

I

The Needs of Young People in Family Planning

A Problem in Latin America

by Arnaldo Gomensoro

*Director of Information and Education
The Uruguayan Family Planning Association,
Montevideo, Uruguay*

An abridged version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Regional Council of IPPF's Western Hemisphere Region, Mexico, May 14, 1983.

The opinions expressed in this publication are of the authors and do not represent those of the International Planned Parenthood Federation.

1. Background

Six years ago, this Regional Council met in Cali, Colombia, under the same conditions as today to develop this same theme.

At that time, we characterized what we called “the problem-situation” as follows:

- The new generations are beginning their sex life much sooner than those who have preceded them.
- The unavoidable consequence of this early activity is juvenile pregnancy, which is increasing at an ever more alarming rate.
- Youthful pregnancies lead to situations of conflict and to problems almost impossible to solve.
- There is no lack of documentation on the nature of these conflicts and these problems. Information available to everyone constitutes sufficient and eloquent testimony: of irreversible damage in medical, psychological, social, economic, cultural and other terms.

Today, six years later, we have almost nothing to add to that, except to say that the problem becomes sharper day by day.

Today, we don't think there is any point in calling for more data or more statistics. We have so much data that perhaps we are already saturated with figures, with the result that each day we pay less attention to them. What might be more interesting is to ask: What has been done, or what are we doing, in the way of reaching solutions?

Well, the answer to that is sufficiently discouraging. Apart from a few programs that are well intentioned but of limited outreach because they are mere “pilot projects” of an experimental character (which we also have carried out – and are continuing to carry out), nothing or almost nothing has come to our attention indicating that anything is being done that promises effective solutions.

We don't want to insist on this point. What seems to us more important is to take advantage of this opportunity for reformu-

lating the problem in more realistic terms. We might begin by considering *what are the obstacles that impede programs and make it more difficult for them to achieve their objectives?*

2. The Heart of the Problem

The heart of the problem is understood when we understand that a pregnancy is something quite different for an adolescent than it is for a mature woman. That is to say, there is something quite different about the fifth child for a woman who already has four and the first child for a girl of 14, 15 or 16.

Let us examine what happens in each of the two cases.

What happens to the mature woman or to a mother who already has children when she becomes pregnant again?

- Her problems increase only quantitatively. From a qualitative point of view, her situation is almost unchanged. Basically, her problem is limited to the fact that now there will be one more to share whatever difficulties there are.

How can an unwanted pregnancy be produced in a mature woman or in the woman who already has children?

The answer to that is simple. It is because she is without:

- Appropriate information.
- Medical attention.
- Access to contraceptives.

- How is this woman's problem solved?

Again, very simply, as Dr. Miguel Trias, the Executive Director of Profamilia in Colombia, has repeated to the point of fatigue. It is by making services accessible to this woman. That is to say, through information, and by placing contraceptives "within walking distance of the user".

What happens, in contrast, with the adolescent who gets pregnant?

- In the young girl, the pregnancy initiates an interminable series of damages, problems and conflicts at all levels: somatic, psychic and social.
- The three ways of escaping the trap – by abortion, forced marriage or the state of “single mother” – are all equally unsettling.
- The closing of possibilities for further study, training or work, for participation in family life, for social adaptation or economic stability – all this quite literally turns the adolescent mother into a “handicapped” person and thus someone who engenders a child condemned decisively to suffer its own organic, psychic and social disadvantages.
- This tangle of problems cannot be explained by a lack of access to contraception, nor is it solved by putting contraceptives within reach of the adolescent.
- The explication of the problem, and what makes it almost impossible to solve, is rooted in the fact that the use of contraception is *unacceptable* to adolescents whether it happens to be available or not.
- It is this *lack of acceptability* which acts as a truly impassable psycho-cultural barrier against which all programs against early pregnancy have shattered.
- Consequently, we must be ready to define this *lack of acceptability* as the great enemy and to decide to do battle with it and to conquer it if we want to be not only efficacious but also efficient and effective, as Diaz Bordenave advised us in the Lima Seminar held in October, 1981.

3. Lack of Acceptability as the Major Issue

Unacceptability is part of an ideology, that is, it is seated in a rigid *system of ideas* which reflect deep-rooted socio-cultural standards of ethico-religious origin.

