

THE ALARMING STATE OF TEENAGE PREGNANCY IN ECUADOR

Raquel Serrano
2020 Laidlaw Scholar
University of Toronto

ABSTRACT

The goal of this research project is to understand what has led to the rise of the adolescent fertility rate in Ecuador. To answer this research question, I conducted a literature review over my first summer of research to look at the causes, current and past programming and policies, and possible strategies to reduce the adolescent fertility rate in Ecuador. The findings of this review suggest that patriarchal norms continue to heavily influence the political and social affairs of the country. This affects women's identity and autonomy through the perpetuation of gender roles, societal expectations, discrimination, and gender-based violence. Moreover, the lack of quality of both health and social services and sexuality education results in risk factors for teenage pregnancy. The literature also 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. I conclude this report by describing two options for next summer that will allow me to apply my initial findings and to expand my research.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research project is to understand one of the many factors that continues to limit women's autonomy, empowerment, and sexual agency. I believe that teen pregnancy is not only a public health problem but an issue that reflects the social and economic inequalities that exist in Ecuador. The research question of this project is only a first step towards a larger research project that I plan to expand in future years. Hence, with respect of this research project, I aim to look at the causes of the rise of the adolescent fertility rate in Ecuador. Here, I acknowledge that there are many aspects to take into account (i.e. the unequal experience of teen pregnancy among different adolescent groups). Thus, looking at it from an intersectional approach will help have a comprehensive understanding of the current situation.

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 factors that we can see as a result of this lack of access is the high rates of teen pregnancy in certain regions. A 2018 UNICEF, UNFPA, and WHO report on adolescent pregnancy in Latin America and the Caribbean highlights that, although there has been a decline in the adolescent fertility rate worldwide, Latin America and the Caribbean have experienced one of the slowest declines worldwide, leading this region to have the second-highest teen pregnancy rate.¹ In specific, this report points out that the adolescent fertility rate is 79 per 1000 teenage girls aged between 15-19

¹ "América Latina y El Caribe Tienen La Segunda Tasa Más Alta de Embarazo Adolescente En El Mundo," UNFPA América Latina y el Caribe, February 28, 2018, <https://lac.unfpa.org/es/news/am%C3%A9rica-latina-y-el-caribe-tienen-la-segunda-tasa-m%C3%A1s-alta-de-embarazo-adolescente-en-el-mund-1>.

years old.² The “*State of the World Population 2019*” report suggests that Ecuador, with a fertility rate of 111 per 1000 teenagers, is the Latin American country with the highest rate.³ The fertility rate in this country is also disproportionate among adolescents due to factors such as economic status, education, life plans, and access to essential services which make certain adolescent groups more vulnerable than others.⁴

This report is divided into three main sections. First, I explain the research carried out over this first summer. Second, I address the main findings of the state of teen pregnancy in Ecuador, including the risk factors for teenage pregnancy and gaps in the literature. Finally, I describe my plans for my second summer of research and how I plan to use the findings made this summer to continue my Laidlaw research project. It is important to note that this research project is not complete, and this report aims to describe the work done over this first summer. A research paper will be submitted after the end of the second summer.

SUMMER 1

Understanding the current knowledge on teen pregnancy in Ecuador

My plan for this first summer of research was to conduct a literature review on the state of teen pregnancy in Ecuador. To do this, I looked for academic papers, news articles, reports, and documentaries on topics related to sexual and reproductive rights, adolescents health, teen pregnancy, teen pregnancy in Latin America, teen pregnancy in Ecuador, adolescent motherhood, gender relations, health systems, sexuality, sexual violence, and social security.

With this initial search I intended to have a comprehensive understanding of the current

² Steve McCurry, Jangbu Sherpa, and Warren K Leffler, “Asegurando derechos y opciones para todos desde 1969,” 2019, 180.

³ McCurry, 161.

