

RETHINKING THE CONSTRUCTION OF FUTURE GOALS IN PERUVIAN RURAL YOUTH: A CASE STUDY OF SANCOS, AYACUCHO

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Our study seeks to analyse how Peruvian rural youth at the district of Sancos, in the region of Ayacucho, construct their life goals. Grounded in a decolonial and feminist approach, this research challenges the colonial notion of progress embedded in education and examines how these logics shape the aspirations and identities of rural Andean youth. Findings were drawn from seven semi-structured interviews and two-session group participatory workshops (n=150) with youth. Additionally, information from semi-structured interviews with eight teachers and 10 parents was analysed to explore how they influence youth's long-term goals. Through thematic analysis, results reveal that, for all participants, there is a tension between the students' migration project and the possibility of experiencing falling in love and partnering in a free and safe way. Given that the idea of a possible partner during adolescence is associated with less time for studying and a higher risk of an unplanned pregnancy, the experience of sexuality is rendered a danger to the future project of professional success. Faced with the image of an undesirable life, such as starting a family early in life and staying in the community as a campesino, youth choose to hide their romantic relationships and sexual experiences from adults, leading to possible risks on their physical, mental, social, and emotional health. The ideal of professional success as the only path to development is discussed as a colonial device designed to impose western standards of living, where youth feel pressured into rejecting a life in their community and separate from their parents' cultural identity.

Keywords: Gender and Migration, Sexuality, Coloniality of Progress, Life Goals, Youth Aspirations, Andean Communities,

1. Introduction

The idea that formal education is the pathway to progress, has gained great relevance in recent decades in Peru, including rural areas of the Andes (Degregori, 1986; Pereyra, 2003). In these regions, several campesino and/or indigenous families place their hopes in their children's educational projects, making enormous efforts for them to access and complete higher education. However, in the process of constructing their life projects, youths experience a series of tensions between leaving their rural community to study or staying to live there, and between falling in love and having a romantic relationship or postponing it to focus on their studies, since the fear of an unplanned pregnancy strongly influences the way these tensions are configured in their professional and personal projects (Pease et al., 2021a).

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In this introduction, we contextualise the Andean region of Peru, where this study takes place. Then, we will address the myth of progress and how it materialises in the educational projects of many students in Peru, entailing great sacrifices and socioemotional costs for them and their families. Next, we will address the process of falling in love and the formation of romantic relationships amongst youths from Andean areas, focusing on how they perceive the risk of early pregnancy. Our analysis is rooted in a feminist decolonial approach that understands both the myth of progress and gender systems as stemming from dynamics of coloniality (Quijano, 2000; Lugones, 2010), therefore, as community psychologists we are attentive to the ways in which power dynamics across the axis of gender, race and ethnicity play a crucial role in this research.

2. The Educational Project of Andean Youth and Their Families

Peru's colonial history has strongly marked the social, economic, and cultural dynamics of the country to this day. The population of the Andes, most of whom are indigenous, have been in continuous contact and have coexisted with European settlers since the beginning of the colonial period. This has led to the establishment of relationships based on servitude and domination over Andean communities, where their Quechua culture has been systematically marginalised and undervalued (Quijano, 2000). The legacy of these relationships can be observed in various forms of discrimination towards *campesino* families from the Andean region, who are mainly engaged in agriculture and livestock, have lived and continue to live in conditions of poverty, and without being able to access state services, mainly health and education (Thorpe & Paredes, 2010).

From the 1950s onwards, both social changes and those produced in the subjectivity of many Andean *campesino* families, made them want to improve their living conditions by pursuing what has been called in Peruvian social sciences, "the myth of progress" (DeGregori, 1986). Consequently, several families have sought this progress through their children's education, motivating them to migrate to more urbanised areas in search of higher education, which could eventually expand their possibilities of having paid work (Gutiérrez Muñoz, 2017). Thus, for these families, migration to the city has symbolised their struggle to access modernity and benefit from social and economic services they are entitled to as citizens, services that are not present in rural areas in the same quality (Pereyra, 2003). Nevertheless, the attainment of formal higher education, professional occupation, and an urban life as necessary elements within a desirable life, evidence how colonial logics underlie these ideas. Coloniality has historically created this ideal of a "modern" man or person from a hegemonic Western perspective, which leaves aside any other way of being in the world, such as those linked to *campesino* and/or indigenous ways of life (Wynter, 2003).

