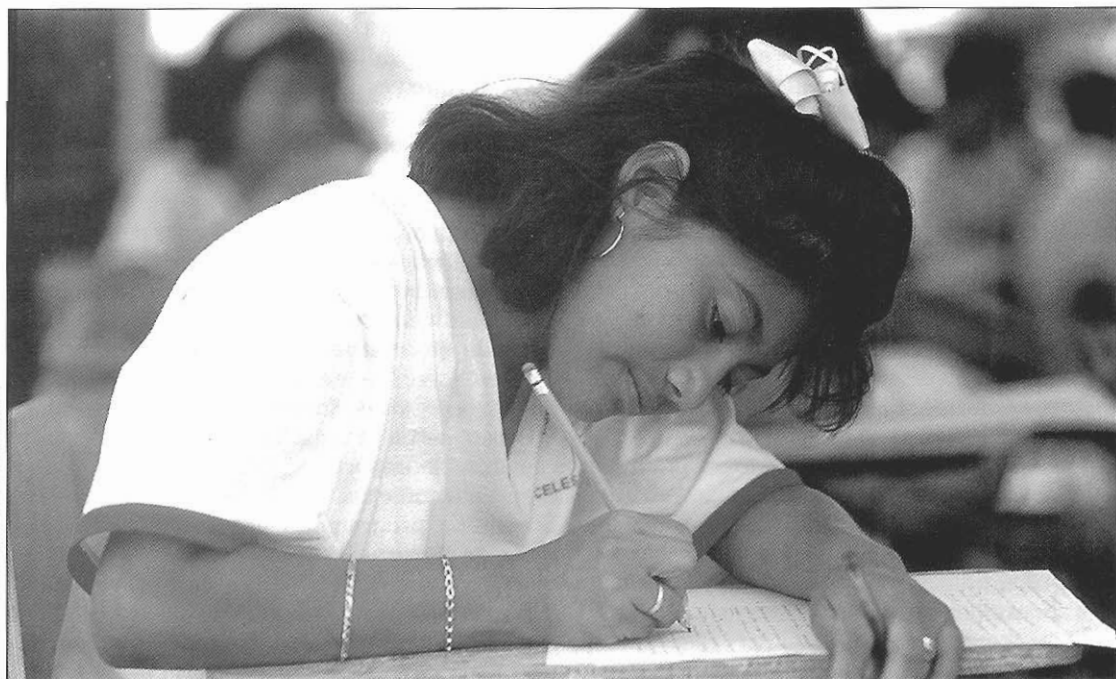
The future of school-based sexuality education in Mexico depends less on the ideological leanings of the new administration that will take office in December 2000 and more on the ability of civil society to convince top officials and cabinet ministries to adopt and incorporate integral programmes into government policy. Because sexuality education has already been adopted nation-wide in secondary schools and because of international pressure stemming from the Beijing and Cairo conferences, we do not anticipate a huge loss of ground during the new six-year administration. Nonetheless, even though our advocacy strategies have allowed for a modicum of success thus far, there is much more that NGOs such as IMIFAP can do.

One effort that we began in 1998 and hope to continue in the future consists of forming a network of local and regional NGOs that work in the area of sexuality and reproductive health to work as a collaborative force in advocating for change. Thus far, we have provided training to 50 NGOs in research methods, evaluation,

communication and dissemination, along with educational materials developed by IMIFAP.

While the implementation of *Formación Cívica y Ética* represents a significant political advance, no school-based programme will permeate Mexico's most marginalised rural areas, where many individuals stop going to school before the subject is offered in the seventh grade. In collaboration with the rural unit of Mexico's social security system, we have designed a parallel integrated women's health project *Si Yo Estoy Bien, Mi Familia También* (If I am OK, my family will be OK) that is currently reaching almost 38,000 rural women in the state of Oaxaca with training in life skills, sexuality, health and nutrition and empowering the participants to take control of their own health, as well as that of their family. In the future, we plan to expand the programme to other marginalised rural areas in Mexico where the effects of the *Formación Cívica y Ética* subject will be less pronounced.

