

Constructing and Reconstructing Motherhood. An Ethnographic Approach to Contemporary State Interventions Relating to Young Women in Greater Buenos Aires

Ana Cecilia Gaitán*

Universidad de Buenos Aires-Universidad Nacional de San Martín, Buenos Aires

Abstract

This article employs theoretical perspectives on the complex reconfigurations of state involvement in social life to explain some aspects of contemporary state interventions related to teenage pregnancy and motherhood. Employing an ethnographic approach, this study explores the ways that these types of interventions are carried out in a popular sector neighborhood of Greater Buenos Aires through territorialized state actions, which configure patterns of everyday intervention related to the sexual and reproductive health of these young people; this brings about not only tensions, but also contradictions.

Keywords: mothers; women; pregnancy; state intervention; youth; Argentina.

* Article received on November 21, 2014; final version approved on April 3, 2015. Ana Cecilia Gaitán is an anthropologist and doctoral student in Anthropology at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA). She currently has a doctoral fellowship from the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas. She is affiliated with the Centro de Estudios Desigualdades, Sujetos e Instituciones of the Universidad de San Martín (Unsam) and the Instituto Interdisciplinario de Estudios de Género of the UBA. She has published various articles on government activities related to the sexuality of youth and on social regulations related to gender, young mothers, and infant care in peer reviewed international academic journals.
Email: ce_gaitan@yahoo.com.ar

INTRODUCTION

State intervention in the regulation of sexuality, relations between the sexes, and family roles is not a recent phenomenon. In Argentina, the politicization of maternity by the state and its conversion into an object of concern and of public and political debate dates back to the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. The confusion between woman and mother and between femininity and maternity that Nari (2004) calls the "maternalization" of women can be perceived with more clarity by the end of the 18th century and begins to be extended to different aspects of social life. Underlying this confusion, justified by the "obvious" biology of bodies, the central idea is that women should only be mothers: any other sentiment, desire or activity becomes a threat to the supposed universal function of maternity. Medical sciences and their institutions, as well as the school, through different practices and discourses, become central spaces for the dissemination, reproduction, and reinforcement of maternalized femininity (Nari 2004). In this paper, keeping in mind that maternity is a cultural phenomenon whose material and symbolic dimensions are historically transformed, we will examine certain aspects of contemporary state interventions that are related to maternity and youth pregnancy and directed at economically deprived families in a neighborhood of the Buenos Aires metropolitan area.¹

Using an ethnographic approach, the territorialization of these regulations are explored along with the concrete modalities through which meanings are configured in respect to maternity and youth pregnancy. In other words, an effort is made to provide a detailed account of the ways through which this state involvement occurs by means of actions in specific territories, configuring – not without tensions and contradictions – common forms of interventions relating to the sexual and reproductive health of these young people. To achieve this, contributions from anthropology regarding the modes of managing infancy and youth and the regulation of family relationships will be employed, as will some feminist studies of the state. The former studies have enabled the problematizing of conceptual frameworks used for the analysis of juridical-bureaucratic measures whose purpose is the normalization and moralization of subjects and populations, relativizing and revitalizing them, and, at the same time, shedding light on local ways that the state implements policies for social inclusion and the protection of the rights of children and youth. For their part, certain feminist studies about the state also deal with forms of local and micro-social resignification of government programs. Some of these investigations

1. The Buenos Aires conurbation 24 districts of Greater Buenos Aires, arranged in "chains" of increasing distance around the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (Maceira 2012).

dehomogenize the notion of the state, characterizing it as made up of multiple places of control and resistance (Haney 1996), as an entity with multiple layers, composed of different apparatuses that do not always operate in a coherent manner and where it is possible to identify spaces for maneuverability, negotiations, and disputes. The state is understood as an interpreter and, as such, as a constructor of social subjects by means of how it interprets problems and needs (Fraser 1989), which, at the same time, are established in negotiations with state agents (Adams and Padamsee 2001, and Mouffe 1996, both in Llobet 2012). This literature demonstrates not only the heterogeneous and contradictory character of the state but also the reflexive character of its agents, responses to state actions, and the capacity for resignification and resistance on the part of the individuals targeted by the public policies.

In this sense, and in opposition to normative and rationalist approaches to public policies, this article considers the implementations of these policies as complex processes of negotiations and disputes about meanings and practices (Llobet 2006, 2010), in which symbolic and cultural constructions regarding gender, age, and legitimate forms of social inclusion are deployed. It is because of this that agents and officials share the possibility of impact and transformation that go beyond formal provisions, even when their field of action is determined by these. As several authors point out, the beliefs and representations of state agents influence and steer these government interventions (Goodwin 1997 in Rodríguez Gustá 2012; Haney 1996). The same occurs in negotiations of meanings between these agents and the individuals targeted by the policies.