Driven by this myth of progress, in the second half of the 20th century, several civil society groups began mobilising, demanding the education sector to expand its reach across the country. This has led children and youth from Andean regions to gradually gain access to higher levels of education. Therefore, from the 1940s and 1950s, there was a rapid increase throughout the country in access to public primary and secondary education respectively (Guadalupe et al., 2017); and by 2023, 93.8% of children and 83.3% of youths from rural areas were enrolled in primary and secondary education respectively (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática [INEI], 2024a; INEI, 2024b). Similarly, access to higher education has also seen significant increases since the 1960s, when only 2.3% completed these studies

(Arregui, 1990), in contrast to the 30.9% of youth nationwide who currently manage to complete higher education (Secretaría Nacional de la Juventud [SENAJU], 2024).

Access to higher education can bring significant benefits for many youths from Andean areas and their families, especially in terms of socio-economic advancement (Ñiquen Lasteros, 2019), thus studies conducted with secondary students in Andean regions, show that the vast majority - four out of five - of youth aspire to go to the university (Mena Portocarrero, 2012; Pease et al., 2021b; Villegas, 2016). However, mainly due to lack of economic resources, the process by which these youth access higher education has high emotional costs for them and their families, and not all these youth manage to access these studies, or complete them (Gutiérrez Muñoz, 2017; INEI, 2015). In addition, pursuing higher education generates very heavy burdens and pressures on youth since many of them must assume the responsibility of financing their studies either by working before or while studying (Villegas, 2023). Moreover, their desire to be professionals and contribute economically to their families to lift them out of poverty and repay their parents for all the effort they have made for them, gives place to a process that some researchers have called the “youth mortgage” (Pease et al., 2025).

Achieving higher education can also be very challenging for many rural Andean youth because it involves migration outside of their communities of origin, where they usually do not find higher education opportunities (Gutiérrez Muñoz, 2017; Villegas, 2016). In this scenario, youth tend to face difficulties adapting both socially and culturally, since urbanised areas are more oriented by individualist rather than collective values and practices, the latter being more common in Andean territories (Cárdenas, 2024; Ledesma et al., 2018). Furthermore, although these youth may have some relatives in the city, many of them usually experience loneliness since they do not have the extensive support network that their family and community can provide (Pereyra, 2003). Also, many youths fear experiencing discrimination in the cities for their campesino origins, which in turn makes them seek to detach themselves from elements that associate them with it (Londoño et al., 2025). For all the above reasons, migration for higher education may generate rural Andean youth to experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and identity crisis, not knowing how to integrate elements of their indigenous identity with their new urban and academic roles (Cárdenas, 2024).

3. Falling in Love, Romantic Relationships and Pregnancy in Andean Youth

Another important challenge in youth’ lives, and one that many often feel in opposition to their educational projects, is the beginning of romantic relationships. During adolescence, hormonal and cognitive changes can generate feelings of attraction and romantic interest towards peers, leading youth to fall in love and explore sexuality, and even, in some cases, to establish romantic relationships (Papalia & Martorell, 2017). While these processes are common and expected within this stage, many youths from Andean regions see romantic relationships as risky, since they associate them with having sexual relations, something that could lead to an unwanted pregnancy and hinder their educational projects (Corporación Visionarios por Colombia & UNICEF Perú., 2019; Pease et al., 2021a). This risk perception is usually stronger in female youth, who in recent decades have shown greater determination to finish secondary school and access higher education (Ames, 2014). In Ayacucho, an Andean region, the rate of pregnancies in youth aged 15 to 19 is 9.5% (INEI, 2022), higher than the national average of 8.2% (INEI, 2023), and specifically in the province of Huancasancos, where

this study took place, pregnancies in this age group saw the greatest increase in the region during the last decade (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2022).

Adults who are close to youth - teachers, parents, and other family members - have a strong influence on how they perceive romantic relationships. In Andean regions, the presence of conservative values can lead adults to reject the exploration of sexuality in adolescence, something that is considered reserved for the adult world (Corporación Visionarios por Colombia & UNICEF Perú, 2019). Therefore, in these regions, adults control youth sexuality through moral regulation processes, which leads youth to feel ashamed when their adult family members figure that they are involved in a romantic or sexual relationship (Corporación Visionarios por Colombia & UNICEF Perú, 2019; Yon, 2014). Adult rejection of romantic relationships during adolescence occurs more strongly for females, since it is perceived that they have more to lose in terms of their reputation and the interruption of their educational projects due to the risk of pregnancy (Ames, 2014; Yon, 2014). Although there are increasingly more female youth who access high educational levels in Andean areas, there is still a strong gap in relation to their female counterparts from other regions (Cuenca & Reátegui, 2018). Therefore, it is not surprising that many Andean mothers and fathers jealously guard the progress their daughters are making on this front and do not want this to be limited by the establishment of a romantic relationship.