This system of ideas is transformed into an urgent problem as it comes to clash with the sex life, exercised ever more widely by the very young.

The clash occurs like this:

- *The same socio-cultural environment that maintains in education the principle that the use of contraceptives on the part of adolescents is not acceptable promotes through all media sexual precociousness in the young.*

The counter-case is offered by countries with a liberal ideology in sexual matters (Sweden, for example) and permissive family environments. In these countries “coherence” replaces the clash, and this coherence puts an end to the problem.

In contrast, the problem becomes more acute in countries that are hypocritically repressive (the countries of Latin America, for example). In such countries, the old Puritan morality coexists in a way that is manifestly pathogenic with the new, almost libertine exaltation of the eroticism of consumption.

4. What Practical Work Is Called For?

Whatever it is, it is not, to be sure, a task that is merely informational, merely medical, merely distributional.

The practical task, whether or not we want to recognize it or inscribe it among the current priorities, is one that is basically educational. Or better said, re-educational.

Re-educational not only for the adolescents themselves, but above all for adults, for those same adults who on the one hand repress adolescent sexuality and on the other exacerbate it.

The primary assignment will then be that of re-educationally promoting an “ideological change” and will thus have to be directed to those who define and sustain the prevailing ideology – to governments, politicians, opinion leaders, religious leaders, and community leaders of social and cultural weight.

Or to put it another way: The very young will not make use of

contraceptives *until their social and cultural environments validate that use.*

The policy to be followed will have to deal with the transition from the recognition of the fact of precocious sex lives to the acceptance of that fact and from there to the social validation of that fact.

Only when the undeniable and unquestionable fact of precocious sex lives is recognized, accepted and socially validated, will contraceptive programs for adolescents become viable.

To sum up:

1. The task to be performed is fundamentally a work of re-education.
2. Re-education for the young, on whom the contradictions of the system have been projected.
3. Re-education for adults, who sustain these contradictions, who promote and exacerbate them.

The third point (re-education of adults) is much more important than point two (re-education of adolescents), and carrying out the point three makes it possible to carry out point two.

5. Prohibition or Permissiveness?

For those who have installed themselves in the sterile chamber of prohibition (or, in more interactive terms, of “dissuasion” or “discouraging”), everything presented to this point will turn out to be indigestible, since they consider it to be inspired by a philosophy that is unacceptably “permissive”.

And as a result, they will scarcely be able to hold back the elemental impulse of asking us aggressively: “In the final instance, what do you hope to get out of what you are suggesting? Is this what you want — to approve and promote premarital relations among the young? Do you want us parents and educators to permit our children to have an early sex life instead of forbidding it?”

In other words, the first reaction of conservative souls (and on this

subject, the immense majority of people are conservative) is one of indignant alarm over a point of view which, if it were carried out, would give the green light to young people to exercise their sexuality, precisely where a red light has traditionally been the rule. On our side, we are convinced that we are dealing here with a reaction that is not only not very intelligent but is often somewhat malicious. Or to put it another way, we are concerned with a reaction that operates by refuting or claiming to refute *not our genuine point of view but rather an absurd caricature of it.*

We can and must confront these accusations directly as the only way of getting rid of facile misunderstandings. And for this, we are going to direct ourselves to those who really matter, to those of our opponents who are well intentioned (and, indeed, they exist also), to those who are honestly troubled at hearing a formulation of the problem as “realistic” as what we are here elaborating. To these, what we say is: *No, it is not true that with our focus we are promoting a frivolous and promiscuous exercise of sex on the part of young people.*

The truth is quite the reverse. Those who are promoting that – and doing so with great success – are not we but rather the various mass communications media and the amusement technologies that have commercialized love, eroticism and sex with the almost unconditional complicity of those same persons who are alarmed by our realism.

The motivation that determines our approach to this subject is precisely the reverse of what is attributed to us: What we seek is to end a policy which, like the ostrich, has its head in the sand and to end a situation in which the family and the environment give to young people the sole alternative *of being Puritans or libertines.*

We contend that young people are here confronted with a false dilemma and that we should be able to provide other options based on a critical awareness of the true place that sex and eroticism ought to occupy in the lives of people, other options based on an authentic responsibility and on a genuine personal and social commitment on the part of young people to themselves and to others.

