

The Reproductive Health of Young Women in Argentina: An Unsettled Issue

by Maria Eugenia Miranda.

Ask today a young Argentine woman about her sexual and reproductive rights, and the most likely response is silence or a shrug to mean she doesn't know what you are talking about. The lack of information is alarming: the adolescents don't see themselves as having any rights, and many subscribe to the most bizarre rumours regarding sexuality.

"I speak about sexuality just with my friends, never with my parents or at school. Once, promoters of hygienic towels came to my school and spoke about menstruation and the changes in our bodies at that period of life, but nothing else," says Marcela Diaz, a 14-year-old secondary student. "We usually have little factual information, and deal in rumours and myths. I know a girl that got pregnant the first time she had sex. She didn't use any protection because she thought, as many girls think, that one doesn't get pregnant if it's your first time."

While sexual education is formally included on the curricula, most of the time this is only on paper. The majority of Catholic schools are completely opposed to sexual education.

Teenage Pregnancy

Many women adolescent that barely a few years ago were playing with dolls cannot prevent pregnancy for lack of information, because they were raped (by their own partner), or due to a defective condom (or ignorance of its proper use) or the lack of money to buy contraceptives. In Argentina, 105,000 of the 700,000 average births yearly are by women less than 20 years old. About 30 percent of these are the second or third baby. Teenage pregnancy is most common among women of low education and socio-economic levels. This is understandable if one takes into account that

access to information or to contraceptives entails a visit to the hospital—and the money for the bus ride to get there. The hospital queue is long, and they are lucky if they are able to meet with the doctor or receive free contraceptives since many hospitals lack these.

Many of these adolescents give birth without the support of parents, who usually prefer an abortion. They are accompanied by the partner in a usually unstable or short-lived relationship.

In addition, many need to leave school due to the pregnancy, and rarely return. The young mothers, moreover, are likely to encounter major difficulties in landing a job.

Neither the public health services nor the educational system have enough programmes offering information or resources to avoid the alarming incidence of teenage pregnancy. The non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civil society groups are left to address the situation, organizing workshops, cam-

paigns, and other activities without adequate support from state institutions in most of the cases.

"Many girls come to the hospital only when they have to give birth," notes Carlos Yoffe, a gynaecologist from the Ramos Mejia public hospital in the city of Buenos Aires. Yoffe considers the country's health system unprepared and ill-equipped to accommodate the numbers who visit the hospital.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Another worrying aspect of reproductive health of young women in Argentina is the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, particularly HIV/AIDS, which is the number one cause of death of women 15 to 44 years old in the city of Buenos Aires, and the second in the entire province of Buenos Aires.

"By watching one of these TV programmes that sometimes carry special reports on HIV/AIDS, I learned what AIDS is and how to prevent it. But the truth is many times, during the actual situation, I do it

without a condom. I'm a bit unconscious," says Maria, a 15 year old adolescent. Her testimony is just one of many examples of how young women may know how to prevent HIV/AIDS have not internalised this knowledge. Getting in the way of the actualisation of any knowledge of STD prevention are myths embedded in Argentina's culture, such as the one that claims the condom reduces one's sensitiveness, or the "love

test" that boyfriends frequently demand from girlfriends—that unprotected sex is the best proof of the girl's love.

According to the Ministry of Health, 22.6 percent of people with AIDS are women. This means that for every infected women, there are 2.9 men infected, which suggests a rise of epidemic proportions in HIV incidence among women (in 1990 the proportion was 1 infected

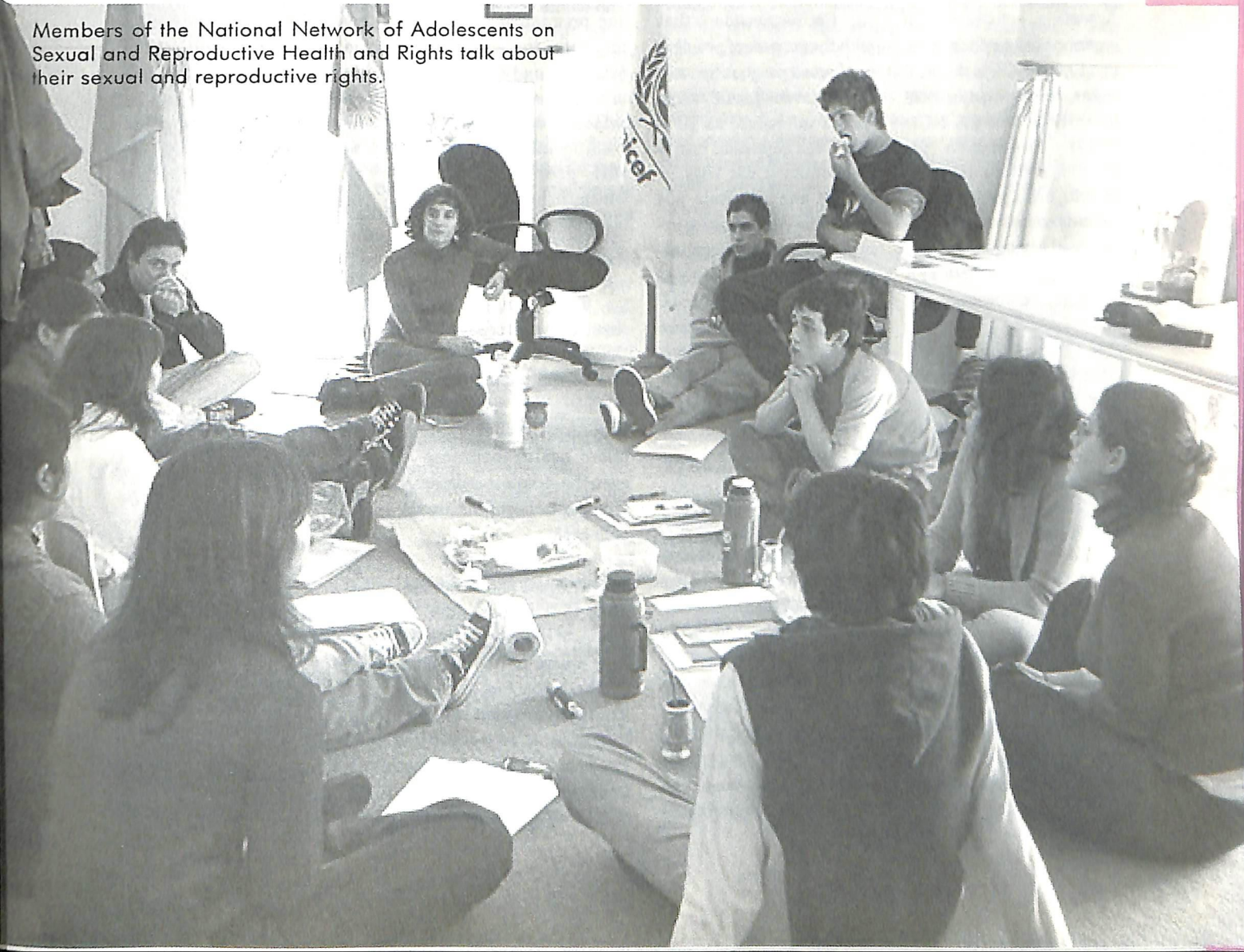
women for every 9 infected men). The transmission from an infected mother to her son constitutes the 6.7 percent of all infected patients, a high value compared with other countries in the region. The women with HIV/AIDS are of much younger ages than their male counterparts: the 65.6 percent of infected women are younger than 30 years old. This illustrates the global trend of HIV/AIDS becoming increasingly young, poor and feminised,

