

THE HUFFINGTON POST

THE INTERNET NEWSPAPER: NEWS BLOGS VIDEO COMMUNITY



[Rocio L. Córdoba](#)

Executive Director of California Latinas for Reproductive Justice

Posted: April 20, 2010 11:45 AM

[The Time to Blame Youth Is Over: Our Policies Must Do More to Support Young Women's Health and Lives](#)

Read More: [California Schools](#) , [Education Reform](#) , [Reproductive Health](#) , [Reproductive Justice](#) , [Sex Education](#) , [Los Angeles News](#)

They make it sound like having a baby and your life is over.

I was 15 and pregnant and nobody knew I was pregnant...I was on the streets, I was on the run and I didn't want anybody to know.

I had to leave; my principal or superintendent told me 'you can't stay here while you are pregnant. You have to go to another school, because [the] pregnant school is required for pregnant people.

Our health and educational systems are failing young women, as we learned from the young Latinas who shared these and other powerful experiences. Even in a state like California, where progressive laws are in place to ensure youth have access to confidential services, quality sexual health education, and prohibit discrimination in their schools, the reality reveals another story: A major gap exists between the passage of key reproductive health policies and their implementation, especially for the most underserved youth of color.

In California, Latinas for Reproductive Justice's (CLRJ) new report [Young Women Speak Out!](#) young Latinas from key regions of California expressed their views, concerns and hopes surrounding sexuality, reproductive health and being a young parent today.

Young women shared first-hand experiences with shame-based, inaccurate and abstinence-only education in their schools, despite California's law requiring comprehensive, medically-accurate and unbiased instruction for schools that teach sexuality education. As a result, our systems are failing to provide young people with valuable information to make well-informed decisions about their health and lives.

Young Latinas who are pregnant or parents continue to face unequal treatment and are being pushed out of their schools into alternative programs with substandard instruction, despite civil rights laws prohibiting such discrimination. As a result, our educational systems are failing to promote positive educational outcomes and future economic opportunities for young families.

Although California laws protect the right of minors to access confidential reproductive health services, our health and educational systems are failing to ensure that young Latinas have information about such rights. Many young women do not get the quality health services they need and deserve, therefore perpetuating inequitable health outcomes - such as higher rates of sexually transmitted infections -- for Latina/o youth.

Why is this happening? What is the basis for such injustice facing our youth?

The absence of efforts to explore concrete answers to these questions is a major part of the problem. In the context of promoting the health, education and justice of young people, it is essential to explore the complex systemic factors underlying sexuality, pregnancy and parenting among adolescents. Placing the blame on youth is not only unjust, it fails to look at the entirety of the world that adults and their institutions have created for them.

The current approach to address reproductive health, sexuality and adolescent childbearing - in particular, as they relate to the Latina/o community - is especially troubling. The prevailing conversations approach these issues from a deficit perspective, in essence "blaming" Latina/o women, youth and their families for their "conditions."

This is reflected in the significant focus on a "teen pregnancy prevention" frame that fails to explore the realities faced by the young women in CLRJ's report and countless other youth. Research findings and policy debates highlight the social and economic "costs" of teen pregnancy and essentially fail to acknowledge pregnant and parenting youth's needs and rights, such as ensuring healthy pregnancies and equal educational opportunities. These approaches further overlook systemic inequities and persistent factors facing our most disenfranchised young women, including poverty, violence, and discrimination.

Despite these perceptions, our experience in being part of, and working directly with the Latina/o community demonstrates an alternative framework. Latina women, youth and their families recognize the importance of ensuring access to quality, culturally competent health care, including the comprehensive range of reproductive health services.

Latina/o parents strongly support access to medically accurate, comprehensive sexuality education for their youth, and actively seek to gain skills for communicating with their children about sexuality.

Latina women are the backbone of their families, making significant decisions about their family's health and education options.

Latina/o families maintain strong cultural, family and community values that strive for excellence in education and positive opportunities for their youth. It is essential to lift up these values in the policy debates surrounding pregnancy, parenting and families - including young families.

The time to blame our youth is over. Our institutions must recognize and build upon the strength of Latina/o youth and their families. Our policies must do more to ensure that all young people - especially those with the least access to resources and services - have equal opportunities to learn, be healthy and thrive. The time for action is now.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rocio-l-c/the-time-to-blame-youth-i_b_543309.html