Ecuador’s Sex Education Setback

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Although it seems unbelievable, the Ecuadoran government approved a plan to control teenage pregnancy with abstinence and family unity. In addition, the proposal focuses on reclaiming the traditional family and moral values, casting aside all the advances the women’s movement and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community have achieved in recent decades.

The government’s new proposal replaces the Estrategia Nacional Interseccional de Planificación Familiar y Prevención del Embarazo en Adolescentes (ENIPLA), a program designed by women’s collectives with advisory support from specialized international agencies. ENIPLA has been accused of promoting sexuality from adolescence on and of having failed in its main objective of reducing teenage pregnancy.

ENIPLA’s history since 2011 founding
ENIPLA, which had become one of the Ministerio de Salud Pública’s flagship programs, was created in June 2011. Its goal was to reduce unplanned and teenage pregnancies 26% by 2017 by focusing on adolescent sex education, family planning, access to contraceptive methods, public health assistance, and information about reproductive rights.

The basis for the creation of ENIPLA was the 2010 housing and population census, which revealed a 74% increase in teenage pregnancies since 2000. The census also revealed that 17% of all teenage girls in the census were already mothers. At that time, it was determined that one cause of teenage pregnancies was a lack of sexual education.

Faced with this situation, a plan was designed giving priority to the formation of health professionals specialized in family planning and contraception. Under the plan:

• health centers and clinics provided free contraceptives;
• hospitals and clinics were given emergency contraceptive pills to provide without cost;
• sex education was included in school and university curriculums;
• educational manuals about sexuality were created;
• meeting places for young people seeking information on how to enjoy their sexuality in a healthy, informed manner, and thus prevent unwanted pregnancy, were opened; and
• a campaign called "Speak seriously, sexuality without mystery" was launched.

However, the new Plan Familia Ecuador tossed all this in the trash.

Plan Familia Ecuador
In November 2014, President Correa said excesses were committed in ENIPLA, and the program had been infiltrated by social collectives that promoted abortion and gay marriage.
"There is an infiltration of a complete abortionist agenda, a gay agenda, etc., that does not go along with this government’s policies," Correa said, defending the need to establish a new strategy that would seek to re-establish certain values and strengthen the traditional family. He then announced the demise of ENIPLA and a change to a new strategy led by his presidential advisor Mónica Hernández, a woman known for her closeness to the most conservative sectors of the Catholic Church, in particular the ultraconservative Opus Dei.

At that time, Hernández made no public statement about the new plan but promised that she would make it public in January of this year. No official announcement of the plan, which will be directly administered by the office of the president, has been made since then. All that is known is a draft leaked to the national press. Hernandez lamented that it had been leaked and has not answered any questions about it. The only thing she has said is that she and President Correa designed it.

In the draft of Plan Familia Ecuador, an emphasis on sexual education and contraception methods has been eliminated and priority is given to promoting affection, love, and family as the focus of sexuality and as the best form of birth control for adolescents. The plan’s proposals are based on theoretical underpinnings provided by Opus Dei professors and scientists who also believe homosexuality can be overcome with proper treatment.

In addition, the new plan questions ENIPLA because it would have had "an ideological and biological approach, which did not take into account the whole person but rather focused on the person's genitalia, providing incomplete information about contraceptives and condoms, neglecting both the family and the teaching of family values."

In Hernandez's analysis, risky behaviors in adolescents grow out of a "lack of family dialogue, sexual violence, lack of education about affection and sexuality with a focus on the family, lack of values, low self esteem, low positive or realistic self image, little or no character development, peer pressure, too much time alone in the home because working mothers are absent, or the temporary or permanent absence of either or both parents."

The goal was also changed. With Plan Familia Ecuador the idea is to "revive the role of the family as the basic societal unit." The plan states that the family is the first school to inculcate human values, to educate and motivate young people to live the affection they deserve. Although the affection adolescents deserve is not defined, President Correa said it is not wrong to go back to talking about abstinence and that, as long as he is president, state policy will not be free sexual enjoyment without values as it was in the past.

**Patriarchal government**

Correa has made it clear that his election as president was an election in which the citizenry also opted for his moral convictions. Therefore, these convictions should be translated into political decisions. One of his convictions is the protection of the traditional family consisting of a man and a woman plus their sons and daughters.

Correa has met with LGBTI communities on several occasions and reached agreements. However, the agreements have not crystalized into concrete policies, and, within days, the president makes public comments that undo them, showing that the president’s personal moral convictions take precedence over policies necessary to protect various social groups.
In this aspect, the most shameful of the administration's statements came from presidential legal advisor Alexis Mera, who, along with Public Administration Secretary Vinicio Alvarado, are considered the most powerful people in Correa’s government.

Mera, in a long interview given to El Comercio, a capital city newspaper, said, "The state should show women that it is preferable to postpone their sexual life." Later, he reaffirmed his position by saying that the state "should say that the option of sexual pleasure should be put off at least until after high school graduation."

Many women’s collectives rejected Mera’s position because it contradicts Ecuador’s Constitution, specifically Article 66 that says the state has a responsibility "to promote access to necessary methods so that individuals can make free, informed, and voluntary decisions about their sex lives."

For Enith Flores, spokesperson for the Asamblea de Mujeres Populares y Diversas del Ecuador, what Mera said legitimizes something that has been evident for some time—that this government represents a patriarchal state, as conceived by its principal representative, since it can be heard in the president’s own discourse (NotiSur, March 14, 2014). "For many years we have felt they have wanted to regulate us, to deepen the traditional roles of women and men. ... We are going back to the time of the Inquisition, to those times when we could not question without being judged and burned at the stake," Flores said.

While Mera’s position was also rejected by some female deputies in the Asamblea Nacional (AN) who support Correa, it should be remembered that, in October 2013 when some of them spoke out in favor of therapeutic abortion in rape cases, the president branded them as traitors and the ruling Alianza País immediately issued a one-month suspension from their AN duties. Since then, these representatives have kept quiet on such topics, strengthening the belief that one man commands this government.

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