



Young Latinas Speak Out About Reproductive Justice

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By Ena Suseth Valladares

More than six years after California policy makers passed a comprehensive sex education law some schools are still providing outdated, incomplete reproductive health information that shames young people rather than teaches them. “*Young Women Speak Out!*”, a new report from California Latinas for Reproductive Justice (www.clrj.org), provides startling first hand accounts of young Latinas that demonstrate a devastating gap between existing state laws and policies and the haphazard implementation taking place in schools and communities on a wide range of reproductive health concerns.

The young women of color I interviewed recalled receiving abstinence-based sexual health education at either the middle or high school level. One young woman summarized her sex education as being told, “sex is bad, abstinence is good.” Similarly, other young women recalled major omissions in instruction, including resources and referrals for STD testing, pregnancy testing and affordable emergency contraception despite clear legal requirements that these topics be taught. As a result of this incomplete and at times misleading instruction, young Latinas and African American females have disproportionate higher rates of STIs as compared to other young women.

In addition to the implications for their physical health, the social stigma attached to sexuality topics in schools leaves adolescents from accessing all the information they need to make important reproductive and sexual health decisions. The young women reported feeling uncomfortable asking clarifying questions in the classroom and instead relied on their friends for information about birth control. And, despite clear legal protections, the vast majority of the participants we interviewed

reported experiencing or witnessing systemic discrimination within educational institutions against pregnant and parenting youth, including pressure to transfer out of comprehensive high schools into alternative programs and being relegated to substandard instruction. Young pregnant women were made to feel that motherhood was the end, and not just one aspect of their life, limiting the likelihood that they would have the foundational skills and the confidence to go on to college or into the workforce and build healthy futures for their families.

The stories and experiences of the young women we spoke with provide a glimpse of how much more needs to be done to reframe conversations on sexuality to ensure that all youth receive complete information and feel supported. This means changing the way we approach sexuality topics in the classroom, in the home and in society in general.

According to recent polls, Latina/o parents strongly support comprehensive sex education for their children, and studies show that Latina/o parents play a critical role in helping their kids make healthy decisions about sexual activity and reproductive health. In addition, many of the young women expressed that it was very important for parents to know about the technical characteristics of sexuality, including contraceptives, birth control and different transmission routes. As one young woman put it, “parents should be educated themselves on those issue and have comprehensive sex education, because I want it to be my mom telling me about this.”

Educational institutions and government-funded programs must do more to provide medically accurate, culturally competent tools needed to engage with their families in important discussions about sexuality. And adolescents may actually have some of the best solutions for policy changes: One young participant suggested that there should be “a class just for the parents and teachers can teach the parents [that] it’s okay to talk to your kids about that, or don’t be embarrassed...”

The health and futures of all our children depend on it.

Ena Suseth Valladares is California Latinas for Reproductive Justice’s (CLRJ) Senior Research Coordinator. Ena is responsible for coordinating CLRJ’s research project, *Making the Case for Latinas’ Reproductive Health & Justice Policy*, and taking leadership on related research activities. CLRJ’s research project was developed in recognition of the need to inform and increase the availability of California-based policy oriented research that specifically addresses Latinas’ reproductive and sexual health priorities and that is strength-based, culturally competent and reflective of the Latina/o community’s needs.

California Latinas for Reproductive Justice is the leading California-based policy advocacy organization whose mission is to advance California Latinas’ reproductive health and rights within a social justice and human rights framework. CLRJ works to ensure that policy developments are reflective of the priority needs of Latinas, their families and their communities.

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