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Conservatives Oppose Teaching Gender Equality in Peruvian Schools

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Conservative sectors in Peru have been promoting a campaign against gender education in primary schools, arguing that it is an attempt to make children focus on their sexuality from an early age. They demand the right for parents to choose the education they want for their children.

The first voices on this issue were heard last year during the investigation and eventual censure of Education Minister Jaime Saavedra Chanduví when some legislators zeroed in on issues that had nothing to do with the subject of the inquiry: alleged irregularities in the purchase of computers and slow progress in the preparations for the 2019 Pan American Games, to be held in Lima (NotiSur, Jan. 20, 2017). At that time, Saavedra Chanduví was asked about his promotion of an alleged “gender ideology” in the new basic education curriculum.

The campaign has the backing of members of the political right and of conservative religious sectors—fundamental evangelical denominations and the conservative wing of the Catholic Church headed by Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani—who say that gender education subverts the formation of children and adolescents.

Last November, these groups launched the “Don’t Mess with My Children” (#ConMisHijosNoTeMetas) campaign with an event in Lima that, according to the official website of the collective of the same name, gathered more than 4,000 backers, including leaders of Catholic and evangelical churches, mayors, judges, prosecutors, and congressmen. At the end of the event, they presented a declaration in defense of the family.

“Although the hierarchy of the local Catholic Church is not part of #ConMisHijosNoTeMetas, it is an active participant in the discussion about so-called ‘gender ideology,’” Carlos Bedoya wrote in the newspaper Uno. He noted that in August 2016, in response to the feminist “Ni Una Menos” (Not One Less) campaign against gender violence (NotiSur, Aug. 26, 2016, and Nov. 18, 2016), “the Peruvian Episcopal Conference published and distributed throughout all its dioceses a booklet titled ‘Gender Ideology: Its dangers and scope.’”

Since Jan. 9, dozens of posters with the campaign’s slogan, as well as people wearing pink or blue pennants to indicate their gender identity, have appeared at Lima’s high-traffic pedestrian bridges and bus stops. Sit-ins have been held in front of the Ministry of Education.

National movement

The campaign has expanded to other parts or the country. For example, in Arequipa, in Peru’s southern coastal area, Aldo Tacuri coordinated a sit-in at the Plaza de Armas for the organization “I Defend My Children” (Yo Defiendo a Mis Hijos). Tacuri said he opposed “our children being taught gender ideology.”

According to the National Pro-Family Coordination website, Tacuri said, “This means that they will teach our children to choose their sexuality. But we understand that one is born a sexual being, and
sexuality is not a thing one chooses. A person is male or female not because he or she mutilates his or her genitals, but because one is born a man or born a woman.”

For Beatriz Mejía, president of the Instituto Educa Bien, gender ideology “seeks to impregnate a homosexual culture through children and youth.” Some members of Congress—including Nelly Cuadros and Juan Carlos Gonzales of Fuerza Popular, and Julio Rosas of the Alianza para el Progreso—share the opinion.

In January, Cardinal Cipriani spoke on the topic on the radio show Radio Programas del Peru: “Why is everyone so eager to corrupt our morals, to believe that it is possible to turn everything around,” he asked. “Instead of being honest, we want to teach our children that women can be men and men can be women. If we continue this deception that all is possible, then we should give children excrement to eat instead of a piece of meat.”

**Ministry response**

The Ministry of Education (MINEDU) has denied that the new National Basic Education Curriculum, implemented this year, promotes an “ideology of gender,” much less encourages homosexuality, as its detractors say.

During a MINEDU TV web channel transmission, Lirama Velasco, who heads the ministry’s national curriculum, said the new program of study seeks to help students from a young age understand that men and women have the same rights.

“They also seek equality of opportunities, of rights, of responsibilities. This is gender equality … We want students to develop to the best of their potential … Gender ideology does not exist in this curriculum,” Velasco affirmed.

The new curriculum includes gender equality among the seven interdisciplinary strategies that guide the pedagogical work and infuse characteristics to various educational processes. “These strategies are part of international agreements and policies that the Peruvian government recognizes and adheres to,” the curriculum reads.