In this study, these theoretical contributions are employed to demonstrate how the ethnographic evidence gathered can lend support to the idea that the state is not an unambiguous structure in terms of gender but, on the contrary, includes within it different messages about gender. The objective of the article is to give visibility to the paradoxes that cut across the gamut of state interventions considered, demonstrating how various state programs and agencies interpret the relationship of the women targeted - in this case, youth and mothers - with maternity, sexuality, and public assistance.

ABOUT TERRITORIES AND SOCIAL POLICIES

As Santillán (2011) suggests, as a result of the increase in social and economic inequalities and changes within the state and civil society in recent decades, certain policies aimed at popular sectors are implemented in local territories; this is both because of the mediation of the participating subjects and because it has become impossible to understand them without considering the social and political fabric of each district. In this sense, during the 1990s in Argentina, agents and social programs proliferated. These

interventions acquired a mixed character in which the state, civil society, the private sector, and international entities all acted simultaneously (Carli 2006). As Perelmiter (2011) observes, the territorialization of social policies implies the displacement of the "desk" as a place where these are formulated and of "experts" as possessors of expertise regarding legitimate assistance. Specifically, there is an increase in the physical presence of state agents in the territory. This is achieved by hiring individuals who must permanently reside in the same local space in which they work, at the same time that a work dynamic is established in which central office agents (in general and, in increasing numbers, social workers) constantly travel out to the local area (Perelmiter 2011). These territorialized interventions take place in the framework of negotiations and institutionally situated disputes. Both state agents and the targets of policies negotiate interests, positions, and needs, which are never exclusively determined by institutions. These negotiations configure spaces of maneuverability that are more or less restrictive, though indeterminate (Haney 1996, 2002). In the specific case of contemporary social interventions for popular sector youth, it is possible to think of these interventions as an interweaving of pedagogy and control, of modeling and critical approach (Llobet 2013). This interweaving is the product of changes in the construction of state legitimacy – the incorporation of the human rights perspective and the modification of consensus about assistance to popular sectors. This process of incorporating a human rights approach into social policies aimed at infants and adolescents is associated with the transformation of the care link, which is reconfigured and provided with new knowledge (Perelmiter 2010) based on the pursuit of closeness and empathy and the knowledge gained by working "case by case."²

This study is an ethnographic analysis of the specificities of the popular sector district of La Estrella, located in a municipality in the western part of the Buenos Aires metropolitan area.³ The district was established as part of the National Plan for the Eradication of Emergency Townships (Plan Nacional de Erradicación de Villas de Emergencia, PEVE)

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2. In 2005, Law N° 26,061, Integral Protection of the Rights of Girls, Boys and Adolescents, was passed, repealing the Patronage of Minors law (N° 10,903). The previous year, the province of Buenos Aires approved Law N° 13,298, Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child. This law was passed after difficult and emotional debates among various actors with the objectives of generating structural change in provincial policies regarding children, designing an institutional organization through the reassignment of the responsibilities of different levels and branches of the state, and proposing the modification of practices and representations of citizens and providers.
 3. Both the name of the district and the municipality are fictitious to protect the identity of the subjects of this study. This research maintains the anonymity of the persons interviewed and for this reason their names have been omitted or changed. At the same time, the confidentiality of information that could identify them has been assured.

created by Law N° 17,605 during the de-facto government of the Gen. Juan Carlos Onganía (1966–1970). In La Estrella, there are a variety of municipal public policies that are articulated with other provincial and national policies and, at the same time, with community and religious actors. Some residents who are in charge of community and religious spaces and others who are linked to the distribution of state benefits ("manzaneras"⁴ and "referentes barriales"⁵), together with state agents, have become central actors in this new territorialized management of public policies. Unlike other districts and municipalities in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, social movements and political parties have not traditionally had a strong presence in La Estrella, and only recently has a social movement with a national, popular, and federal profile become active there. This research shows that the presence of the municipal government in this district has fundamental and particular effects. In this regard, it is worth noting that the choice of the municipality in which to carry out fieldwork was related not only to its accessibility but also to suggestive information discovered about the importance of the perspective of rights for municipal public policies. At the same time the promotion of citizen participation, visibilized both through the implementation of a participative budget in 2004 and the agreement to implement public hearings as a form of guaranteeing government transparency in 2005, seemed like a key aspect of municipal management (Rodríguez Gustá 2012; Annunziata 2008).

THEORETICAL–METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES

Ethnographic fieldwork was carried out in 2013 and 2014 during the implementation of specific social policies and measures related to popular sector youth. This work was carried out by combining two methodological strategies: participant observation in different spaces – individual and collective – and in-depth and semi-structured interviews with authorities and municipal officials, state agents, «referentes barriales,» and youth who were the target of the programs. It was decided to use an ethnographic approach because this approach allows the complexity and the non-linearity of everyday social relations to be captured and illustrated (Cerletti and Gessaghi 2012). Since its central concept is the analysis of situations that are lived daily and are generally not documented (Achilli 2005), it is a very useful perspective for shedding light on the informal and interstitial as well

4. Term used for females, generally adults, who are charged with distributing government benefits. Translator's note: this term is derived from the Spanish word "manzana," meaning a city block.