Even though many youths and their parents consider that romantic relationships should not occur at this stage, many of them still engage in them. These romantic relationships are influenced by the gender roles present in Andean youth, which tend to be somewhat binary and deterministic, and reinforce gender differences perpetuating sexist behaviours (Pease et al., 2021a), where men are attributed a more active role and women a more passive role (Corporación Visionarios por Colombia & UNICEF Perú, 2019).

Both youth and their parents perceive that gender violence in its different manifestations (e.g., sexual violence, intimate partner violence) is a very present risk in their lives. Thus, many mothers advise their daughters to postpone the establishment of romantic relationships, since they recognise the context of gender inequality and *machismo* that exists in Peru and in Andean regions. This perception has a basis. Both qualitative studies conducted in Andean regions (Orihuela Millán & Rondinel Sanchez, 2024; Yon, 2014), as well as statistical information show how sexual and intimate partner violence are very present in the lives of Andean youth. In Ayacucho, during 2023, 58.3% of women aged 15 to 49 reported experiencing violence from their partner; and the Women's Emergency Centres received 1,083 complaints, of which 51.7% were for physical violence, 30.2% for psychological violence and 17.5% for sexual violence (INEI, 2023).

In parallel to the myth of progress, it is important to analyse Andean gender roles and relationships from a decolonial perspective. It has been argued that gender relationships in precolonial Andes did not follow a patriarchal system but were better understood in terms of complementary differences (Alvites, 2018; Babb, 2018). However, presently the coloniality of gender is expressed in the Andean region through binary and rigid gender roles that promote domination over women and assign guilt on them for being sexually active, actions which have led to forms of violence (Lugones, 2010).

As can be seen, the challenges rural Andean youth experience stem from a series of both external and internal expectations, which generate tensions in the way youth live these processes. Hence, this study aims to analyse how youth from a rural Andean context in Peru, construct their life goals.

It is a case study that analyses the tensions between their educational expectations, their ideal of partner and family life, and the fear of unplanned pregnancy. Additionally, it explores how their main caregivers: parents, and teachers, influence these tensions.

4. Method

4.1 Participants and Procedures

Data collection for this research was carried out between September 2022 and October 2023 at the district of Sancos in Peru. Sancos is the capital district out of the other three districts that compose the province of Huancasancos in Ayacucho. It is a highland south Andean area located at 3,433 metres above sea level, with mostly cold and dry weather conditions (see Appendix B, Figure 1). By 2024, it had an approximate population of 3,108 inhabitants (Distrito.pe, 2025), which shows a decrease from the last national census in 2017, when 3,202 inhabitants were registered, out of which 84% learned Quechua as their first language during childhood, and more than 90% self identifies as part of the Quechua population (INEI, 2017). During the 80's, Sancos' population was affected by the internal armed conflict, when multiple violence acts and human rights violations were perpetrated at a national level mostly against *campesino*, rural and Quechua speaking populations, especially from the Ayacucho region. This history constitutes an important frame of reference from which youths construct their social representations at the district, considering most of their parents and grandparents experienced the direct psychosocial sequelae from these times (CVR, 2003).

Participants consisted of various actors from the educational community of the only public secondary school in Sancos. This school was selected since it holds most secondary school students from Huancasancos, and our university had previously worked there through specific projects. In total, the research team conducted seven semi-structured individual interviews with youths (four women and three men) and seven two-session group participatory workshops with 150 youths in total (approximately half women and half men), both with students coming from the two last years of secondary school between the ages of 15 and 17. Also, individual interviews with eight teachers (tutors of each of the sections), a group interview with parents (six mothers and one father) and three individual mother interviews were included in the analysis.

All participants were intentionally selected, considering their direct involvement in school life. Recruitment activities were carried out through direct management with the school administration and the tutoring department. In the case of parents, they were sent a formal invitation, explaining the aims of the study and the terms of their and their children's participation.

For data collection, techniques mentioned were applied at the school premises. Youth, teacher, and parent interviews lasted between 40 to 60 minutes approximately, and the seven youth workshop sessions (with 20 to 25 secondary students per group) were carried out during tutoring periods, which lasted one hour and a half. This was part of the negotiation with the school's headmaster, who considered these spaces beneficial for students. We acknowledge that our accessibility to school hours was also enhanced because of the value that the education community puts on psychologists, since mental health services in Peru are scarce compared to the current social demand.

Despite most participants are bilingual and speak both Spanish and Quechua, the interview guides were constructed in Spanish, considering school classes are predominantly in this

language. They were differentiated according to the role each participant plays within the school, and were organised around two main axes: sexuality, falling in love and romantic relationships; and life projects.