It also clarifies that these interdisciplinary strategies are based on the educational principles written into general education laws—which include the concept of gender equality—that have been taken and adapted from the National Plan of Gender Equality 2012-2017, approved in 2012 and found in regulations that place gender equality as a state policy.

Gender equality as defined in the curriculum reads: “In a situation of real equality, a person’s rights, responsibilities, and opportunities do not depend on his or her gender identity and therefore, everyone has the same conditions and possibilities to exercise his or her rights, as well as to expand their abilities and opportunities for personal development, contributing to social development, and benefitting from the results.”

Critics of the curriculum are the only ones talking about the concept of gender ideology. Nevertheless, when the citizens participating in the marches and events of #ConMisHijosNoTeMetas campaign are asked what they understand gender ideology to be, they don’t know how to respond, or they say they are not authorized to respond.

Bedoya noted that the campaign’s spokespersons take the extreme position of “assuming that gender roles have been determined by God. It’s as if God determined that the color blue and little
cars are for boys and the color pink and dolls are for girls, with all the imbalance of power between men and women, between heterosexual and straight people, that results from this.”

Although there’s no basis to the arguments that the national educational curriculum includes what critics call gender ideology, on Feb. 1, Lima’s First Civil Court accepted a suit filed by the collective Padres en Acción (Parents in Action) seeking block the ministerial resolution that approved the curriculum, a move that halted the curriculum’s implementation. The suit, however, was rejected on Feb. 16 by the office of the Constitutional Attorney, the entity charged with defending the norms and powers of the executive branch of government in Peru.

An urban-rural poll conducted by Ipsos in January on behalf of the MINEDU revealed that 94% of those surveyed agree that the ministry should promote a focus on gender equality, meaning boys and girls have the same rights, responsibilities, and opportunities. Likewise, 83% stated they agree that the sexual orientation of students should be respected.

When the daily La República asked about the survey results, Robert Prevost, bishop of Chiclayo and spokesman for the Peruvian Episcopal Conference (Conferencia Episcopal Peruana, CEP), said, “It is clear we all agree about equality. But there’s a leap towards the ideology that aims to eliminate all biological differences between male and female.”

At a press conference on Jan. 22, CEP Vice President Monsignor Miguel Cabrejos questioned why MINEDU had included ideas that come, not from Peru’s Constitution but from the so-called gender ideology.

“This is how they have created a climate of confusion among Peruvians regarding the state’s role in protecting the family and marriage, and violated parental rights to decide the type of education they want for their children,” Monsignor Cabrejos said, reading from a press release.

In early February, a group of scholars and researchers issued a statement backing MINEDU, saying that if confusion exists, it is created by the ongoing conservative campaign. “This campaign generates confusion, appeals to fear, and puts the contribution of gender studies in the development of these educational topics at risk,” the statement said. “Using a gender focus across the school curriculum is key, as it allows the analysis of how being a man or a woman impacts each situation of our lives, or how it is handled in every policy, and how policies and programs can be designed that look for ways to seek equality, taking gaps and specific needs of each gender into consideration.”

The leaders of the conservative offensive say that they feel attacked by Legislative Decree 1323, issued on Jan. 6. The decree penalizes intolerance or discrimination on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, or gender identity, among other things. They say the measure discriminates against those who oppose what they call the homosexual agenda.

The conservative campaign is planning a massive demonstration for March 4, the first day of classes, that they hope will surpass last August’s huge “Ni Una Menos” march (NotiSur, Aug. 26, 2016).

On Feb. 15, the controversy led the congressional caucus of Peruanos por el Cambio (Peruvians for Change) to suspend one of its members, Congressman Moisés Guía Pianto, for six-month. At a meeting of evangelical Christian communities with Congress on Jan. 31, Guía Pianto had called for President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski to step down for his support of the alleged gender ideology and called for a “popular insurgency” on March 4.
Critics of the campaign say that statements such as those made by Guía Pianto show that the campaign is nothing more than an attempt to manipulate public opinion for political ends.

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