A profound Uruguayan thinker, Dr. Carlos Vaz Ferreira, once said that there probably does not exist another fallacy more widespread

than that of the so-called "construction of false oppositions", and, he added, there is probably no worse way of seeking to resolve a problem than to persist in doing so on the basis of a false formulation of it.

Therefore, we can affirm with complete assurance that the alternative between prohibition and permissiveness is a false alternative. And to declare as an unquestionable premise that the educational task is exhausted between one or the other of these two possibilities is to fall into a formulation that grossly falsifies the entire problem.

Consequently, the only truly intelligent and truly useful course is to reject this opposition as a false construction and to seek a correct reformulation of the issue.

In fact, nothing is or could be more stupid from an educational point of view than to try to exert an authoritarian supervision over the love lives of the young. *Nothing is more stupid than to persist in prohibiting what everyone knows, and knows very well, cannot be prevented from happening.*

And especially when all the reality that surrounds us, and surrounds the young, *that reality which the adults have created and for which they are primarily responsible*, impels the young inexorably to the early exercise of that same sexuality that we are trying to prohibit.

Those of us who are trying to be more honest and more faithful would transform those questions which have sought to refute us by insisting on a more correct and less simplistic formulation of the problem.

6. The Questions That Really Matter

For example: Do parents and educators really believe that it is possible to prohibit the present life style of youth? Do they think that sensual clothing styles can be proscribed? Or erotic music? Or the free availability of time and opportunities for young couples to be together and to cultivate an amorous intimacy? Do they think it is possible to eliminate the current liberalism in the way studies are organized, or work, or sports, walks, dances, friendship, engagements? Do they think it is proper to prevent the spread of

erotic, even pornographic stimuli that are carried over the mass communications media? Do they think it is proper to stop young people from kissing and caressing each other so sensually as they have learned to do from the movies and television?

In the name of what superior values and by what authority can we demand of young people that they sail against the current when their own elders invented the current and set it in motion?

But beyond that, can true edification be found in the few cases who do sail against the current? Are such cases convincing? Do they affect us by their heroism or do they disturb us by their hypocrisy? Those who make so much of their chastity — are they saints or Pharisees? Do their demands arise out of the healthy fortress of their souls or out of a sick weakness?

The effort to answer these questions can turn out to be more instructive and much more interesting than to play ducks and drakes with the false opposition of prohibitive attitudes versus permissive attitudes.

7. Teachers Instead of Judges

We as educators, confronted with the growing intimacy of juvenile love-making and the early initiation of the young in sexual practices, refuse to adopt the attitude and posture of judges who authorize or prohibit these things.

The truth is that the broad, abstract principles inspired by an antique, repressive morality serve only to confuse us.

An early sexual relationship can and ought to be judged as negative and immoral if it implies the egotistical “using” of one person by another, if it presents manipulative or exploitative behavior, so common when sexuality is disassociated from our culture.

An early sexual relationship can and should be judged as positive, as acceptable and morally valuable if it constitutes the consummation of a deep, inter-personal communion which has brought about a loving fullness between two young people.

Here, as in so many other respects, what definitively matters is not

the “fact” but the “meaning” that accompanies it. And this meaning is unique and unrepeatable for each youth, each girl, each couple, each occasion.

To wish to prescribe generic norms applicable to everyone and to all occasions is to continue to be divorced from real life and to be condemned to contemplate — with gestures made futile by resentment at our impotence and obsolescence — how this same life passes us by and continues on its way while ignoring us.

Even more serious from an educational perspective is to want to strip young people — in opposition to pedagogy and the natural flow of reality — of their rights and their obligations, so recently discovered and so recently assumed, to take personal and responsible charge of their own existential options in everything that will define their own future.

8. The Supposed Basis for Lack of Acceptance

The heretical character of all this discussion centers on the hypothesis that we should be capable of accepting the possibility that young people will have sexual relations instead of closing ourselves off to this in stern opposition. Our experience has shown us that this acceptance is a difficult bone to swallow for parents and elders. It is good then for us to ask ourselves what reasons justify our elders in refusing to accept the possibility of a fact that they cannot prevent and which, in spite of everything, they are going to have to learn to live with? In simply disapproving and censuring the sexual behavior of the young, aren't they inscribing on the same repressive line a reinforcement of contradictions, prejudices and traditional taboos instead of reaching out to surmount them through education?