5. According to Manzano (2004), this term has acquired meanings in the 1990s that go beyond political Peronism. Here "referente barrial" refers to individuals – both men and women – who possess vast knowledge of the district (barrio) and play a leading role in the administration and daily management of social policies and territorial work.

as on certain networks of interests (Rockwell 2009), negotiations, and disputes that arise in state interventions in territories (Santillán 2011; Lobet 2013). The research focuses primarily on discourses, but also on the practices of state agents (the vast majority of whom are women), addressing their complex everyday construction and reconstruction of the ways that targeted youth should relate to their children, relatives, partners, the neighborhood, state programs, and public assistance. These agents interact with young mothers and pregnant youth in concrete and immediate ways and, in many cases, on a daily basis in the space of La Estrella.

ETHNOGRAPHIZING SOME INTERVENTIONS WITH YOUTH MOTHERHOODS

Given that the purpose of this study is to explore the concrete modalities through which the state configures meanings related to maternity and youth pregnancy, the fieldwork started with the local implementation of a youth social inclusion program called *Envi3n*.⁶ This program started as a municipal experience that promoted social inclusion and the rights of youth between 12 and 21 years of age who lived in conditions of "social vulnerability."^{7,8} In 2009, this program, which included the transfer of income directly to the target youth, was extended to most of the Province of Buenos Aires, and replaced the Adolescent Program (*Proyecto Adolescente*)⁹ According to the program's official information, its objectives are to integrate these youth into the educational system, teach them trades, and provide them emotional support as well as recreation space by offering workshops and sports, cultural, play, and artistic activities. The goal is to facilitate their insertion into the labor market and social life through the promotion of schooling, learning a trade, and contact with different artistic and sports activities. While this is a program of the Ministry of Social Development in this province, its execution is municipal. This results in each implementation having its own particularities depending on the municipality in which it is based. In the implementation analyzed here, the group of state agents is very heterogeneous in terms of age, personal history, and educational, labor, and political

6. Fieldwork was initiated within the PIP 11220090100520-Conicet research project that analyzed tensions between social gender identities, processes of expanding citizenship, and representations and practices of social programs, and was focused on the interaction of the agents – youth from popular sectors – in the processes of implementing social policies.

7. Translation by *Apuntes*.

8. For the purposes of the program of shared social responsibility, *Envi3n*, individuals who are considered vulnerable are "those who are from homes where labor insertion is precarious, who do not study or work, who live in family situations where there is violence or abandonment, or who live in precarious housing, in neighborhoods with inadequate infrastructure and equipment." Translation by *Apuntes*.

9. The Adolescent Program, inspired by the Brazilian program *ProJovem*, was created in 2007 by the Ministry of Social Development (*Ministerio de Desarrollo Social*) of the Province of Buenos Aires.

activism backgrounds.¹⁰ The state agents in the program who interact regularly with the youth include the office coordinator, professionals (youth who have graduated from public universities as social professionals who are not from the district and do not live in it), and district state agents who do live in the district. Others participating in this space include various teachers who run the recreational workshops and university students of Social Work on internships.

During the first stage of the fieldwork, it was discovered that a large number of the youth participating in the *Envi3n* program were either mothers or pregnant. Many of them, as a condition of the economic aid received, participated together with their children¹¹ in a maternal education workshop provided by the program's office, while some participated with their younger sisters, friends and/or partners. None of them had finished high school and, while they expressed interest in doing so and getting a job, they had not yet succeeded. The majority of them did non-remunerated work at their homes, which they shared with their partners, but also with fathers, mothers, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters. They were only able to get informal and temporary work without a fixed salary. These young women, who participated once a week in the maternal education workshop – an educational initiative provided by the municipality – also circulated through other state services in their territory: for example, healthcare spaces such as the Primary Healthcare Center (*Centro de Atenci3n Primaria de Salud*), also municipal, and a public national hospital located a few meters outside the district.

As fieldwork advanced, two central matters were understood. First, *Envi3n* state agents shared moments of interaction and socializing with young and pregnant mothers that went beyond the time and space of the formal activities of the program. Second, *Envi3n* was implemented in an integral manner with the maternal education workshop and the district's health center. In light of these revelations, two new, highly interwoven research questions were developed. On the one hand, there was an interest in shedding light on the circulation or trajectories of these young people through the different programs and state agencies and, on the other, it was decided that it was necessary to investigate whether there were contradictory aspects to the gender messages within the different interventions constructed by these government spaces. It was important to determine whether the relationship of these women – young, mothers, and poor – to motherhood, sexuality, and public assistance was inscribed in the same way or, conversely, whether it

11. The majority became mothers for a second time during my fieldwork.

10. For more information about *Envi3n* agents' appraisal of the program and the legitimacy of its practices, see Lobet (2013).

acquired different nuances. To this end, fieldwork was carried out in the maternal education workshop and in some specific spaces in the district health center (pre and post-abortion counseling and "sexual breakfasts").