⁴ Isabel Goicolea, “Adolescent Pregnancies in the Amazon Basin of Ecuador: A Rights and Gender Approach to Adolescents’ Sexual and Reproductive Health,” *Global Health Action* 3, no. 1 (December 1, 2010): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3402/gha.v3i0.5280>.

knowledge on the aforementioned topics and their relation to teenage pregnancy in Ecuador. At first, I searched for articles in English. However, I found that most of the literature was only available in Spanish. This did not affect this research project as I speak both languages, but this might be an obstacle for other researchers interested in learning about teen pregnancy and factors associated with it.

I started my research by reviewing regional and national case studies that looked at the perceptions that teenagers had about teen pregnancy, sexual relations, contraceptives, sex education, among others. As well as, research projects that looked at teenager's sexual debut, use of contraceptives, and gender-based violence. This helped me have a better understanding of the state of teen pregnancy in countries that share similar historical and cultural features as Ecuador. I also looked at articles that offered an understanding of possible strategies to lower teen pregnancy rates. In the following weeks, I narrowed down my search to teen pregnancy in Ecuador. Although the literature on this topic has increased in recent years, there is still a gap in a) the knowledge of how teen pregnancies affect vulnerable communities (i.e. Indigenous and Black communities, immigrants, and victims of sexual violence); b) the role of international organizations and non-governmental organizations in addressing teen pregnancy and how they support pregnant adolescents and teen mothers; c) the success/failure of the government programs that have been implemented in recent years; d) the efficacy of the current sex education curriculum, among other topics. I aim to expand my research project in future years to address these gaps. Especially, I want to look at how these topics respond to my initial questions on the state of teen pregnancy in Ecuador.

Throughout the summer I was in contact with different professors that helped me solve inquiries, recommended readings, and offered advice on the next steps. Psychologist Marie-

France Merlyn is a Professor at Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador (Quito Campus) and has researched teen pregnancy and abortion in Ecuador. Her advice and support were invaluable for my project as she knows the research that has been done so far and the current political and social affairs of Ecuador. Some of the main questions that I asked her were related to her research projects on teen pregnancy and sexuality, the Ecuadorian sexual education curriculum, teen birth rate, and the state of research on abortion in the country.

KEY FACTORS

Historical and Cultural Context

Ecuador, a former Spanish colony, continues to face the legacy of colonialism. One of the main problems that need to be addressed is racial and social inequality. A 2019 report on gender-based violence shows that Afro-Ecuadorian women and Indigenous women of Ecuador face higher rates of violence.⁵ These vulnerable groups also have less access to quality education, essential services, and face higher levels of poverty. Moreover, even though Ecuador became a secular country in 1986, the Catholic Church still has a major influence on political and social affairs. For example, the Ecuadorian Episcopal Conference recently released a statement against the reforms made to the Organic Health Code (COS for its initials in Spanish). This statement was forwarded to President Lenin Moreno as he has to approve or veto these reforms. These reforms aim to be a step forward in the protection of the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and adolescents. In this statement, this religious group also claimed that their point of view stood for the position of most of the Ecuadorians.⁶ In addition, in 2019, the

⁵ 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.

⁶ Politicians and different civil societies have also released a statement. For more information on the position of the Catholic Church of Ecuador please see Conferencia Episcopal Ecuatoriana, “Declaración ante la Aprobación del

National Assembly rejected a reform that looked for the legalization of abortion in cases of rape. These examples show that women's rights have been for many years a decision of a few politicians and groups of power but with consequences that affect a larger population.

