

Adolescent pregnancy in Latin America: Is it wanted?

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INTRODUCTION

Several studies have focused on the analysis of the implications that pregnancy has during adolescence, but few have looked into the issue of it being wanted or not. Some of the ones that have tackled this topic show that there is a greater social risk for the mother-child couple when the pregnancy was unwanted,^{1, 2} and this is associated to limited care of the pregnant woman's health, perinatal complications, child abuse and some problems regarding the children's development.³

The general objective of this work is to analyze the factors associated to unwanted pregnancies in adolescent women.

METHODOLOGY:

Based upon the information available for the last five years from the *Demographic and Health Surveys* (DHS) in Bolivia (2003)⁴, Colombia (2005)⁵, Haiti (2005/2006)⁶ and Honduras (2005)⁷ and the National Survey of Reproductive Health (2003)⁸ in Mexico, women between 15 and 19 years of age with at least one child born alive were selected. Focusing the statistical analysis on the last pregnancyⁱⁱⁱ, a linear bivariate and multivariate logistic regression analysis was carried out to observe the association between the unwanted pregnancy and the selected demographic and socioeconomic characteristics (socioeconomic level, site of residence, level of schooling, age at the moment of the first child's birth, marital status and number of children).

For the creation of the dependent variable the following question was taken into account: At the time you became pregnant with (NAME), did you want to become pregnant then, did you want to wait until later or did you not want to have any (more) children at all? The numbers corresponding to the two latter answer categories were grouped for the construction of unwanted pregnancy.

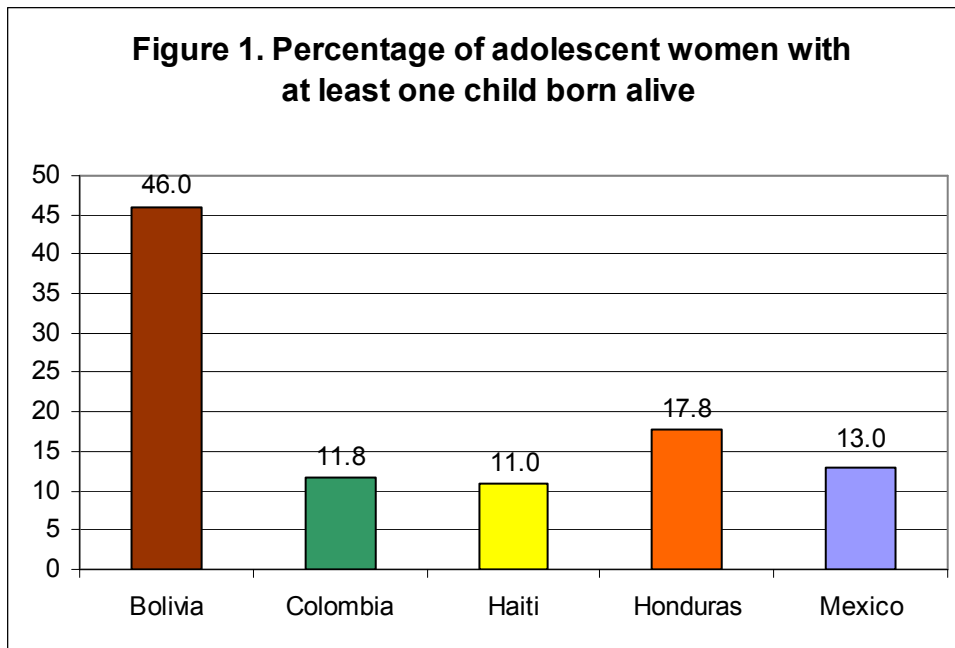
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ⁱⁱⁱ In the case of Mexico, questions were asked about the first pregnancy.

RESULTS:

In some countries in Latin America, there is an important rate of women that have at least one child born alive during adolescence. Taking into account women between 15 and 19 years of age, we found that the rate of adolescent mothers ranges from 46.0% in Bolivia to 11.0% in Haiti (Figure 1).