The maternal education workshop began in 2003 and, currently, is held in more than five popular sector districts in the municipality. The target audience of this policy are women who are pregnant or have children up to three years of age that do not attend pre-school. In some cases, others involved in the care of children may participate, such as fathers, grandparents, aunts, and neighbors. The workshop team is made up of a social worker, a psychologist, and maternal education teachers. The latter are those who stage the workshop on a daily basis in different districts. The initial announcements of the workshops are made on the basis of information provided by the More Life Program (Plan Más Vida)¹² and through what its state agents call "walking the districts" ("caminar los barrios"), where they provide information about the workshop in the districts, establish direct contact with the mothers targeted, chat, and get together with godmothers ("comadres") and "referentes barriales."

According to official and programmatic guidelines, these workshops provide a communal approach to maternal education, which, guided by the principles of popular education, promotes joint reflection with the mothers about ways to diminish any risks associated with the early stage of their children's lives through a review of the childrearing guidelines. According to the state agents, these guidelines are examined based on the conviction that if followed from the birth of a child, they can have a preventive effect. The idea of a workshop dealing wholly with motherhood, attuned to concerns – supposedly shared by the municipality – regarding the high number of teenage mothers in this particular district, resulted in its being held from the outset at the central office of Envión, exclusively for young mothers and pregnant adolescents. Thus, the initial announcement of the workshop in this district was issued through information provided by the Envión program. The agents of both social policies worked together: the maternal workshop teachers participated in Envión's planning meetings to assign tasks and agendas for their state agents, and the latter went out, in the hours before a workshop was to start, to «convoke» participants. This involved calling by phone and/or going to houses or wherever these young women could be found so that they would really attend the workshop.

12 This is a program of the Ministry of Social Development of the Province of Buenos Aires that is implemented together with each municipality. It includes the weekly provision of liquid milk to children until they start school, a card for the purchase of food, in addition to the one-time provision of a layette for the newborn.

These are not the only ways in which young mothers and pregnant adolescents are reached out to; they also establish links with state programs in which they and others concerned with bringing up their children exchange opinions and concerns regarding pregnancy, maternity, and childrearing with people from outside the sphere demarcated as "domestic." These are individuals who are configured as subjects entitled to exchange advice about childrearing as well other matters, such as social benefits, families, partners, and sexuality.

The municipality included in this study has a unified health system made up of a municipal hospital and more than ten health centers distributed across its various districts. In this sense, and as proposed by the municipality, these entities work together to strengthen preventive practices and offer optimum health benefits so as to guarantee universal, fair, and free access to healthcare throughout the municipality. In addition to general and specialized medical services, these spaces also provide access to different prevention and healthcare services. According to the information gathered, youth targeted by *Envi3n* and the maternal education workshop receive healthcare at "*La Salita*," the nickname given to the district health center, and the national hospital, which is not part of the municipality's unified health system. The health center provides general medical check-ups as well as gynecological exams, consultations about terminating a pregnancy, pregnancy and obstetrical issues, and pediatric check-ups (including vaccinations and dental check-ups). This center is part of the first level of the municipal healthcare system and works together with the rest of the system's healthcare providers. While these centers are distributed throughout the territory of the district, they have a greater presence in areas that the municipality considers to be the most "vulnerable" and as having the "most pressing needs" and their services are oriented towards the promotion, prevention, and treatment of illnesses. Most of their preventive actions are strengthened through talks and workshops with people who live in the district. Within the unified health system, there is an integral health program on sexuality which, according to the municipality, seeks to guarantee access to the sexual and reproductive rights that are in force in Argentina.¹³

13. In 2002, national Law N° 25,673 was promulgated, creating the Program for Sexual Health and Responsible Procreation (Programa de Salud Sexual y Procreaci3n Responsable). This law recognizes that the right to health includes sexual health and that this includes the freedom to have a sex life that is gratifying and non-coerced, as well as the prevention of unwanted pregnancies. This program is responsible for providing information and counseling, in addition to an appropriate method of contraception to enable pregnancy planning. To this end, it promotes sexual and reproductive health counseling as part of public health services throughout the country. The purpose is to provide free access to high-quality advisement that contributes to autonomy and decision-making regarding sexual and reproductive health. Given that Argentina has a federal system, the provinces and the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires can opt to adhere to the national law or to promulgate their own laws on these matters.