Furthermore, the Ecuadorian society, until nowadays, is deeply influenced by patriarchal norms and practices that have contradictory beliefs to the women's rights agenda. Women in Ecuador face multiple levels of oppression. For example, 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. Here, it is important to acknowledge that not all women experience these gender expectations to the same extent and in the same manner. Looking at this from an intersectional perspective will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these gender roles shape a woman's identity. Moreover, women are merely responsible for childbearing and household activities. Even from pregnancy, there are already gender roles and expectations influencing the baby's life, which will be deepened with the past of the years. Under patriarchy, women's plan of life is directed towards motherhood. This puts reproduction over women's sexuality and pleasure. Here, sex education and a change of approaches that look at women's sexual and reproductive rights can play an important role. Hence, in terms of sex ed, it is necessary to analyze if what is being taught about sexuality perpetuates gender roles or serves to empower teenagers to explore their sexuality and have control over their experiences and bodies.

Furthermore, 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.⁷ This report also highlights that only 50 percent of victims of psychological violence told about the incident to a relative and only 1.9 percent denounced it. This low statistic is prevalent in report cases of other forms of violence such as physical and sexual. Thus, there are no official statistics on the number of teen pregnancies that resulted from sexual violence. This is alarming as victims of sexual violence, especially teenagers and girls, do not have the governmental, societal, and judicial support needed for the protection of their rights. Even more, they are forced to become mothers as abortion is illegal in Ecuador.

Socioeconomic Context

A woman's identity is also shaped by her socioeconomic context. Teen pregnancy could be viewed as a problem for some but not for others. On one hand, in cases where there is a lack of access to opportunities and services, motherhood is seen as a life project.⁸ 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.⁹ On the other hand, teen pregnancy is seen as an obstacle to one's life plan as there is limited government support to teen mothers in the child rearing process.¹⁰ 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

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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>.

⁹ Teenagers might look at teen pregnancy as an option to achieve social status as motherhood contributes to their identity. Here, they are considered as mothers and not necessarily as teenagers. For more information see Sonja Caffé et al., "Looking Back and Moving Forward: Can We Accelerate Progress on Adolescent Pregnancy in the Americas?," *Reproductive Health* 14, no. 1 (July 1, 2017): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-017-0345-y>.

¹⁰ 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>.

childcare, and community programs, as well as, supportive familial structures and non-violent environments.

Teenage pregnancy poses health, social, and economic consequences. In many cases, it leads to high school dropouts. With no high school completion, pregnant teens have fewer options to earn a secondary and post-secondary degree and have a high-skilled job, resulting in a decrease in opportunities to become independent. Hence, teenagers continue to reinforce and practice the gender roles and expectations assigned by society. Another possibility for them is to join the workforce in entry level positions such as cleaners, cooks, and salespersons. Despite being employed, the chances to achieve social mobility are low. Hence, poverty cycles are passed from generation to generation. With no access to health services and educational programs, teen moms become more vulnerable and susceptible to have another pregnancy.¹¹ All of these factors indicate the importance of having integral policies and programs that aim to support pregnant teens and teen moms, address their needs, and protect their rights.

Education on sexuality

Sexuality education is actively mentioned in the literature I revised. 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

¹¹ G. Mayron Nakandakari, C. Dyanne De la Rosa, and José Jaramillo, “Grado de instrucción de embarazadas adolescentes.,” *Revista del Cuerpo Médico Hospital Nacional Almanzor Aguinaga Asenjo* 6, no. 3 (2013): 35.

point out the low use of condoms during teenagers' first and recent sexual intercourse. A study evidences that for women, the disuse of condoms is linked to the belief of keeping one's image as "pure" and as an act of love.¹² This is an example of how patriarchal norms continue to influence a woman's sexual agency.

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. I reviewed the Ecuadorian sex education curriculum and I was surprised by its content as it did touch on the aforementioned topics. However, there is a gap in knowledge as to the extent of its implementation. In my experience, the type of sex education I received in high school was merely focused on educating students on the use of contraceptives and sexually transmitted infections, and there was no discussion on other aspects of sexuality, such as consent culture, gender identity, sexual orientation, and empowerment. I wanted to know more about this disparity between what is being taught and what the sex education curriculum states. Hence, I contacted Psychology Professor Marie-France Merlyn. She mentioned that this is a reality as schools have the last decision on what they teach and how they do so. Even though there is a universal sex education curriculum designed by the Ministry of Education, there is a lack of implementation of it and a lack of knowledge as to the extent of its use. Further research should be done to know the extent of the use of this curriculum, and the reasons why it is or is not being used. Overall, this is a problem as education on sexuality is necessary to assure teenagers are well-informed at the time of making any decisions.