Conversely, the participatory process involved designing workshops based on thematic interests and using playful and creative tools considered relevant for the dialogic and co-constructive exploration of knowledge. Through creative activities and artistic expressions such as drawing and storytelling (see Appendix C, Figure 2), previously mentioned topics were addressed. Open dialogue and free expression were prioritised, which allowed for collecting valuable information about their experiences.

Both the workshop design and the interview guides, were approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. Moreover, despite all youths and their parents were made aware of the study and signed assent and consent forms respectively, it should be noted that, within rural contexts in Peru, consent is traditionally given by the educational institution's main representative. This relates to how figures of authority who attained higher education are valued within the community in contrast to *campesino* parents, which in turn emphasise how decisions for youths and their families are informed by formal education mandates (Quijano, 2000).

After data collection, spaces for participatory dialogue were created to disseminate the findings to the participants. These sessions included meetings with the school's Headmaster and teachers, where the scope of the research was explained, and potential solutions and recommendations were discussed together. Separate sessions were also held with each class section to share the results, reflect on them collectively, and validate the conclusions. To achieve this, all participants received a fanzine (see Appendix C, Figure 3) in which findings were summarised. In this way, what was shared in the workshops and interviews with students, teachers, and families was brought into dialogue to consider possible future actions based on the role of each stakeholder.

The ethical considerations mentioned above are in line with our position as community psychologists, since we believe that collaborative knowledge-building processes allow for agency recognition of those involved in the research process (Montero, 2006; Morales, 2020). Yet, although we position ourselves in solidarity with the Andean communities we work with, there are several aspects of our subjectivities that might limit our understanding of their struggles. Even though all of us can trace part of our ancestry to Andean areas, none of us identify as Andean or indigenous, but rather as mestizos, coming from Metropolitan Lima and are not first-generation college students. Rather, we are affiliated with a private university at the capital city of Peru, a privileged position that grants us more access to social spaces given how the dynamics of coloniality of knowledge operate in our country's education system (Quijano, 2000). Thus, through this article we seek to be reflexive of how our positionality informs the knowledge we construct.

4.2 Data Analysis

This research was developed under a case study design, which allowed for an in-depth approach to the experiences of the actors involved. In the process of analysing the collected information, a fundamental first step was taken aimed at guaranteeing confidentiality: new identities were assigned to all participants in the interview and workshop transcriptions.

Data analysis was carried out using the reflective thematic analysis (RTA) technique, a widely used methodological approach in qualitative research, especially in educational

contexts, due to its ability to identify meaningful patterns and understand phenomena based on the experiences narrated by the actors themselves (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

In this case, we have considered the reflexivity proposed by RTA, recognising our subjectivity for analysing the information. This was possible thanks to the research team's prior knowledge of the school environment and community, and from the information gathering process. This immersion allowed for a more contextualised and comprehensive reading of the testimonies. The analysis followed several stages: each team member independently developed various codes from the transcripts and jointly develop a code book. From this, we constructed themes and named these categories according to the guidelines established by Braun and Clarke (2022). From this process, central themes were aligned with the aims of the study and responded to the participants' narratives.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Between the Possibility of Migrating to Study or Staying to Work in the Community

In the context of Sancos, adolescence is seen by participants as a stage in which important goals are defined, one of them being professional studies. This, while seen as a personal aspiration, is also positioned as a family aspiration, given that for youth, their life goals are to "be a professional and be a pride for your parents" (Male student). For all youths who participated in this research, despite not having a clear plan on how to achieve it, studying a university career was valued as the highest form of self-realisation, considering this was viewed as the only way to "become someone in life" (Guerrero et al., 2016), a common narrative for most Peruvian rural youth (Pease et al., 2021b).

The professional goals youths set are constructed from personal and collective resources. On a personal level, recognition and confidence in their own abilities, and introspection and reflection about themselves, are central elements that help in this vocational choice; and, autonomy, responsibility, and perseverance are characteristics that allow the development of their goals. On a collective level, youths mention the importance of having emotional and social support from their school teachers, and economic and logistic support from their parents and direct family members. These adults motivate them to study and trust in their abilities and, in some cases, suggest the routes and strategies they can employ to achieve their goals. As presented in the following quote:

None of my family studied law until now [but are they helping you to apply for scholarships, right?]. Yes, my aunt, who works at the Ministry of Health and my parents. [Uh-huh, and what have they told you?] (...) That I can apply for a scholarship, and get it. And study law, right? Which for now I like. I can change my mind... I am not very sure (Female student).