According to observations, young mothers and pregnant adolescents in the district used some of the services provided by this program such as integral sexual health counselling at *La Salita* as part of an activity called the "sexual breakfast" and pre and post abortion counselling.¹⁴ The "sexual breakfast" takes place once a week, on the day when one of the gynecologists is on duty, while women are waiting to see the doctor. Women are offered food and drink during an informal talk that provides integral counseling on contraceptive methods (pills, condoms, IUCDs, contraceptive implants, injections, tubal ligations, vasectomies, and emergency contraception) as well as gynecological check-ups. The health center provides all the mentioned contraceptive methods as well as check-ups. Attention for pregnant women takes the form of counseling sessions: spaces where women are listened to and counseled regarding unplanned and/or unwanted pregnancies. If a woman decides to continue with the pregnancy, all necessary prenatal check-ups are carried out. If she decides not to and her case does not fall into the category of an illegal abortion, she is provided with information about the risks and damage caused by certain abortive practices, as well as scientifically valid and publically available information about safe practices. In addition, she is informed about danger signs and the emergency facilities she can go to if complications occur. During the post-abortion consultation, she is offered all the contraceptive methods available.

EMPOWERMENT AND THE "LIFE PROJECT"

As Perelmiter (2010) suggests, the reconfiguration of the care link has the purpose of inserting a certain closeness and empathy into the relationship between state agents and youth. In the case of the implementation of *Envi3n*, there are state agents who create links of trust with youth that have strong work and affective implications. In general, these agents, whether they are professionals or neighborhood state agents and in addition to their group activities, are tasked with personal follow-up of particular youth in relation to their participation in the program, school attendance, family links, relationships between peers and partners, substance abuse, and motherhood, among other issues. In the relationship established through interviews, individual encounters – formal

14. In Argentina, abortion is criminalized in the Penal Code as a crime against life and persons, and is punishable by imprisonment for the person who carries it out and for the women who causes or consents to this practice. However, cases where the life or the health of the mother is in danger or when the pregnancy is the result of sexual intercourse without consent are not penalized. Despite the fact that the law provides for cases in which abortion is not penalized, women who find themselves in applicable situations were not and are still not – to a great extent – able to access legal and safe abortion in public health facilities. Many professionals at such facilities insist on judicial authorization to terminate a pregnancy. This may be due to a lack of knowledge of the penal law, fear of criminal prosecution, or conscientious objection.

and informal – and various group activities, the experience of both the youths and the agents is central. The centrality of the experience of a young person is expressed in the possibility of “telling all” in collective and individual spaces: of making their life public. This is also the case for agents, but they do so through advice and self-reference. In the case of interactions between agents and young mothers, these tend to take the form of accompaniment, which translates into listening – in many cases outside the time and space assigned for the activities of the program, the provision of “advice,” the distribution of certain benefits that are part of compensatory policies, and provision of detailed information about subsidies, nurseries in the area, and doctors’ shifts. In many cases, it is the agents who find space in a nursery as well as appointments for gynecological consultations and examinations in *La Salita*. Underlying the advice given, which sometimes can come close to being an order and/or a warning and circulates orally, are ideologies that differ considerably from one another.

For example, some of these agents characterize the motherhood of the youth as problematic: the young women “leave their lives for the baby,” starting to see themselves only as mothers. This leads to them stopping taking care of how they look, skipping program activities, and leaving school, among other things. Their interventions with these young people thus are oriented towards the latter gaining greater autonomy in relation to their children, and towards establishing certain expectations of these young women, especially in their relationships with their children and partners. The agents provide advice, sometimes raising questions about these relations, and it is common for them to advise young women to try to construct a “positive link” with the fathers of their children with the purpose of constructing joint childrearing that is equitable in terms of the various responsibilities involved, ranging from the payment of child support to certain daily care activities. This would serve to relieve the young women or other female members of the family of some responsibilities. Given that the personal experience of state agents is a central element in their interventions when dealing with the relationships between young women and the fathers of their children, the agents draw upon their own experience with their partners in their conversations with the young women (Gaitán 2014).

The central expectation of this group of agents is that young women are able to become more autonomous subjects. This autonomy is described by some of them as the key to empowerment. Part of this empowerment is associated with the planning of a “more thought out” life project: just like the agents, the targeted young women can plan when to become mothers and achieve a link with the fathers of their children that permits them to continue with other aspects of their lives as women.

This empowerment also is related to these young women learning to demand certain state benefits to which they are entitled. In order to achieve successful interventions, these agents employ – in articulation with other local, provincial, and national programs – a whole gamut of strategies¹⁵ that at times blur the limits between the various public administrations. All these strategies, from the most everyday and simple to those that require more planning, not only form part of a set of broader and more complex interventions but are oriented towards the construction of a "life project" by the young women, which will allow them, among other things, to plan a possible future pregnancy.