Health services

¹² Alejandra Bermúdez Zuleta, "La cigüeña extraviada: una aproximación al fenómeno del embarazo adolescente," *Revista Tendencias & Retos* 19, no. 1 (2014): 36.

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. Other problems that affected the delivery of quality health services to teenagers were the lack of trained professionals and the lack of knowledge of laws related to adolescents' sexual and reproductive rights. Moreover, from 2007 to 2011, Ecuador implemented a small-scaled program that offered differentiated health care for adolescents and it turned out as a positive strategy to make health services more accessible for youth.¹³ However, in 2011 there was a change of policy, resulting in the disruption of the program. Further research needs to be done to look at the possibilities of re-implementing and expanding differentiated sexual and reproductive health care services for adolescents.

Other strategies to address teen pregnancy

The literature also shows the importance of educating about sexuality, practices and prevention mechanisms, and healthy habits before the teenage years. Moreover, strategies should also look for availability and accessibility to educational information and services for all adolescents, regardless of their education and economic status, abilities, race, and gender. Attention has shifted to both rights and gender approaches for the benefits they could present when addressing sexual and reproductive health matters. One study stated that “the rights and gender framework stresses the importance of the interaction between right-holders and duty-bearers on the realization of sexual and reproductive rights, and acknowledges the importance of gender-power relations on sexual and reproductive decisions”.¹⁴ These are paramount in the

¹³ Joar Svanemyr et al., “The Health Status of Adolescents in Ecuador and the Country’s Response to the Need for Differentiated Healthcare for Adolescents,” *Reproductive Health* 14, no. 1 (February 28, 2017): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-017-0294-5>.

¹⁴ Isabel Goicolea, “Adolescent Pregnancies in the Amazon Basin of Ecuador: A Rights and Gender Approach to Adolescents’ Sexual and Reproductive Health,” *Global Health Action* 3, no. 1 (December 1, 2010): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3402/gha.v3i0.5280>.

design and implementation of policies and programs that aim to promote women and adolescents rights.

CONCLUSION AND PLANS FOR SUMMER 2

The findings suggest that patriarchal norms continue to heavily influence the political and social affairs of the country, 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.

My plan for the second summer of research is to go to Quito, Ecuador, and continue my research project there. I have two possible options. The first one is to work with a non-governmental organization (e.g. *Fundación Desafío*) to get to know the type of projects that they have implemented to address teen pregnancy, facilitate access to information on sexual and reproductive rights, and empower adolescents to control their experiences and bodies.¹⁵ I am also interested in designing infographics with the information gathered this summer and the work being done by *Fundación Desafío* to help visualize the problem of teen pregnancy in Ecuador (i.e. risk factors, existing policies and programs, and suggestions), and to raise awareness on women sexual and reproductive rights. The second summer plan is to look at the type of health, social, and educational services available in Cotacollao, Quito. This zone has the highest

¹⁵ *Fundacion Desafio*, a well-known NGO in the country, actively releases reports on different matters related to sexual and reproductive rights. For example, they released a report in 2016 based on the stories of 15 pregnant girls under the age of 14 who have been victims of violence. This report aims to bring to light this alarming issue and calls for integral strategies to address gender-based violence and teen pregnancy and to protect the rights of this vulnerable group.

adolescent fertility rate of the Metropolitan District of Quito.¹⁶ Analyzing the services available might help us understand the reasons why this zone has the highest teen pregnancy rate. With this option, I can apply the research carried over this first summer to explain the importance of having adolescent-friendly services and community programs that aim to educate and empower adolescents on their sexual and reproductive rights, and to search what risk factors are more prominent in this zone to facilitate further research into how to address them.

