

The Alarming State of Teenage Pregnancy in Ecuador

Raquel Serrano



1. Overview

The “State of the World Population 2019”, a report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), brings to light the lack of access and enjoyment of sexual and reproductive health and rights by many groups around the globe. Despite major attempts to increase the protection of these rights, more collective work is needed to achieve this goal. One of the outcomes that we can see as a result of this lack of access is the high rates of teen pregnancy in certain regions. The “State of the World Population 2019” report suggests that Ecuador, with a fertility rate of 111 per 1000 teenagers (15 to 19 years old), is the Latin American country with the highest rate.¹

2. Research Goal & Methodology

The goal of this research project was to understand the causes of the alarming teen pregnancy rate in the country. As such, I conducted a literature review of primary and secondary sources to look at the causes behind high rates of teen pregnancy, as well as current and past programming to mitigate this situation.

3. Key Factors

Violence. Women in Ecuador face discrimination and violence in the private and public spheres. A 2019 national survey on violence against women reports that 65 out of 100 women aged 15 or older have experienced some form of violence throughout their lives.² The national survey also highlights the low rate of denouncement of cases of violence, thus, making it harder to fully comprehend the consequences of gender-based violence, including unwanted pregnancies.

The patriarchy and gender roles. Gender roles and expectations are a key factor in the determination of a woman’s identity. Women are expected to be submissive, dependent, and innocent. Under patriarchy, women’s plan of life is based on its reproductive ability. This puts reproduction over women’s sexuality and pleasure.

Socioeconomic factors. As the literature noted, on one hand, in cases where there is a lack of access to opportunities and services, motherhood is seen as a life project.³ Here, teen pregnancy is not necessarily seen as a problem but as a pathway for teenagers to grow into themselves, escape from toxic family environments, and achieve social status. On the other hand, teen pregnancy is seen as an obstacle to one’s life plan for several reasons, including limited government support to teen mothers in the child rearing process.⁴

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Laidlaw Foundation for providing this unique opportunity to undergraduate researchers. Thank you to Shraddha Prassad, the University of Toronto Laidlaw Supervisor, for her support throughout this experience.

Both situations are linked to each other as the life plans of both groups are influenced by the opportunities and support systems available for them. These include access to quality sex education, health care services, publicly funded childcare, and community programs, as well as supportive familial structures and non-violent environments.

Education on sexuality. The literature reports that comprehensive sexuality education has many benefits (e.g., empowers teenagers on their sexuality, and helps teenagers be informed of their sexual and reproductive health). However, in Ecuador – and across Latin America- we can see that there are many misconceptions of sexuality education due to patriarchal norms and religious beliefs, resulting in its stigmatization. In Ecuador, education on sexuality is not universal, inclusive, nor accessible. Thus, little is known about its efficacy. Despite sex education usually being oriented to the use of contraception and prevention of sexually transmitted infections, its efficacy is being challenged as multiple studies point out the low use of condoms during teenagers’ first and recent sexual intercourse. The literature also shows that sex education received in school tends to solely focus on prevention rather than addressing topics such as sexuality, pleasure, gender, sex, and consent.

Health services. The delivery of quality health services to teenagers has been affected by the lack of trained professionals and the lack of knowledge of laws related to adolescents’ sexual and reproductive rights. The literature also points out that teenagers’ main concern when accessing health care services is the lack of confidentiality between the doctor and the patient.

4. Conclusion

The findings suggest that patriarchal norms continue to heavily influence Ecuador’s political and social affairs, affecting a woman’s identity and autonomy through the perpetuation of gender roles and expectations, discrimination, and gender-based violence. Moreover, the lack of quality sexuality education and both health services and social services results in risk factors for teenage pregnancy. The literature shows that policies, strategies, and programs with gender-based and rights-based approaches, as well as differentiated care for adolescent’s health, can contribute to the decrease of the national adolescent fertility rate.

References

- ¹ Steve McCurry, Jangbu Sherpa, and Warren K. Leffler, “Asegurando derechos y opciones para todos desde 1969,” 2019, 161.
- ² Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Ciencia, Encuesta Nacional sobre Relaciones Familiares y Violencia de Género contra las Mujeres – ENVIGMU (Web, 2019), https://www.ecuadorencifras.gob.ec/documentos/web-inec/Estadisticas_Sociales/Violencia_de_genero_2019/Boletin_Tecnico_ENVIGMU.pdf.
- ³ Alba Lucía Vélez Arango, “El embarazo en el adolescente: una visión desde la dimensión emocional y la salud pública,” *Revista Cuidarte* 3, no. 1 (2012): 398, <https://doi.org/10.15649/cuidarte.v3i1.38>.
- ⁴ Alba Lucía Vélez Arango, “El embarazo en el adolescente: una visión desde la dimensión emocional y la salud pública,” *Revista Cuidarte* 3, no. 1 (2012): 398, <https://doi.org/10.15649/cuidarte.v3i1.38>.