Thus, when the targeted women become pregnant, the intervention consists in "accompanying" them. In many cases, the closeness that is forged results in the agents becoming the first adults to whom the adolescents turn when they learn they are pregnant. For then on, for a time, the agents become confidants (Gaitán 2014). As such, they accompany the young woman to medical consultations and examinations, and to the announcement of the pregnancy to family members and partners (a situation that many agents describe as very tense). This "support," which is often related as a conflictive situation, is characterized as unconditional. One of the agents, recalling with anguish an occasion when she accompanied a young woman to an appointment to obtain information about ending a pregnancy (with which the agent was in disagreement), reported that:

Well, the decision is hers. We were going to support the decision that she made, we were going to accompany her. ¹⁶ (Neighborhood state agent)

In effect, abortion is a practice that is mentioned in agents' accounts and they have varying and even contradictory positions on the practice. Many agents not only argue that there should be a law legalizing abortion but also support the decisions of young women to terminate their pregnancies and accompany them to the neighborhood health center to obtain information on safe abortion practices. Other agents who also accompany young women to these consultations due to the closeness of the link and the level of trust between them, report that they disagree with the possibility of ending the pregnancy. They consider motherhood as something more associated with the instinctual, as something for which one is born. Their interventions, as is the case of the other agents, are centered

15. Thematic workshops, introduction of the question of whether a pregnancy is wanted or not, help in obtaining appointments for gynecological check-ups, provision of contraceptives, babysitting for children so young women can participate in *Envión* activities, arrangements with schools so that they can finish high school, obtaining places in nursery schools, facilitation of access to social benefits, and the requirement that young women keep a written diary of their activities and obligations, among others.

16. Translation by *Apuntes*.

on counseling and referral, alongside certain expectations that they have for the young women they work with. These interventions are divided into the classification of some mothers who are more neglectful and others who are more careful. In this sense, part of the expectations attached to the interventions is to transform the group of mothers "who leave their kids lying around neglected, and who wander about,"¹⁷ and mothers who "take super care of their kids"¹⁸ (neighborhood state agent).

"THE COMMON SENSE OF BEING A MOTHER"

In its local implementation, the maternal education workshop is a space targeted especially at mothers and pregnant youth. Each week, for two hours, maternal education teachers work with young women and their children, reviewing guidelines for childrearing. Some activities are repeated at each workshop – they involve play and are similar to those at preschool. After these games, the main activity takes place, which can range from an "exploration" – work to stimulate the senses and knowledge of the body among children through experimentation with temperas, painting, food, music, etc. – to conversations about subjects such as breastfeeding, as well as narration and story creation, among others. This is followed by the last part of the workshop, which consists of refreshments. During this time, while everyone shares something to eat and drink, conversations take place among the youth and between them and the teachers about their children, partners, and families. It is common to talk about the behavior of children at home, situations which occur in the home, experiences at the hospital (giving birth and others), sexuality, conflicts in the neighborhood, feeding, the vaccination calendar, medical appointments, and preschool, among other similar subjects. During this time set aside for conversation, different advice and recommendations circulate about partners, families, education, and health – including hygiene and diet. In the view of the workshop teachers, the link between these young mothers from the district and their children tends to be relaxed and, therefore, their interventions are targeted at those women involved in the raising of their children. While teachers are envisioned as facilitators of information and the workshop as a place of mutual learning in the program's description, during the actual implementation, the teachers employ moralizing and modeling ideologies that shape the conduct of these youth. According to the teachers, the purpose is to lead the young women to reconsider certain ideas related to pregnancy and childrearing in order to adjust their behavior:

17. Translator's note: In Spanish, "que dejan sus chicos tirados por ahí, que andan por ahí."

18. Translator's note: In Spanish, "recuidan a sus hijos."

At the time, for example, [of talking about] the breast, offering the breast, when we breastfeed... Eh, a workshop which is special, this, many mothers... are on the phone like this or viewing the soap opera or argue or talk... "No! This is a unique moment!" I mean, emphasizing this to them, the moment of communication.¹⁹ (teacher)

According to the observations and findings of the fieldwork for this study, it seems that there are certain tensions between the programmatic objectives of the workshops, institutional discourses, and the meanings that state agents give to this "type" of maternity and pregnancy. These tensions configure the space of the workshop as one that is complex, where elements of critical pedagogy coexist with normalizing moralities. In this sense, the agents "work" with the young women targeted, not without ambiguity and contradiction, using a model of rearing that they consider more positive and "necessary" because of the inadequate rearing that these youth received as children. The language of infant caretaking is an ideal medium for the translation of significations and moral categories which are also class and professional categories (Boltanski 1969; Santillán 2011). While these agents think of motherhood as something natural, something for which they themselves were born, and something with which one is born, and thus maternalize their own experiences as women (Nari 2004), when these experiences refer to the mothers in the workshop, who are young and from popular sectors, the "universal maternal function" seems to fade away:

I sometimes asked myself and say: that one sometimes comes up with things that.. which a woman comes with, right? Like this motherhood thing. It's like things that come naturally. But I notice that there are girls that don't [in reference to the youth who come to the workshop], that don't even have it, that is, they don't have the common sense of being mothers, I mean, they need someone to guide them or... or see what it is they can do [...].²⁰ (workshop teacher)

In other words, in the case of these young, popular sector mothers, the maternal, far from being a natural drive, must be guided in a rational manner by the teachers. Otherwise,

19. Translation by *Apuntes*. In Spanish: "El momento por ejemplo del pecho, de darle el pecho, cuando damos lactancia... Eh, un taller que es especial, ese, muchas mamás te... están con el teléfono así o con la novela o discuten o hablan... "¡No! ¡Es un momento único!" O sea, recalcarles eso, el momento de la comunicación."