And so we have set out to describe the reasons that make youthful sexuality more inadvisable than adult sexuality or sexuality *per se*. And we have discovered that there seem to be no real reasons but instead only typical non-reasons, which is to say — typical prejudices and irrational taboos.

Let us give them a rapid survey. First of all, the exercise of youthful sexuality responds to two imperious necessities that we all clearly recognize and which no one today would deny:

- *A biological (or natural) necessity.* It has been shown that the youthful years are those characterized by the highest sexual capacity, a capacity that decreases progressively from the peak achieved at around 16 to 22 years of age.
- *A cultural (or artificial) necessity,* which is even more decisive than the biological necessity. Today we understand very well the point to which the market economy creates and nourishes artificial needs – and in the most diverse categories – turning them into priorities which can displace even basic natural needs (such as for food, shelter and protection).

Indeed, if there exists one artificial necessity which the consumer society has incorporated irresistibly into the dynamic of the juvenile life style – to an extreme of becoming compulsively dominant – it is that of enjoying, intensely and precociously, the delights of sensuality, eroticism and love. To confirm this, we have only to throw a glance at the descriptions and promises that an all-powerful technology presents to youth, a technology of publicity, propaganda, style, music, dance, recreation and so on.

Faced with this reality, openly contradicting it, the adults go on “advising against” and “condemning” the early exercise of sexuality.

None can deny that the sexual experience is a profoundly pleasurable experience. What then could be the troublesome “reasons” for discouraging it and condemning it through education while it is simultaneously encouraged and exalted in social and cultural life?

A critical analysis reveals to us three supposed reasons:

- The early exercise of sexuality would be inadvisable because of the irresponsible nature of its protagonists, this in turn due to their limited age.
- Young people run the risk of precipitating themselves through the exercise of sexuality into a promiscuous and libertine life style.

- Youthful sex runs the special risk of ending in an unwanted pregnancy, one certainly for which the participants are poorly prepared.

Let us attempt a critical evaluation of each of these three objections.

The Irresponsibility of Youth

On this subject, it might be wise to begin by recognizing that irresponsibility in sexual matters is not an attribute exclusive to the young but that it transects all ages.

Furthermore, we should ask ourselves:

Would young people go on being irresponsible if adults accepted and approved the possibility of their early entrance into sexuality and provided them, in consequence, with the appropriate information and educational guidance?

Would they go on being irresponsible if they didn't have to hide their sexual intimacy, acting clandestinely and consequently overwhelmed by an anxiety aroused by insidious guilt feelings or by the aggressive hostility of having to face their elders and their contentious attitudes?

The Risk of Falling into Promiscuity or Licentiousness

On this subject we should ask ourselves:

Do promiscuity and licentiousness derive in fact from the early exercise of sexuality?

Experience and knowledge contradict this presumption head on. Promiscuity and licentiousness correlate with other social and cultural variables which are much more determinative than the age of the protagonists. There is not one trace of evidence that promiscuous and licentious persons are such because they entered into their sexual lives either early or late.

What indeed is generally determinative is rather the incorporation of the individual, whether young or not so young, into human groups where frivolous values prevail, groups subject to apathy,

skepticism and cynicism. Where the established attitudes are what certain thinkers have defined as the syndrome of “existential emptiness” or “existential nihilism”.

In that sense, it can be affirmed that promiscuity as well as licentiousness are to be inscribed under the heading of “escapism” which a tragically contradictory society proposes to its weaker and more vulnerable members. They are very similar and generally closely associated with other escapisms such as alcohol, drugs, play, the vertigo of high speed, the seductions of violence, and so on.

The Risk of an Unwanted Pregnancy

This, without any doubt, constitutes an important contraindication against precocious sexual relations.

It is quite clear that young people, for the very reason of their age, find themselves in poor condition to take on the problems that come with an unwanted pregnancy.

But here an important distinction arises: What is it that turns out to be questionable? Is it youthful sexuality or the unwanted pregnancy?

The objective and unquestionable contraindications refer to the unwanted pregnancy, that is to say, to the undesired consequence of sexual relations, and not specifically to the sexual relations in themselves.