Some of the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics from these women's profiles are very similar between countries, for example, most women belong to a low socioeconomic status, they have a low level of education (except Colombia and Mexico), they are primiparous, they are (or have been) in common-law marriages, and they have a similar percentage distribution of age at the birth of their first child. Haiti displays a different profile since three out of every five adolescents live in rural areas and it is the country that has the smallest number of adolescents that have children before they are 15 years of age (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of women between 15 and 19 years of age with at least one child born alive in some Latin-American countries

Characteristics	Bolivia, 2003	Colombia, 2005	Haiti, 2005/06	Honduras, 2005	Mexico, 2003
Socioeconomic status					
Low	53.2	63.1	48.2	53.7	56.3
Middle	21.0	19.3	19.6	24.8	37.6
High	25.8	17.6	32.2	21.6	6.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Place of residence					
Rural	45.9	30.7	59.8	67.7	71.4
Urban	54.1	69.3	40.2	32.3	28.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Level of education					
Less than high school	60.6	34.1	76.4	80.3	26.3
High school and beyond	39.4	65.9	23.6	19.7	73.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Mother's age at first birth					
14 years old or less	9.8	11.4	5.6	9.7	17.7
15-17	67.3	69.3	65.1	70.3	71.6
18-19	22.9	19.3	29.2	20.0	10.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Marital status					
Married, divorced, separate, widowed	68.8	72.0	90.7	88.9	85.9
Single	31.2	28.0	9.3	11.1	14.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number of children ever born					
One	82.2	81.0	85.0	84.4	77.9
Two or more	17.8	19.0	15.0	15.6	22.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

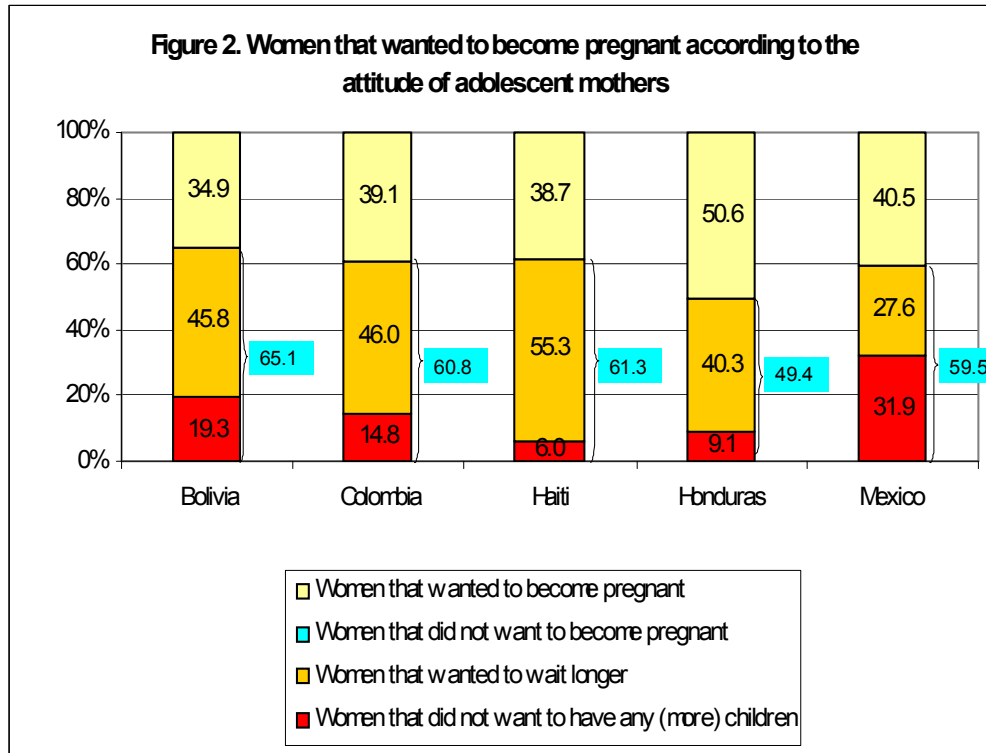
Source: For Bolivia, Colombia, Haiti and Honduras: Demographic Health Surveys (DHS).

For Mexico: National Survey of Reproductive Health (ENSAR2003).