20. Translation by *Apuntes*. In Spanish: "Yo a veces me planteaba y digo: pensar que una a veces viene con cosas que... que ya lo trae la mujer, ¿no? Como eso de la maternidad. Es como que hay cosas que te salen. Pero yo me doy cuenta que hay chicas que no [en referencia a las jóvenes que asisten al taller], que ni siquiera lo tienen, o sea, no tienen el sentido común de ser mamás, o sea, necesitan que alguien las guíe o... o ver qué es lo que pueden hacer [...]"

it could turn into something negative: a mother who breastfeeds without following the correct model will not form an adequate bond with her child.

Thus, the images that the agents in the workshop have regarding the motherhood and pregnancy of these young women imply certain expectations, not only regarding the link between the mothers and their children but also with the families and the district. The district appears as a central element in the interventions. The expectations of the workshops revolve around the young mothers strengthening their links with their children – which are supposedly weak – and becoming more involved in childrearing. For this reason, agents' interventions are oriented toward reinforcing the mother-child bond and strengthening single parent childrearing precepts. Their interventions are also aimed at the link the young women maintain with their families in the district where "they all live together." In this sense, the intervention endeavors to establish boundaries between those who are authorized for childrearing and those who are not, and strengthens the protagonism of the mother in the raising of her children and the pertinence of "expert" advice, especially for the young mothers, who are supposedly lacking in instinct and confounded by district and family dynamics.

"WE LISTEN TO EVERYTHING YOU SAY. BUT NO, IF YOU TELL ME YOU DON'T WANT TO CONTINUE, THAT IS ENOUGH"

The youth targeted by Envi3n and the maternal education workshop go to the primary attention center for various reasons. This includes going not only for pregnancies and postpartum check-ups and pediatric issues, but also to find out about and receive social benefits (such as, for example, to receive milk and do the paperwork for an identity document) and for help in the resolution of a situation categorized as conflictive (lack of a job, disagreements with neighbors, family members, partners, etc.). According to information provided by the young women and Envi3n agents, many of these young people not only took advantage of the integral sexual counseling space but also pre- and post-abortion counseling. Regardless of whether they had terminated one of their pregnancies or not, all the young mothers or pregnant youth who went to Envi3n and the maternal education workshop either used or heard something about these counseling services in *La Salita*. In some cases, they went to these counseling services as a result of a recommendation from, or even accompanied by, the state agents of Envi3n.

While in the municipality studied these counseling services have been available since 2007, a product of local government action, it was only in 2004 that the Honorable City Council

(Honorable Concejo Deliberante) decided to institutionalize them.²¹ In this way, the local government acted within the current legal framework, providing help in cases of legal abortions and, at the same time, guaranteeing access to information. Thus, responding to a local government initiative and according to the current legal framework, the counseling service in the district of La Estrella is one of those that functions in the municipality's primary healthcare center. It has an interdisciplinary group of state agents (psychologist, social worker, nutritionist, and a general medical practitioner) whose tasks are to provide counseling and accompaniment to women who have doubts about continuing with their pregnancy and/or have decided to interrupt it. As the state agents see it, the objective of the counseling service is to create a space to provide accompaniment so that women can make a decision and, in the case they opt to end the pregnancy, to facilitate attention and access to health services so that there are no negative effects on either the physical or the all-round health of the women:

[...] they are those that come to the counseling service because being pregnant doesn't appeal to them much, but nor does the idea of aborting. So, many come to clarify this, to figure out what they want. And maybe while you go to ask for an echogram and all that, maybe they decide that no; or they don't want to take a chance on an abortion or they want to continue the pregnancy. That's why, for me, successful counseling is when the woman feels she has been listened to and she feels comfortable talking and thinking together with someone, that is, to be accompanied so that she, more than anything, thinks it out. But, well, when the woman decides to have an abortion, that she can do it on time and correctly [...] ²² (social worker at the health center)

Thus, the spoken word, as such, takes on a central relevance in the intervention: the point is to construct a space where women can express what is happening, dispel uncertainties, and be listened to. The state agents emphasize that while the women's stories are relevant and should be listened to, they refrain from asking for and expecting justifications from the women:

21. The Senate of the Province of Buenos Aires recently approved a draft law that incorporates the strategy of reducing the risks and harm done by unplanned pregnancies into the Program for Reproductive Health and Responsible Procreation of the Province of Buenos Aires. At the time of writing, this proposal was being analyzed by the Chamber of Deputies. This project modifies Law N° 13,066, Creation of the Program for Reproductive Health and Responsible Procreation and creates the Counseling Services for the Reduction of Risk and Harm in Situations of Unplanned pregnancies and seeks to replicate the experience of the pre- and post-abortion counseling services that were established in the municipality included in this study.