Today, given the fact that we are able to make available to young people the resources necessary to prevent this unwanted pregnancy, then if we want to go on censuring the early sexuality of the young, it will have to be for what it signifies in itself and not for its possible unwanted consequences. At the same time, we recall that every adult sexual relationship runs the same risk of ending in an unwanted pregnancy. Which constitutes a good reason for taking precautions, but is not a good reason for abandoning sex life.

However, the resistance to providing young people with contraceptive information and services continues to be widespread and obstinate.

As far as we are concerned, the refusal of adults to protect young

people through contraceptive information and advice should be interpreted for what it is:

- First, as a resource for discouraging the exercise of youthful sexuality by means of the ever-present threat of an unwanted pregnancy.
- Second, as a punishment for the sin which young people commit when they infringe on moral and religious principles in which they themselves do not believe but which their elders claim to believe.

From our point of view, the wish to control youthful conduct by means of this “carrot and stick” philosophy seems more suitable for taming animals than for providing education.

We think it is time to call things by their real names. We should not go on committing educational outrages in the name of education.

9. The Real Basis for Acceptance

After having demonstrated the weakness of the reasons behind the refusal to accept precocious sexual relations, we have to contribute a real basis for accepting the possibility. In fact, a critical and dispassionate analysis of what is actually going on among young people provides eloquent evidence of the fact that the early exercise of sexuality can be taken in an undeniably positive sense. What is certain is that adults are going to have no other remedy than to recognize, whatever it costs them, that when boys have an affair that involves also a sexual component, they tend to have experiences that are much fuller and more enriching than those had by the classical youth of former times with their discovery of sex in the sordid environment of the house of prostitution (whither they went with the blessing of – and sometimes even on the insistence of – their parents). Today, prostitutes are complaining that they have lost their youthful clientele, who, much better integrated than their counterparts of the preceding generation, are initiating their sex life with their sweethearts.

It is as if we had to ask ourselves if all this really constitutes legitimate grounds for worry and disquiet, or, on the contrary, if

satisfaction and pleasure cannot be drawn from the fact that our youth have risen above the classical "disassociation" (the cultural basis of our repudiated "machismo") that left them hanging between a pure and sexless love for wives and sweethearts and their periodic and degrading immersion in sex with prostitutes. And from the complementary fact that our young girls have in turn liberated themselves from the double destiny that confronted them with the dilemma of choosing between life as the traditionally frigid wife and mother or as the traditional object of pleasure whereby men could achieve their satisfaction.

10. A Change of Attitudes or of Behavior Is Only Possible Through a Change in Ideology

The challenge is not easy to face. The re-education of adults that we are suggesting involves nothing less than questioning and conquering the obsolete but deep-rooted ideology that sustains a double sexual morality, one for men, another for women. Only through this questioning and conquest is it possible to understand that the problem of the pregnancy of the young woman is not based on the fact that she is young but rather on the fact that she is a woman.

That is to say, the problem of early pregnancy flows into the problem of the status of the woman in a *macho* society, in her state of being alienated and discriminated against, "used" by the man as much when he is young as when he is an adult.

And consequently the solution to the problem will consist in the eradication of the causes that have brought it about: *It will consist in the liberation of the woman from sexual servitude as the decisive moment in the process of her personal liberation.*

11. The Attitude of Parents Is Always Decisive

Governments, opinion leaders and community leaders all question the fact and the right of girls to engage in sexual activities. Not of boys.

It is not difficult to ascertain that they do this not as governments nor as leaders but rather as the parents of female children.

The right to sexual precocity, which they permit and promote for their children who are boys, they refuse and deny to their children who are girls (for the boys a medal, for the girls a battle).

In the context of this repressively discriminatory ideology, parents consider adolescent pregnancy to be the deserved punishment for having flouted the ethico-social norms of the system.

And as a result, they are not disposed to inform, educate nor help their daughters toward an intelligent use of contraceptives. Even less are they disposed to allow others to do this for them. For they suppose that to permit that is to admit the right of girls to sexual activity – equivalent to facilitating and promoting it.

This is the result:

- *As long as this right is not exercised or permitted, contraceptive information, education and services for adolescents are going to continue to be attacked and denounced as immoral and subversive.*

These persistent denunciations and attacks reduce the greater number of programs for young people to mere “pilot efforts” of little or no social importance, condemned to a semi-clandestine existence, diluting or dissimulating their true objectives and compromising with the prevailing prejudices.