Focusing on the issue of wanted or unwanted pregnancies, it is found that 65.1% of Bolivian women, 60.8% of Colombian women, 61.3% of Haitian women and 49.4% of Honduran women stated not having wanted their last pregnancy at the moment it occurred. In the case of Mexico, 59.5% stated not having wanted their first pregnancy at the moment it occurred.^{iv}. According to the way in which the question was asked, this lack of want can be disaggregated into wanting to get pregnant later on and not wanting any (more) children. It was found that not having wanted the last pregnancy at the moment it occurred was similar among women from Bolivia (45.8%), Colombia (46.0%) and Honduras (40.3%); in contrast, more women from Haiti (55.3%) expressed that they would have wanted to wait longer before getting pregnant. In the case of Mexico, the figure is 27.6%, while total lack of want in terms of the first pregnancy was expressed by 31.9% of Mexican women. This information contrasts with the other countries,

^{iv} Since the percentage of adolescents that had two or more children born alive was under 3% in Colombia, Haiti and Honduras and it was 8% in Bolivia, we considered the comparison with Mexico to be valid.

especially Bolivia where 19.3% of female adolescents did not want any (more) children. (Figure 2).



In order to pin down the factors that determine the lack of want to become pregnant, some of the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the adolescents with at least one child born alive were analyzed. Some of the major findings include the fact that the lack of want to become pregnant occurs mainly among women that are single, multiparous (except for Haiti), and with a high level of education (in Mexico it is similar along all levels of education). No clear trend with respect to the socioeconomic level and the place of residence was found by country (Table 2).

Table 2. Percentage of women between 15 and 19 years of age with at least one child born alive that did not want the pregnancy according to selected demographic and socioeconomic characteristics

Characteristics	Bolivia, 2003	Colombia, 2005	Haiti, 2005/06	Honduras, 2005	Mexico, 2003
Socioeconomic status					
Low	64.1%	59.1%	53.8%	52.0%	53.7%
Middle	60.9%	58.7%	72.9%	45.5%	67.0%
High	70.4%	69.5%	65.6%	47.7%	72.1%
Total	65.1%	60.9%	61.3%	49.4%	59.8%
Place of residence					
Rural	63.4%	54.4%	58.3%	49.5%	62.7%
Urban	66.4%	63.7%	65.8%	49.2%	52.7%
Total	65.1%	60.9%	61.3%	49.4%	59.8%
Level of education					
Less than high school	61.6%	54.6%	58.3%	46.7%	59.6%
High school and beyond	70.4%	64.1%	71.4%	60.6%	59.9%
Total	65.1%	60.9%	61.3%	49.4%	59.8%
Mother's age at first birth					
14 years old or less	71.4%	70.8%	75.0%	44.7%	80.7%
15-17	63.6%	62.2%	60.7%	52.0%	54.9%
18-19	66.7%	50.6%	60.2%	42.6%	58.3%
Total	65.1%	60.9%	61.3%	49.4%	59.8%
Marital status					
Married, divorced, separate, widowed	56.4%	55.3%	60.3%	47.0%	54.5%
Single	84.0%	75.1%	71.4%	68.9%	92.1%
Total	65.1%	60.9%	61.3%	49.4%	59.8%
Number of children ever born					
One	63.6%	58.4%	63.9%	45.7%	58.5%
Two or more	72.0%	71.4%	46.7%	69.3%	64.4%
Total	65.1%	60.9%	61.3%	49.4%	59.8%

Source: For Bolivia, Colombia, Haiti and Honduras: Demographic Health Surveys (DHS).

For Mexico: National Survey of Reproductive Health (ENSAR2003).

By means of the logistic regression analysis, it was found that the factors that account for not wanting the pregnancy differ between countries (Table 3):

- In Bolivia, not wanting the pregnancy is higher among single women and among those who have two or more children.
- In Colombia, not wanting the pregnancy is higher among adolescents who live in urban areas, among those with the highest levels of education, among those who have their first child before turning 15, among single women, and among those who have two or more children.
- In Haiti, not wanting the pregnancy is higher among women from the middle socioeconomic level.
- In Honduras, not wanting the pregnancy is higher among adolescents from the lower socioeconomic level, among those with the highest levels of education, among single women, and among those who have two or more children.
- In Mexico, not wanting the pregnancy is higher among single women.

