Guatemalan Girls Standing Up and Speaking Out for Their Bodies, Their Rights

A special report from the field by Mary Beth Hastings, CHANGE Vice President

International Day of the Girl both sheds light on successes made in empowering girls and underscores how much more must be done to secure gender equality. It showcases how girls everywhere are speaking up and taking action. From access to education, to economic opportunity, to the right to control their own bodies, girls in nations large and small are standing up for their human rights.

On a recent trip to Guatemala, I saw firsthand the power of girls demanding ownership of their sexual and reproductive health and rights. I saw girls challenging a pervasive culture of sexual violence that should never be allowed. I saw girls refusing to accept the status quo of a system that too long betrayed them.

The official statistics are bad enough. For example, 10,000 should not be the number of births among 10 to 14 year old girls in Guatemala since 2009. Twenty-one should not be the number of 10 year olds there who gave birth in 2011 alone. Yet, the actual numbers are most likely much higher. Young teens and pre-teens giving birth are often hidden by their families, and give birth at home.

The stories are worse: Paula, who had been sexually abused by her great uncle for two years; Cristina, just 14 and the youngest of three daughters, whose father had raped her repeatedly. Up to 70% of pregnancies among young adolescents in Guatemala are a result of sexual abuse within the home, and these pregnancies are often what finally bring the abuse into the criminal justice system, then into the public eye – Guatemalans are now talking about topics that were until recently taboo.

Yet, despite newspaper articles and new government commitments pledging to keep girls safe, the voices of young people were largely absent from the public debate.

Fortunately, you cannot shut youth voices out for long, especially when their lives and futures are at stake. In late September, the Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE) and more than 20 Guatemalan civil society groups welcomed more than 200 youth from all over the country – some as young as 12 – as participants in that
country’s first youth summit on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Girls were speaking out for their rights – their bodies – with their male counterparts standing right beside them, joining in a call to action.

Not only was this the first youth summit on SRHR, it was the first time Guatemalan decision makers were being held accountable by youth for government commitments to family planning access, youth-friendly health services, and sex education. Representatives from the Guatemalan Congress and ministries of health, education, and social development sat at a table with youth representatives in the closing session, and listened to their testimonies.

As in most first-time encounters between the powerful and empowered, there were moments of tension. Lectures from government officials advising the youth to remain abstinent and read the Bible were met with a buzz from the crowd – this was a group looking for a rational discussion, not a sermon. In the end, government officials held up posters for a campaign against sexual violence and signed a declaration crafted by the youth, which asks for sex education, access to family planning, and youth-friendly services.

No one in the room assumed her job was finished, or that from now on, youth will consistently be consulted in the design, implementation, and evaluation of sexual and reproductive health programs in Guatemala. No one is taking for granted that these programs will find robust funding, or that comprehensive sex education will blossom throughout the country. The summit was a moment in time – building on countless efforts by hundreds of youth SRHR advocates in Guatemala – yet it was also a turning point.

Donor governments and multilaterals that threw their support behind the summit – like UNFPA, UN Women and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) – should embrace the importance of this turning point. Youth participation in the definition and implementation of SRHR strategies, policies, and programs is essential and must be sustained. USAID rolled out a youth policy last year calling for just such youth engagement. Guatemala would be an excellent place to showcase our commitment to this policy and to girls globally.