The programs will also see themselves as continually exposed to the indignant reaction of the conservative media.

We have at hand an example which can serve as a typical illustration. During the months of February and March of this year, as the Argentine Association for Family Protection announced in its publication, *Este mes* (This Month), they carried out 27 significant activities in family planning and sex education. All of them were excellently received, except for one. Let us read the account that was published in the above-mentioned journal:

- We continued broadcasting the radio program, *Quienes Somos* (Who We Are) over Radio El Pueblo on Wednesdays at 4 p.m. During those two months, one small incident occurred. One of the programs in which the problem of adolescent pregnancy was discussed – as well as contraception for adolescents – was censored and prevented from going on the air.

We should now be capable of interpreting this incident (not so little but very typical inasmuch as it has been repeated identically in all Latin American countries) in all its true significance:

- We are up against a system that holds power through repression, and not only does it repress but it serves notice that it will not permit its ideology to be questioned.

Or, stated more concretely:

- *As long as the ideology of those who retain the power of prohibiting or permitting is opposed to contraceptive information, education and services for adolescents, programs that seek to provide these things are necessarily condemned to failure.*

12. Are Ideological Changes Possible?

History says yes, that they are possible, but that the process of change is slow and by no means easy.

One thing seems clear: Ideological change occurs much more readily when the prevailing ideologies have become obsolete and are straggling behind the reality. This is precisely the case of the anti-sexual ideology that underlies the stubborn opposition to youthful contraception.

Because, as hard as it is to admit, sexual precocity is a fact that is present, progressive and irreversible. We simply have to accustom ourselves to live with it.

And surely and necessarily, living with the fact of early sexuality is going to convince us, and a little more with every day that passes, that what is highly questionable is not early sexuality in itself but its possible destructive consequences:

- unwanted adolescent pregnancy, and
- the conversion of young love into the frivolity and alienation that go with the commercial exploitation of consumer eroticism.

But something else happens that becomes every day more evident:

- *Only those who admit, accept and validate the possibility of an early exercise of sexuality will have placed themselves in condition to be able to channel it through education so that its destructive and lamentable consequences can be avoided.*

It is very likely that this last assertion, with all that it signifies in a practical sense, will strike our ears as almost scandalous. If that is the case, we will have to recognize that paradoxically we ourselves have not effectively overcome the repressive and discriminating ideology alluded to above.

This very real possibility that even among the ranks of the family planners and of sex educators the remnants of an obsolete ideology persist merits careful attention when the time comes to design concrete policy.

In fact, if it is true, as we have maintained, that all effective action in the field of contraception for the young has to be preceded by an ideological change respecting the evaluation and validation of early sexual activity, it becomes evident that the first condition to be fulfilled will be that of achieving a conviction concerning the new ideology on the part of those who will be called on to promote it. Only those who are convinced will be capable of convincing others.

The first task will thus be self-criticism and reaching toward an internal maturity, and the ideological preparation of our own people so that they will be in condition to promote and advance this new ideology.

13. Summary and Conclusions

The use of contraceptives, thus eliminating the procreative consequences of sexual activity, validates the "recreational" use of sex.

On this subject, the basic problem is constituted by the lack of socio-cultural acceptance of the use of contraceptives by girls.

This lack of acceptability is the practical expression of a repressive ideology that consecrates sexual discrimination against the woman.

Latin American society, which has always given validation to the “recreational” exercise of sex on the part of young men, whatever their age, and which has recently granted this same validation to the adult woman, refuses roundly to grant it to the young woman.

This double standard gives evidence that discrimination against women continues in force in spite of all the rhetoric about equality of rights and opportunities.

As long as changes do not occur in this ideology, mass programs of contraception for adolescents cannot be implemented.

All the foregoing defines with total clarity what has to be the task of IPPF in this field:

- *That of making possible and actively promoting this decisive ideological change.*

In this context, the priority of programs for the prevention of early pregnancy appears as one part of another, more embracing priority:

- *That of campaigning, on all fronts, for an effective liberation of the woman, questioning her traditional roles and achieving for her the same personal status and personal dignity that define her male companion in their sexual and procreative commitments.*