Table 3. Odds ratio adjusted* for unwanted pregnancy among adolescent women in Latin America by key characteristics

Characteristics	Bolivia 2003		Colombia 2005		Haiti 2005/06		Honduras 2005		Mexico 2003	
	OR	p	OR	p	OR	p	OR	p	OR	p
Socioeconomic status										
Low	1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00	
Middle	0.88	0.659	0.77	0.130	2.07	0.044	0.67	0.049	1.07	0.782
High	1.12	0.705	1.15	0.450	1.34	0.439	0.55	0.019	1.48	0.347
Place of residence										
Rural	1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00	
Urban	1.08	0.763	1.36	0.037	0.98	0.950	1.21	0.339	1.08	0.705
Level of education										
Less than high school	1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00	
High school and beyond	1.41	0.117	1.55	0.002	1.71	0.092	2.53	0.000	1.15	0.479
Total										
Mother's age at first birth	1.05	0.591	0.84	0.001	0.92	0.488	0.96	0.569	0.87	0.059
Marital status										
Married, divorced, separate, widowed	1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00	
Single	4.59	0.000	2.64	0.000	1.55	0.334	2.97	0.000	4.02	0.001
Number of children ever born										
One	1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00		1.00	
Two or more	2.47	0.002	2.06	0.000	0.52	0.071	3.16	0.000	1.43	0.149

* Adjusted by all variables in table

OR = Odds ratio

Source: For Bolivia, Colombia, Haiti and Honduras: Demographic Health Surveys (DHS).

For Mexico: National Survey of Reproductive Health (ENSAR2003).

DISCUSSION

It was found that the most determining factor accounting for unwanted pregnancies among adolescents is the marital status.^v Another determining factor in the case of almost all the countries is the number of children ever born. It is noteworthy that only in the case of Colombia does unwanted pregnancy occur in early adolescence, according to Dixon-Mueller's definition⁹. Contrary to what was expected—previously shown to be determining in the case of adolescent pregnancy—the level of education, the socioeconomic status and the place of residence were not key factors for unwanted pregnancies in all the analyzed countries. There must be other factors, which were not analyzed in this paper, that also have an impact on the female adolescents' lack of want to become pregnant.

The question that arises is the following: If pregnancy is considered an issue of fate, as something natural in the case of women, and because one lacks another alternative in life, is pregnancy considered the only means of appraisal in terms of the social subject?

There is increasing consensus that it will be difficult to have any impact on adolescent behavior if the structures of social inequity that determine the occurrence, the meaning and the result of

^v Except in the case of Haiti where, in spite of a larger number of single women expressing their lack of want, this was not statistically significant when the adjusted logistic regression was carried out. It is necessary to conduct further research to understand the phenomenon as it expresses itself in this country.

such behavior are not transformed.¹⁰ The structural conditions imposed by poverty entail a lack of opportunities for girls and adolescents. Moreover, they are often exposed to self-devaluating life experiences that, along with the double (class and gender) subordination, seriously hinder the possibility of preventing unwanted pregnancies.¹¹

These results underline the need to improve adolescent women's knowledge about and access to contraceptive methods so that they are able to decide, freely and responsibly, when to become pregnant. It is mandatory to consider integral policies that enhance their life conditions and alternatives.

One of the limitations this study bears is the timing for asking women if their pregnancy was wanted or not. Some researchers discuss the fact that women's retrospective reports provide accurate and unbiased information.¹² One study examined the impact of time variations when questions about having wanted or not a pregnancy were asked and there was evidence of bias: If the question was asked after the birth, there was a higher rate of responses asserting having wanted the pregnancy than if it was asked during the pregnancy.¹³ Another study also demonstrated that a report of an intended pregnancy becomes more positive between the moment of conception and half-way through the pregnancy as well as 6 months after the birth.¹⁴ One of the reasons for bias is the pressure women feel they are under for a determined answer from a social perspective.⁹ In spite of these arguments, the findings from the present study demonstrate that a sizable number of adolescents did not want their pregnancy. Hence, it is very important to deepen our understanding of this topic both from a quantitative and from a qualitative point of view.

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