

IRC Americas Program

Women's Rights Eroding in Latin America

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Throughout the continent, there is an offensive against the rights of women. The litany of losses or less-than-hoped-for gains announced this International Women's Day only proved what women across Latin America already knew.

Most law does not recognize the term "sexual rights," and the religious right has been working hard to eliminate the term "reproductive rights" as well. A coordinated effort to rescind parts of the Cairo agreement—if not in law at least in practice—has seriously affected the exercise of hard-won rights.

In several countries legislators have introduced changes in the penal code to punish "injury to the as-yet unborn." These laws open a Pandora's Box of potential interpretations that in many cases would conflict directly with the existing rights of women.

Abortion is still illegal in most places, except under very narrow circumstances. In places such as Mexico City, where reforms have been passed to permit abortions under a broader range of conditions, the lack of response within the public health system still often leaves poor women without the option.

A recent survey in Mexico shows that only half the sexually active adolescents protect themselves from sexually transmitted disease. The Latin American Women's Health Center announced that in all of Latin America only one of every ten single, sexually active adolescents uses contraceptives. The number of HIV-AIDS patients has been rising steadily, despite underreporting, and the percentage of women among them is also on the rise.

Another result is an increase in teen pregnancies—half a million last year in Mexico. Besides posing a higher health risk to both mother and baby, in most cases the social and economic structures necessary to support a child are nonexistent or insufficient. And the impact on the human development of the young mother can be devastating, turning dreams into drudgery.

Changes in the global economy have also had negative effects on Latin American women. A tour through the Mexican countryside is enough to note the profound impact on women's lives. Male emigration has left women with the double work of farm and family, while the number of female-headed households, both rural and urban, has doubled in a single decade.

Globalization has also transformed women's work, and often not for the better. Thousands of women and their children labor in subhuman conditions in the fields of export products. A recent study follows transnational tomatoes as they are passed from women's hands to women's hands: from the indigenous migrant women who pick them, to the mestiza women workers in the packing plant, to immigrant women servers in fast-food restaurants. Each sector hires predominantly women because they can pay them less and exploit them more. Latin American and Caribbean women make only 68 cents to a man's dollar.

Much of the world has heard about the rape and murder of young women in Ciudad Juárez. But few really know that a double crime is still being committed in that Mexican border town. Bodies

continue to appear half-buried in the desert dust. Buried too, the truth of what happened to them. A succession of governments—local, state, and federal—has decided that the death of factory girls is a small price to pay for the foreign investment in offshore assembly plants that holds up the local economy. More than that, there is credible evidence of cover-ups. We may never know what sinister misogynist forces are behind the murders, because misogyny is also behind the law enforcement agencies assigned to the cases.

Similar crimes have been reported in Guatemala, where crime statistics show a sharp rise in murders—1,300 since 2001—and NGOs estimate that the real number is up to three times the official report. Meanwhile, the special police unit assigned to investigate the murder of women was cut from 22 to five officers.

Domestic violence claims the lives of 14 women a day in Mexico , but the law in 8 states does not consider domestic violence a crime and 12 do not penalize rape in marriage. It is often the custom to consider a rape case resolved if the rapist offers to marry the victim. As if that form of lifelong subjection weren't bad enough, according to the UN representative on violence against women, a thousand dollars will buy you a little girl on the southern border of Chiapas .

Under the second Bush administration, women's rights organizations throughout the world can expect to have an even more determined adversary. During the "Beijing plus Ten" conference, the U.S. government delegation objected to the use of the term "sexual rights," protested any reference to the "right to abortion," and called for an amendment stating that the agreement creates "no new international human rights." The Bush government has already cut international health funding for services that include abortions.

Too often, women's organizations battle against a tide of reaction while even progressive forces pay only lip service to their demands. Supporting women's rights is not a matter of being politically correct or expressing solidarity. It is an integral part of any definition of justice or development.

Sadly, the tendencies mentioned above are growing, not abating. The attempts to roll back progress on sexual and reproductive rights, the degradation of women's work, and rising violence against women are characteristics of the twenty-first century. Many of us had hoped by now to see a better future for our daughters. But today, even to just reverse these trends will take all our efforts—and theirs as well.

P.S.

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