As can be seen, the validity of the myth of progress in rural Andean areas is present in the construction of life projects in Sancos (Degregori, 1986; Pereyra, 2003), in which education is chosen to improve the family's living conditions. The idea of the myth of progress in rural areas stems from the fact that rural life is associated with inequality. This is because the various opportunities offered by state and private services, including access to quality higher education and well-paid jobs, are centred in the capital. In this sense, these youths develop strategies to pursue higher education having Metropolitan Lima as the ideal city to study in (Pease et al., 2021b). The strategies deployed such as applying to get a scholarship to support

study costs or activating family and/or community networks based on kinship to receive material and emotional support, demonstrates the importance of having and maintaining strong connections with these adults (Pereyra, 2003).

Nevertheless, there are various complex challenges that might limit the possibility of attaining university studies. On one hand, despite the aspiration to get a scholarship to be able to study, this is not necessarily a viable possibility for everyone, since many youths mention economic difficulties as a main challenge. As evidenced by national statistics (INEI, 2015) and other qualitative studies, the lack of economic resources is a difficulty for not only applying to a university but also completing these studies (Guerrero et al., 2016; Gutiérrez Muñoz, 2017; Pease et al., 2021b; Villegas, 2016). Meanwhile, family, and social pressures constitute a second important challenge in the lives of these youths, considering most of them feel that their professional goals are conditioned to their parents' approval, who have their own thoughts regarding which are the best careers. This limits youth's aspirations to careers positioned as most relevant and are also influenced by the gender stereotypes that determine which careers are allowed for men and women:

The social situation and stereotypes. If a woman chooses as a profession, let us say, I want to be a mining engineer, stereotypes will always guide you to tell you: "no, a woman cannot do that", and it changes you (Female student).

The pressures that students go through foster a tension between "being someone in life" versus "letting yourself go and fail" (Male student). The first position supposes that youths' value is directly linked with continuing the academic trajectory and studying a university career. As a research team, we believe it is important for youths to reflect upon who are they beyond their professional goals, and that to consider what would happen if they cannot achieve them, since the fear of not being able to fulfil this, might be experienced as a strong deviation from the path traced by parents, highlighting the pressure to which youths are subjected. As seen in the following quote:

Yes. Since the beginning of secondary school. I want to finish secondary school and study a little more to be able to apply to university and study medicine. And, of course, more than anything goals like that, for the future, to be someone, not to be like some youths who have reached failure by letting themselves go too much, also alcoholism and pregnancy (Female student).

As Peruvian researchers, this reality is also part of our own family histories. Despite all of us being born in the capital city of the country, all our ancestors come from different regions of Peru, most of whom did not have access to formal education. Consequently, the project of achieving higher education was predominant for us too. This is important to acknowledge because, even though we had the privilege of not needing to migrate to pursue our life goals, we understand the embodiment of the desire to enter a private university and what it means for ourselves and our parents to finish a professional career.

Accordingly, we can see how the "failure" described in the mentioned quote also symbolises how the myth of progress responds to the imposition of the colonial, western and Eurocentric agenda which positions formal education and urban life as ideals to be achieved to be successful in life (Wynter, 2003). These logics evidence how the migratory project becomes mandatory for these youths, and why "returning to the town" and working as a *campesino* in the field - an activity to which many of their parents are dedicated to - is seen as a future to be avoided and rejected (Gutiérrez Muñoz, 2017; Villegas, 2016). In this way, their parents and *campesino* life constitute these "anti-models" (Pease et al., 2021b) of what is sought to be "overcome" with university studies. Paradoxically, this mandate is viewed positively by their

own parents, who seek their children to be “better than them” and reinforce the idea that the only way to “Be someone in life” is through an academic degree:

Most of us want to be professionals. But here in Sancos you suffer a lot because youths don't come with good educational training and that's why they keep going down wrong paths (...) they start to get together with people they shouldn't (...) I think these people are those who come from other places or are youths who already went to the city, who already finished school and since they couldn't pursue a university career (...), they returned to town (...) They usually dedicate themselves to the field and work for 50 soles [14.30 US dollars approximately] for their labour day and then for alcohol (Male student).

As we can see from this quote, youths anticipate very dim scenarios in relation to failing to pursue a career. However, although studying one can bring youths closer to the goal of overcoming poverty, it also entails renouncing their cultural identity and ceasing to see themselves as indigenous (Ames, 2014). Hence, “to become someone” means relegating *campesino* ways of life, which generates a very large emotional cost in youths raised in rural Andean regions, who feel the pressure to be “good students” and not disappoint their parents. This makes youths live their professional projects with much anguish, fear, and shame at the idea of not being able to fulfil their goals:

This is a big responsibility to have good grades and all that. [And who will you disappoint, do you think?] My parents and more than anything my parents. [And if you disappoint them what would happen? What would they tell you or do?] I think that they would not tell me much, but they would have shame and think that I could not achieve my goals by myself (Male student).