admitted on a recent interview Dr. Graciela Hamilton, in charge of the Ministry of Health's HIV/AIDS programme.

Abortion

Abortion is illegal in Argentina, but the estimate is that every year, at least 500,000 Argentine women submit to an abortion. Abortion cuts across classes, but the women in the lower income brackets are conceivably more vulnerable be-

Members of the National Network of Adolescents on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights talk about their sexual and reproductive rights.



cause of their lack of money and access to the private, hygienic abortion clinics.

During last years, the rise of abortion on young adolescents is alarming. And it is also shocking the fact that 35.3 percent of maternal mortality on adolescents is due to complications with abortions.

National Network of Adolescents

The National Network of Adolescents on Sexual and Reproductive Health of Argentina, a federation of organisations working on reproductive health and rights, was created in 1999 on initiative of the NGO FEIM (Foundation for Women Studies and Research), and a group of adolescents trained as peer educators in sexuality, and the prevention of STDs and teenage pregnancies.

"The idea of the network was to develop a joint work and to promote the activities of young people in the defence of their sexual and reproductive rights through information and diffusion campaigns, our website <<http://www.rednacadol.org.ar>>, and training workshops," says Cecilia Correa, a 30-year-old psychologist and the coordinator of the network.

This year, the network will have its third national meeting, when all the members will meet to craft an ac-

tion plan for the next years, to admit new members and participate in follow-up or deepening training.

"The activities on a network have a bigger impact at the national level than the work of individual members," notes Cecilia. "It is important to work as a whole and among the youth for the basic sexuality education of children and adolescents and to foster respect for sexuality and reproductive rights."

Cecilia considers that with the purpose of avoiding unplanned pregnancies and to prevent the sexual transmitted infections, as HIV/AIDS, sex education has to be conducted not only in schools and hospitals but also in the communities, especially the poor communities, for the effective prevention of teenage pregnancy and STDs. "The people must be informed of the different contraceptive methods available, and must have access to these without having to pay," she added.

While such access to reproductive health information is provided for in the recently approved Law of Reproductive Health and Responsible Procreation in the National Territory, some difficulty is still encountered in obtaining free contraception from public hospitals. "It's very important that young people can mobilise themselves and take concrete ac-

tions in favour of their sexual and reproductive rights, even if we can't count on the support of the State or the Church," Cecilia said.

Law of Reproductive Health

The Law of Reproductive Health and Responsible Procreation in the National Territory, approved by the National Parliament last October, seeks to prevent and eliminate the factors that lead to child mortality, including the alarming frequency of unplanned teenage pregnancies. The law mandates the access to information and services vital to reproductive health and responsible procreation, including information that will prevent abortions which, in recent years has become an important cause of mortality among women.

The economy in Argentina has so worsened since December 2001 that 50 percent of the population now live below the poverty line. As a result, majority cannot afford health insurance or even the simplest contraception. Public hospitals are the only option.

The new legislation implies that those under 18 years old will now also have such access to public hospitals to receive free and confidential information and services on sexual and reproductive health, without need to be accompanied by an adult.

Argentina is a federal country, which means that every province has free rein in observing the new law, making the communication and coordination between the local offices of the health ministry and the hospitals crucial to effective implementation. In the city of Buenos Aires, the local parliament approved a similar ordinance on reproductive health three years ago, but the difficulties that women face to access information and contraceptive methods from public hospitals remain. A reproductive health law at the national level is therefore a big step forward in respecting the sexual and reproductive rights of young women, especially the young women from poor families who are rendered more vulnerable by their lack of access to information and contraception from other sources. The new law will only be as good as the agencies and people that will put this into action. ♀

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