Another area that requires more negotiation and sensitisation of Ministry of Education authorities is including sexuality and life-skills training in the official curriculum of *escuelas normales*, or teacher training colleges. Up to this point IMIFAP has focused on educating instructors who have been teaching (or avoiding)



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sexuality and life-skills in the same way for many years, but it is also crucial to provide Mexico's future teachers with knowledge and skills during their formative years in teacher training college.

Although we have made inroads with the Ministry of Education and plan to concentrate our efforts on *escuelas normales* in the near future, after the elections we will begin to focus our attention on the Ministry of Health – utilising the same advocacy model outlined in this article. We have discovered that no matter how well someone is informed about sexuality, if her/his doctor fails to give full disclosure of medical or contraceptive information, our efforts will be undermined. In Mexico, health professionals' education generally does not include psycho-social training or orientation on doctor-patient communication. This lack of communication is exacerbated by a general reluctance to discuss problems regarding sexuality. For this reason we will advocate for increased diffusion of our

recently developed course 'Sensitisation and Communication for Health Care Professionals', which emphasises the preventive role that doctors can play and concentrates on doctor-patient communication, especially with regard to sexuality.<sup>30</sup> Our goal in this project is the inclusion of the elements of this course in official medical school curricula.

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25. Most not-for-profit organisations, including IMIFAP, are prohibited from using certain donated funds for lobbying purposes. For this reason, it is important to make a clear distinction between 'project time' and 'lobbying time', although we encourage NGOs to actively disseminate research and programme results to authorities.
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## Résumé

Ces dix dernières années, l'opinion mexicaine à l'égard de l'éducation sexuelle et l'appui qui lui est accordé ont changé de manière spectaculaire. La population a compris que les jeunes sont sexuellement actifs avant le mariage et doivent disposer d'informations pour faire des choix responsables. Cette évolution est due à des activités intensives de promotion de la santé menées par des organismes publics et privés. L'article décrit l'œuvre d'une ONG mexicaine, l'IMIFAP, qui a conçu et évalué des programmes d'éducation sexuelle pour les enfants depuis la maternelle jusqu'à l'adolescence et pour leurs parents, par une recherche formative. L'IMIFAP plaide également avec d'autres pour que l'éducation sexuelle et des informations pratiques soient plus largement dispensées dans les écoles - travail qui a été récompensé en 1988 quand le Ministère de l'éducation a annoncé son appui à l'éducation sexuelle dans le programme scolaire. Les stratégies de l'IMIFAP pour formuler, appliquer et évaluer un programme intégré d'éducation sexuelle dans un pays en développement, et pour plaider en faveur de son inclusion dans le programme scolaire, pourraient servir de modèle dont d'autres peuvent s'inspirer.

## Resumen

En México durante la década pasada se produjeron cambios dramáticos en la opinión pública en torno a la educación sexual. Gracias a los esfuerzos intensivos de entidades de salud públicas y privadas de promover la educación sexual, se reconoce cada vez más el hecho de que los jóvenes tienen relaciones sexuales prenupciales y que necesitan información para poder tomar decisiones responsables al respecto. Este artículo se trata del trabajo de una ONG mexicana, IMIFAP, que ha utilizado la investigación formativa para diseñar y evaluar programas de educación sexual para niños desde la edad preescolar hasta el fin de la adolescencia, y para sus padres. Por otra parte, el trabajo de promoción de IMIFAP y de otras entidades a favor de ampliar la provisión de la educación sexual fue compensado en 1988 cuando el Ministerio de Educación anunció que apoyaba la inclusión de la educación sexual integral en el plan de estudios escolar. Las estrategias de IMIFAP para la formulación, implementación y evaluación de un programa integrado de educación sexual en un país en desarrollo, y para promover su inclusión en el plan de estudios nacional, puede servir como modelo.