As can be seen, parents, teachers and other community members reinforce ideals of progress and respectability within this youths' reality, which conveys how coloniality is felt through shame, operating relationally through care, advice, and social expectations that reproduce the myth of progress as love (Pease et al., 2021b). This is central, considering community psychology does not often pay attention to how coloniality reproduces at an emotional level, thus pointing to the fact that not only social structures need transformation, but also the healing of the body and emotions that shape aspirations and day to day relationships (Boonzaier & van Niekerk, 2019).

In this way, the challenges of having to migrate and physically leave the family and the community, and adapt to more individual than collective logics in an urbanised context (Cárdenas, 2024; Ledesma et al., 2018; Ramos, 2024), are thought to be preferable rather than dealing with the consequences of staying in their homelands. For youths, this means detaching from their own cultural elements and assuming the dominant culture, facing the costs of discrimination, uprooting and loneliness as part of the process of acquiring citizenship (Pereyra, 2003).

In spite of this, several youths indicate that they want to be professionals—with the costs that this entails—to contribute economically to their homes and lift them out of poverty. Thus, migrating and being a professional represents a form of repayment to their parents for the effort made, like a “loan” that is finally returned upon finishing their career (Pease et al., 2025). Taking this into account, the present lives of the youths we worked with are distinctly shaped by formal school life, where they spend much of their time. The following section discusses how this also outlines the decisions regarding partnership.

5.2 Between the Possibility of Forming a Couple or Postponing It

For youths, falling in love is a normal experience that is part of the stage they are in. They describe it as a state of illusion and initial attraction towards another person that begins around 10 to 11 years of age approximately, in which girls are more motivated to establish a serious relationship, while boys usually see attraction more as a game or pastime to explore their sexual desires, therefore tending to move easily from one partner to another:

There are men who take it as a pastime. I just see my classmates who say “oh, I’m with her, then I’m with her, and now I’m with another one. I break up with her and then I get back with the other one”. They take it as a game. On the other hand, there are others who say: “I do love her, I respect her”. Few men are respectful. Sometimes, there are men who just want that [a sexual encounter], who seek that and then leave you. They say, “I already got that with her; I already tried her” (Female Student).

This quote evidences how gender norms shape romantic and sexual desires in youths by categorising males as objectifying and less empathetic figures towards potential female partners. Youths in Sancos are aware that this gendered differentiation is the result of *machismo*, a form of sexism in Latin America where men exert dominant behaviours to position themselves as superior to women, thus instrumentalising pleasure and attraction for their own benefit (Pease et al., 2021b). These *machista* gender roles could also be seen as a product of the colonality of gender (Lugones, 2010).

Likewise, most of the female youths indicate that both sexual relations and love towards another person are circumstances marked by conflict situations, where alcohol consumption can be encouraged as a form of manipulation to have sex, a common behaviour in males:

Also, one of the things that someone would do for love is, for example, when their partner tells them “Don’t go to that party because if you go it’s because you don’t love me” Or they also tell them to consume substances or alcoholic beverages, like that, as manipulation. Most men do this (Female Student).

This information accentuates male youths as individuals with less agency to control their sexual impulses and consequently, with less care for their sexual health compared to women: “Oh yes. Sometimes the male... the male more than anything says if you love me, we must have sexual relations. Something like that too, like the proof of love” (Female Student). It is important to note that, in these cases, alcohol is seen as a means of exploring sexuality, due to the disinhibition it can cause, but also as a risk factor, as it exposes young people to unprotected sex and, in this sense, unwanted pregnancy.

In this study, the marked gender differences for sexual partner negotiation that female youths anticipate also defines roles regarding consent in couples (Pease et. al., 2021a). According to this, both men and women highlighted that the man is usually the one who asks for sexual consent from the woman, given that he is the one who is more prone to wanting sexual relations. However, in this agreement, the responsibility of care on sexual health falls on female youths, by attributing them greater capacity to reason and prevent the consequences of unprotected sex: “from what I saw, young women have an advanced mind of what can happen and what cannot happen and she would look at the future and foresee more” (Male Student).