22. Translation by *Apuntes*.

[...] we also don't ask for justifications, that is, for us it is sufficient that the woman does not want to continue this pregnancy. No, the woman often says that, on the one hand... because she wants to say why not, because we all have our reasons for what we do, the sense of something that causes you to act. But, on the other hand, there is also the thing of introducing yourself and justifying yourself to an institutional agent, I think. And, well, then we explain: "We are listening to you, to everything you say. But no, if you tell me you don't want to continue [the pregnancy], that is enough."²³ (social worker at the health center)

While both adolescents and adults use the counseling services, the agents stress that the former are more torn between their desire to be mothers and their right as adolescents to decide, making it even more necessary for accompaniment to be a part of the intervention with youth. Better accompaniment on the part of professionals will make it possible for the youth to be more firm in their decisions. One of the state agents comments on this issue:

"Come and talk. Let's talk, I will accompany you." It also requires a different approach from the team, also not ending up being someone else who is pressing, [laughs] do you understand? This line is very fine also. Because careful with the intervention you carry out, because there you are one pressure factor more as a [counseling] agent.²⁴ (doctor at the health center)

While all the state agents in the counseling services are in favor of legal abortion and the possibility of women deciding about their own bodies, not all think of this practice in the same terms. Some of these female state agents characterize the experience as traumatic, while others describe it more in terms of a life experience, as «something experienced and which leaves a mark, but it does not leave a terrible mark» (social worker). In this sense, for some of the state agents, the purpose of the intervention is to accompany the decision-making but also to redimension the experience.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis of the fabric of state interventions in cases of young mothers and pregnant young women in a district in the west of the Buenos Aires metropolitan area gives credence to the questioning of understandings of the state as a uniform structure that acts by imposing a single corpus of gender expectations on women. However, the discussion above

23. Translation by *Apuntes*.

24. Translation by *Apuntes*.

leads us to imagine the state as an entity composed by different institutions and multiple levels where different messages regarding gender are disseminated (Haney 1996). An analysis has been provided of how, in the multiple state activities that intervene directly and daily in aspects of maternity, pregnancy, and adolescent sexuality and work in an articulated manner in the district studied, tensions occur that allow us to consider their particularities and the interweaving of pedagogy and control.

In this sense, it was found that the perspectives that state agents involved in the programs construct with respect to the youth, their pregnancies, and their relationships with their children, families, and partners, are not homogeneous. Indeed, among this heterogeneous group of state actors, meanings regarding maternity and adolescent pregnancy that are ambiguous are constructed and become a subject of dialogue. In certain cases, different definitions and redefinitions traverse the discourse of the same agent in complex ways (Santillán 2009). Some state agents characterize their interventions as being in line with the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and guided by the ideals of critical pedagogy and popular education; others posit a gender perspective. But, according to the observations of this study, it is appropriate to think in terms of varied practical and contextualized appropriations of these norms and of their pedagogy and perspectives and not in terms of the use of a monolithic ideological construct. Such theoretical-ideological frameworks are mediated by territorial networks and the biographies of the agents and are constructed and reconstructed in day-to-day interventions. These interventions are configured by multiple and variable social positions: belonging or not to the neighborhood, family trajectories, gender solidarity, place occupied within the hierarchy of the program, professional training, and existence of empathy (or the lack thereof) for certain mothers and families.

The exploration of these programs suggests that, while in all of them adolescent motherhood is characterized as something "inappropriate," "hybrid," or "unexpected" – and a possible next pregnancy as something that has to be combatted – the interventions of the various agents construct differential expectations for the young mothers. On the one hand, a significant group of Envión agents endeavor to promote the empowerment of the young mothers through their interventions. On the other hand, in the case of the community maternal education workshop, it was found that its state agents direct their interventions towards strengthening the mother-child link when it is weak. Finally, it was found that for the agents of the integral sexual health program, the most important aspect of their intervention is promoting the free choice of pregnant women regarding their bodies through conversation and accompaniment.

In conclusion, this article has focused on the programs and perspectives of state agents related to maternity, pregnancy, and adolescent sexuality. It has introduced the question of the signification and resignification carried out by the targeted youth in the framework of interactions related to the specific ideologies of motherhood. In this sense, identifying the circulation of different discourses and the possibilities of interaction between the targeted youth and state space makes it possible to deepen our understanding of disputes, tensions, and resistances related to motherhood and abortion.

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