

Sex and violence: the roots of Mexico's teen pregnancy problem

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Claudia Colimoro still remembers the day she met Rosa, a 12-year-old girl sent to the shelter she runs after being sold into sex slavery twice and getting pregnant for the second time.

Rosa—not her real name—is one of hundreds of thousands of teens and pre-teens who get pregnant each year in Mexico, a worsening problem caused by minors having unprotected sex at an early age, but also by horrific violence against women and [girls](#).

Colimoro runs a shelter called Casa Mercedes in Mexico City that takes in pregnant girls with nowhere else to go, pays for their education and helps them raise their babies if they decide to keep them.

Rosa was not yet a teenager when she arrived at Casa Mercedes, but she had already been sold into prostitution twice by her own mother.

Her family comes from Puebla, in central Mexico, a state with a picturesque colonial capital that belies a much darker side: it is also home to networks of human traffickers who force women and girls into prostitution.

"She got pregnant from being forced into sex work, because her mother had sold her," Colimoro explained.

"The first time, she refused to believe her own mother had sold her. She ran away, went home to her mom asking for help, and her mom sold her

again."

The second time Rosa got pregnant, she was sent by a court to Casa Mercedes.

As Colimoro does for all the girls who pass through her privately run shelter, she educated her about her options—adoption, abortion or motherhood.

Colimoro addressed the issue of [teen pregnancy](#) this week at Women's Forum Mexico, a gathering of leaders and activists meant to generate creative ideas on gender issues in a country where inequality is rife and violence against women is soaring.

'Cluster of risk'

Mexico has the worst teen pregnancy rate in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCDE), at 77 births per 1,000 girls aged 15 to 19.

The statistic doesn't even capture the youngest girls affected.

"One in six pregnancies in this country, nearly 20 percent, are girls between 10 and 19 years old," Interior Minister Miguel Osorio Chong said recently.

Most girls who get pregnant before the age of 15 are victims of "some kind of physical violence," he said.

And the problem is getting worse.

The teen pregnancy rate rose by nearly 10 percent from 2014 to 2016.

Early sexual activity has played a part in the increase, said Maria del Carmen Juarez of the National Women's Institute.

But the problem goes deeper.

There is also a "cluster of risk" involving crime, drugs, alcohol, physical abuse and child sex slavery, she said.

Opportunity: the best contraceptive

Those are the factors that tend to be involved in the cases of girls who end up at Casa Mercedes, such as Teresa Garcia.

Garcia, 25, arrived at the shelter when she was 14 years old. She gave birth to her son soon after, and has lived there with him since, studying for a law degree that she completed just days ago.

She grins contemplating the new life that now awaits her. But it was not easy to get here.

"When you're that age, all you want to do is talk with your friends, go out. But I couldn't do any of that. I had to take care of my son," she said.

In the courtyard, fellow resident Rosalba Vazquez is playing with her two kids, aged four and five.

She is 19 years old, but looks younger with her slender build and face partly hidden by a curly mane of hair. She has managed to finish high school since moving to the shelter and is now studying at a private university on a full scholarship.

"I dream of finishing my degree and becoming a professional dancer," she said. "And as a mother, watching my kids grow up right and

finishing their own education."

That is the best hope for fighting teen pregnancy, said Christian Rodriguez, a Uruguayan photojournalist who—the child of a teenage mother himself—has traveled around Latin America documenting the subject.

Rodriguez, who also spoke at the Women's Forum, says the same problems can be seen throughout the region: poverty, gender violence and deep inequality.

"There are girls whose only prospect in life is to become mothers. One of the things we have to do is give those girls the same opportunities," he said.

"The best contraceptive out there is to give someone a real, possible dream in life."

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