This imbalance raises an important question: how can consent be guaranteed if young girls are pressured into sexual dynamics where men are empowered to feel less, say less, and position themselves as authority figures? This is the main reason why parents and female

youths in Sancos, aware of this imbalance, view sexuality as a threat specially for women (Costilla F., 2023; Orihuela Millán & Rondinel Sanchez, 2024; Pease et al., 2021a).

Although some youths questioned that only women should oversee taking care of themselves when having sexual relations and that there should be greater equity in this, the majority agreed that hormones, emotions, and lack of confidence can generate important barriers to communication in couples when they want to have sexual relations:

[Is having consent from your partner easy or difficult? Is it easy to communicate what one wants?] It depends on trust. You can get into an argument or think about another person. To create the idea of consent is that both have a mutual agreement but practically in couples sometimes that does not happen because they get carried away by the passionate moment, by emotions and hormones, and they break up (Male Student).

Faced with this situation, having a partner is seen as a risk for a healthy life, which can have effects on personal fulfilment, since both youths and adults consider that falling in love during adolescence can represent a danger to advancing in their studies. Therefore, some prefer to postpone the possibility of having a partner until they are of legal age or have completed their higher education, since falling in love is a “waste of time” and a reflection of a lack of maturity as they are not able to make serious couple decisions as youths:

Well, in my opinion, I would say that it is not very mature [to have a partner during adolescence] since let's say, well what I realise is that being in a couple at my young age can affect us psychologically and mentally and we are not mature enough to take a serious relationship. Maybe at 18 or when I finish university (Male student).

Furthermore, participants indicate that having a partner can cause family tensions, as some parents also oppose this happening. This is confirmed by the mothers interviewed: “I talk to the girls. I tell them: you don't have to be with a boy, you must graduate studying, when you're of age you can have a partner, now you're a minor, and you can't have one, that's what I tell them” (Mother)

One of the predominant reasons mentioned for not having a partner during adolescence has to do with anticipating an unwanted pregnancy which would interrupt the possibility of completing their studies adequately, in addition to exposing youths to gossip and mockery from their peers and the community.

The anticipation of pregnancy in adolescence is commonly seen as an unpleasant and catastrophic situation, in which the female youth must assume a large burden for which her body is not prepared: “It damages your body. Your body is not prepared for that because you are young... and you harm yourself, damage to oneself. And it is emotional because it is going to shock you to be a mother” (Female Student).

The emotional burden of an early pregnancy also falls on the youth's mother, as some of them comment, there is a strong fear that their daughters will become pregnant, as they are directly responsible for their upbringing and, therefore, their health.

Yes, the dad also acts that way. Yes, the dad too. Sometimes to us, to the mother, he blames us [the youth's father]. He says: “You haven't talked to your daughter; you haven't told your son.” Sometimes when he drinks, he becomes *machista*, he upsets us, all like that. Yes, that's how it is (Mother)

As noted before, women at any stage of their development, tend to carry the most burden when it comes to care tasks (Ames, 2014; Yon, 2014). This is common in Peru at a national level, where rigid gender roles create an imbalance that usually develops into an asymmetrical

partnership where violence is the norm (INEI, 2024b). Specially in a context like Sancos, where mothers may have experienced sexual abuse in the context of the internal armed conflict in Ayacucho during the 1980's, this could make them extra worried for their daughters not achieving their future goals (Mancilla Guzmán, 2022), as seen below:

My daughter fell in love with a boy. People told me: "Hey, wasn't your daughter with so-and-so?" (...) I closed my job, I went to look for her far away in the fields, near the cemetery, to a place where there's really no one there, and the boy was waiting. She was sneaking away (...) As a mother, I couldn't hold it back. I caught up with them... I almost killed my daughter, I almost killed her, and at that moment I grabbed some hot pepper, and I said to myself: "I'm not going to hit her, I'm just going to tell this boy off, why does he have to bring her here?" That's what I was thinking. So, I was really mad. It got the better of me. I pulled my daughter's braid and said: "You're not going to do this to me," and I threw a rock at the boy, I was desperate. I dragged my daughter and told her: "you're going to change because you're going to change, if you continue like this, I'll send you to Lima right now, I'll call your dad, your brother so they can come and pick you up, I'm not going to put up with this, you're not going to act like a tramp, because you're behaving like a tramp (Mother).

The experience of sexuality, especially in women, is lived with guilt and shame, which makes youths prefer experiencing their first romantic partners in a hidden way, without communicating their doubts or concerns about this stage to their parents, and exposing themselves to greater emotional, social, and sexual health risks (Yon, 2014).

