

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By Edgardo Ayala - IPS / Globetrotter

10.08.2023

Globetrotter Submission: Global News Dispatches: 4 Stories

‘No’ to Sex Education Fuels Early Pregnancies in Central America **[1,441 words]**

Pregnancies among girls and adolescents continue unabated in Central America, where legislation to prevent them, when it exists, is a dead letter, and governments are influenced by conservative sectors opposed to sex education in schools.

The most recent incident reflecting this situation was the July 29 veto by Honduran President Xiomara Castro of an Integral Law for the Prevention of Adolescent Pregnancy, approved by the single-chamber Congress on March 8 and criticized by conservative groups and the country’s political right wing.

“We don’t know the arguments behind the veto, but we could surmise that the law is still being held up by pressure from these anti-rights groups,” lawyer Erika García, of the [Women’s Rights Center](#), told IPS from Tegucigalpa.

The Influence of Lobbying Groups

Conservative sectors, united in “Por nuestros hijos” (“for our children”), a Honduran version of the regional movement “Con mis Hijos no te Metas” (roughly “don’t mess with my children”), have opposed the law because in their view it pushes “gender ideology,” as international conservative populist groups call the current movement for the dissemination of women’s and LGBTI rights.

In June, the United Nations [expressed concern](#) about “disinformation campaigns” surrounding the Honduran law.

The last of the marches in favor of “family and children” took place in Tegucigalpa, the country’s capital, on July 22.

These groups “appeal to people’s ignorance, to fear, to religion, with arguments that have nothing to do with reality,” said García. “They say, for example, that people will put skirts on boys and pants on girls.”

According to the [United Nations Population Fund \(UNFPA\)](#), one in four births is to a girl under 19 years of age in Honduras, giving the country the [second-highest teenage pregnancy rate](#) in Latin America.

According to the Honduran Penal Code, having sexual relations with minors under 14 years of age is statutory rape, whether or not the girl consented.

In 2022, 1,039 girls under 14 gave birth.

“The problem is quite serious, and it is aggravated by the lack of public policies to prevent pregnancies among girls and adolescents,” García said.

In the countries of Central America, which have a combined total of some 50 million inhabitants, ultra-conservative views prevail when it comes to sexual and reproductive health and education.

In El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua—as well as the Dominican Republic in the Caribbean—abortion is banned under all circumstances, including rape, incest, or a threat to the mother’s life.

In the rest of Central America, abortion is only permitted in certain circumstances.

The Honduran president vetoed the law under the formula “return to Congress” so that it can be studied again and eventually ratified if two-thirds of the 128 lawmakers approve it.

‘I Didn’t Even Know What a Condom Was...’

However, having laws of this nature does not ensure that the phenomenon will be reduced, since legislation is not always enforced.

Since 2017 El Salvador has had a [National Intersectoral Strategy for the Prevention of Pregnancy in Girls and Adolescents](#), and although the numbers have declined in recent years, they are still high.

A [UNFPA report](#) noted that in this country the pregnancy rate among girls and adolescents dropped by more than 50 percent between 2015 and 2022.

However, “it is worrisome to see that El Salvador is one of the 50 countries in the world with the highest fertility rates in girls aged 10-14 years,” the UN agency said in its latest report, released in July.

Among girls aged 10-14, the study noted, the pregnancy rate dropped by 59.6 percent, from 4.7 girls registered for prenatal care per 1,000 girls in 2015 to 1.9 in 2022.

The map of pregnancies in girls and adolescents in El Salvador added that the country “needs to further accelerate the pace of reduction, adopting policies and strategies adapted to the different realities of girls aged 10-14 years and adolescents aged 15-19 years.”

Such actions must be “evidence-based,” the report stressed.

The reference appears to be an allusion to the prevalence of conservative attitudes of groups that, in Honduras for example, reject sexual and reproductive education in schools. This lack of basic knowledge about sexuality, in a context of structural poverty, led Zuleyma Beltrán to fall pregnant at the age of 15.

“When I became pregnant I didn’t even know what a condom was, I’m not ashamed to say it,” Beltrán, now 41, told IPS.

She added: “I suffered a lot because I didn’t know many things, because I lived in ignorance.”

Two years later, Beltrán became pregnant again but she miscarried, which landed her in jail in August 1999, accused of having an abortion—a plight faced by hundreds of women in El Salvador.

El Salvador not only bans abortion under any circumstances, even in cases of rape. It also imposes penalties of up to 30 years in prison for women who have undergone abortions, and women who end up in the hospital after suffering a miscarriage are often prosecuted under the law as well.

“The State should be ashamed of forcing these girls to give birth and not giving them options,” said Anabel Recinos, of the [Citizens’ Association for the Decriminalization of Abortion](#).

“The State does not provide girls with sex education or sexual and reproductive health, and when pregnancies or obstetric emergencies occur as a result, it is too cruel to them, it only offers them jail,” she added.

Recinos said that, due to pressure from conservative groups, the State has backed down on the strategy of providing sexual and reproductive information in schools.

“Now they are more rigorous in not allowing organizations working in that area to go and give talks on comprehensive sex education in schools,” she noted.

Not Even Baby Formula

In Guatemala, initiatives by civil society organizations that since 2017 have proposed, among other things, that the State should offer reparations to pregnant girls and adolescents, to alleviate their heavy burden, have made no progress either.

These proposals included the creation of scholarships, making it possible for girls to continue going to school while their babies were cared for and received formula.

“But unfortunately we have not been able to take the next step, to get these measures in place,” said Paula Barrios, general coordinator of [Women Transforming the World](#), in a telephone conversation with IPS from the capital, Guatemala City.

Barrios said that most of the users of the services offered by this organization, such as legal and psychological support, “are girls and adolescents who are pregnant because of sexual violence and are forced to have their babies.”

She said that in the five years leading up to 2023, some 500,000 girls under 14 years of age have become pregnant, and the number is much higher when teenagers up to 19 years of age are included.

“Today we have half a million girls who we don’t know what they and the children who are the products of rape are eating,” Barrios stressed, adding that as in El Salvador and Honduras, in Guatemala, having sex with a girl under 14 years of age is considered statutory rape.

“Society sees it as normal that women are born to be mothers, and so it doesn’t matter if a girl gets pregnant at the age of 10 or 12 years, they just think she has done it a little bit earlier,” she said.

Patriarchy and Capitalism

The experts from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador consulted by IPS said the root of the phenomenon is multi-causal, with facets of patriarchy, especially gender stereotypes and sexual violence.

“The patriarchy has an interest in stopping women from going out into the public sphere,” said Barrios.

She said the life of a 10-year-old girl is cut short when she becomes pregnant. She will no longer go to school and will remain in the domestic sphere, “to raise children and stay at home.”

For her part, Garcia, the lawyer from Honduras, pointed out that there is also an underlying “system of oppression” that is intertwined with patriarchy and colonialism, which is the influence of a hegemonic country or region.

“We have girls giving birth to cheap labor to feed the (capitalist) system, and there is a greater feminization of poverty, girls giving birth to girls whose future prospects are ruined,” she said.

In the meantime, to avoid a repeat of her ordeal, Beltrán said she talks to and teaches her 9-year-old daughter about sexuality.

“In order to keep her from repeating my story, I talk to her about condoms, how a woman has to take care of herself and how she can get pregnant,” she said.

“I don’t want her to go through what I did,” she said.