¹⁶ Distrito Metropolitano de Quito, *Diagnóstico de Salud del Distrito Metropolitano de Quito*, (Web, 2018), https://quito.gob.ec/documents/Salud/Diagnostico_Salud_DMQ2017.pdf.

Bibliography

- Arango, Alba Lucía Vélez. “El embarazo en el adolescente: una visión desde la dimensión emocional y la salud pública.” *Revista Cuidarte* 3, no. 1 (2012): 394–403.
<https://doi.org/10.15649/cuidarte.v3i1.38>.
- Caffe, Sonja, Marina Plesons, Alma Virginia Camacho, Luisa Brumana, Shelly N. Abdool, Silvia Huaynoca, Katherine Mayall, et al. “Looking Back and Moving Forward: Can We Accelerate Progress on Adolescent Pregnancy in the Americas?” *Reproductive Health* 14, no. 1 (July 1, 2017): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-017-0345-y>.
- Climent, Graciela Irma. “Voces, silencios y gritos: Los significados del embarazo en la adolescencia y los estilos parentales educativos,” 2009, 186-213.
- Conferencia Episcopal Ecuatoriana. “Declaración ante la Aprobación del Código Orgánico de Salud.” *Conferencia Episcopal Ecuatoriana* (blog), August 2020.
<http://conferenciaepiscopal.ec/declaracion-ante-la-aprobacion-del-codigo-organico-de-salud/>.
- Distrito Metropolitano de Quito. *Diagnóstico de Salud del Distrito Metropolitano de Quito*. Web: 2018. https://quito.gob.ec/documents/Salud/Diagnostico_Salud_DMQ2017.pdf.
- McCurry, Steve, Jangbu Sherpa, and Warren K Leffler. “Asegurando derechos y opciones para todos desde 1969,” 2019, 1-180.
- UNFPA América Latina y el Caribe. “América Latina y El Caribe Tienen La Segunda Tasa Más Alta de Embarazo Adolescente En El Mundo,” February 28, 2018.
<https://lac.unfpa.org/es/news/am%C3%A9rica-latina-y-el-caribe-tienen-la-segunda-tasa-m%C3%A1s-alta-de-embarazo-adolescente-en-el-mund-1>.
- Goicolea, Isabel. “Adolescent Pregnancies in the Amazon Basin of Ecuador: A Rights and Gender Approach to Adolescents’ Sexual and Reproductive Health.” *Global Health Action* 3, no. 1 (December 1, 2010): 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.3402/gha.v3i0.5280>.
- Guijarro, Susana, Jorge Naranjo, Mónica Padilla, Richardo Gutiérrez, Cristina Lammers, and Robert W Blum. “Family Risk Factors Associated with Adolescent Pregnancy: Study of a Group of Adolescent Girls and Their Families in Ecuador.” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 25, no. 2 (August 1999): 166–72. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X\(99\)00020-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X(99)00020-8).
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística. *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
- Nakandakari, G. Mayron, C. Dyanne De la Rosa, and José Jaramillo. “Grado de instrucción de embarazadas adolescentes.” *Revista del Cuerpo Médico Hospital Nacional Almanzor Aguinaga Asenjo* 6, no. 3 (2013): 33–36.

Svanemyr, Joar, Susana Guijarro, Betzabe Butron Riveros, and Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli. “The Health Status of Adolescents in Ecuador and the Country’s Response to the Need for Differentiated Healthcare for Adolescents.” *Reproductive Health* 14, no. 1 (February 28, 2017): 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-017-0294-5>.

Zuleta, Alejandra Bermúdez. “La cigüeña extraviada: una aproximación al fenómeno del embarazo adolescente.” *Revista Tendencias & Retos* 19, no. 1 (2014): 31–40.