On the other hand, considering that in Sancos, like many regions of Peru, traditional gender roles still pressure men into being the main economic provider of the family and women into being responsible for home and child care tasks, it is common for male youths to seek to escape their responsibility if they find out they got a female partner pregnant: "Well mostly in my opinion the man is the one who leaves more burden to the woman, and leaves and no longer takes care" (Female Student).

Finally, both adults and youths are terrified at the idea of an early pregnancy given the economic demands involved in having a child, a situation which can leave the young couple in a situation of greater precariousness and, therefore, of social vulnerability. This is emphasised by many mothers we interviewed, who were also mothers in their adolescence, so they and their children seek not to repeat the same story (Ames, 2014; Urrutia & Trivelli, 2019).

6. Conclusions

For all youth respondents in the present study, their future goals are strongly influenced by colonial ideals of studying formal higher education and attaining a professional career. This is a shared family and community desire, which demands Andean rural youths of Sancos to migrate outside their homeland and into a more urbanised area, where higher education opportunities are more available and where they can aspire to have a higher social and economic status. Although this idea motivates them as part of the search for individual development and "progress" or "modernity" it also supposes large emotional costs and restrictions during their development as youths. The main restriction is associated with the possibility of forming romantic relationships, since this is viewed as a threat to their professional goals, especially for young girls. Since blame and punishment is foreseen, youth tend to hide their feelings of attraction and sexual experiences from their parents and teachers, which may expose them to emotional, social, and sexual risks. In this sense,

community psychology interventions should strengthen open communication and critical thought on sexual education and life projects between youths, their parents, and teachers. We propose these actions should consider an intercultural, feminist and decolonial approach, so that reflective spaces are built with care: sensitive to the context and needs of youths, prioritising their affections, and promoting them to have active roles in proposing practical solutions to their problems. This has already been seen to work in interventions from other parts of the Global South with youths coming from similar conditions (Sánchez Ares & Lykes, 2016; Aubel & Kapungu, 2024) as well as in Peru (Marquez Olivera, 2026). Considering the current censorship our Peruvian government holds against the gender perspective and comprehensive sex education; we acknowledge the importance of articulating key allies coming from different sectors and building learning communities to define specific strategies and establish a common ground when working with youths.

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APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY

Campesino. Is a small-scale agricultural producer who, despite not being legally recognised under this category, maintains a historical and cultural identity tied to the land and the Agrarian Reform in Peru. Their lives are marked by limited resources (land, water, technology), economic inequalities in the market, low political influence, and growing vulnerability to climate change. Consequently, they face precarious living conditions, reinforcing the need for public policies that acknowledge and strengthen their central role in the country's food security (Diez, 2025).

Internal Armed Conflict. The most intense, extensive, and prolonged episode of violence in Peru's republican history. It was initiated by communist group Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), led by Abimael Guzmán, a former philosophy teacher at Universidad San Cristóbal de Huamanga, a local university at the capital of Ayacucho Region. Its main objective was to destroy the Peruvian state and install a new regime through a popular uprising, where violence and torture were legitimised as means to an end. It is estimated that during the conflict (1980-2000) 69,280 people died due to the confrontation between subversive groups and the armed forces. The violence responded to variables of social exclusion and poverty (Comisión de la Verdad y la Reconciliación [CVR], 2003).

Machismo. Should not be reduced to individual sexist attitudes but understood as a manifestation of the modern-colonial patriarchy, according to Rita Segato (2016, in Blanco García, 2018). It operates through men's domination over women's bodies and sexuality as a means of political and social control. This system functions as a "pedagogy of cruelty," naturalising female subordination, legitimising violence, and reinforcing hierarchical gender orders (Blanco García, 2018).

Rural. Rural areas in Peru have been defined as geographical spaces with fewer than 100 clustered dwellings or more than 100 dispersed dwellings without forming population centres (Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo [GRADE], 2020). However, these areas are also characterised by the broad cultural and linguistic diversity of their inhabitants, along with the predominance of agricultural and livestock activities, and, to a lesser extent, extractive practices (Anaya et al., 2021). From an educational policy perspective, rurality has been classified into three levels according to geographical extension and proximity to the capital. It is worth mentioning that this marked distance from the country's capital means that rural areas are marked by inequality in access to resources (health, education, etc.) and opportunities (UNESCO, 2020).

APPENDIX B
PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION OF SANCOS DISTRICT



Figure 1. Landscape view of Sancos district

APPENDIX B
PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION OF THE GROUP WORKSHOPS WITH
YOUTHS



Figure 2. Photographs of the body mapping technique used in group workshops with youths

APPENDIX C

PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION OF THE DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS



Figure 3. Photograph of fanzine made for the dissemination of results with youths