

THE SOCIAL COST OF EARLY UNION AND PREGNANCY IN GIRLS AND ADOLESCENTS

A challenge to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

VIOLENCIA EN EL NOVIAZGO

La violencia en el noviazgo es todo ataque intencional de tipo sexual, físico o psicológico, de un miembro de la pareja con el objetivo de controlar o dominar a la otra persona.

Puedes identificar la violencia cuando:

1. Te pide la "PRUEBA DE AMOR"
2. Te prohíbe hablar con amigos o familiares
3. Quiere controlar todo lo que haces
4. Toma tu teléfono a escondidas y revisa tus mensajes y redes sociales
5. Te obliga, con chantajes y manipulaciones, a tener relaciones sexuales
6. Critica constantemente tus convicciones
7. Te amenaza con abandonarte
8. Coquetea con otras personas frente a ti
9. Utiliza la lástima para justificar su actitud
10. Promete cambios que nunca llegarán.

¿Qué debo hacer?

¡Valórate! Recuerda que tu eres una persona valiosa y mereces algo mejor.

Busca ayuda con profesionales especializados en el tema y si el nivel de violencia aumenta acude a un abogado para demandar un acta en contra del agresor.

Alójate inmediatamente de esa relación ya que el nivel de violencia puede incrementar.

¿Cómo me afecta la violencia en el noviazgo?

Baja autoestima, depresión, aislamiento, violaciones recurrentes, bajo rendimiento escolar o laboral, agresiones físicas y emocionales y hasta el suicidio.

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Contributing to a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, and every young person realizes their full potential.



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The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) is grateful to every single woman who agreed to share their story to be included in this document. They opened their doors to us to approach their reality and communicate it through different means to have their voice, and the voice of many other women, heard.

We are grateful as well to the fourteen people who accepted to comment the stories and include their thoughts as a preamble to each of the testimonials.

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Photography: Lucy Tomasino

Girl and adolescent pregnancy implies a cost that burdens them and their society. This cost is usually overshadowed by a cultural scotoma, silenced by the customs and indifference associated to gender-based violence. This cost is assumed by the pregnant girls' families, or on the contrary, transferred to others by approving a marriage or a union of an underage girl to save family's honor, or to transfer the responsibility to the male who impregnated her, thus mutating from a "rapist"¹ to a husband, without considering the girl's best interest. Sometimes the girl is traded as if she were an inanimate asset or goods for purchase, void of rights, autonomy, aspirations, thoughts or opinions.

These are pregnancies anchored to clusters of violence and sexual violations, added to abandonment, indifference, lack of opportunities, and unexpressed pain.

This document includes 14 real testimonials woven across the country. These are experiences lived by girls and adolescents that most likely repeat daily within Salvadoran families across the four cardinal directions, in their neighborhoods, communities and departments. In all the 14 testimonials, the names, ages and places where the interviews took place have been modified to guarantee the safety of those who shared their story with such courage. Their life stories evidence family violence, sexual violence, generational violence, in short, all the modalities and types of gender-based violence. Some stories reveal the impact of migration, violence and insecurity in the community of origin. In the end, their lives are also facing the risk to die as the result of obstetric risks associated to pregnancy and childbirth.

Their voice, their sorrow, have been dismissed year after year because "it's better" to have the girl live with the man since the family does not want "damaged goods", like Dolores was told when she was fourteen.

1 Article 161 of the Penal Code, in reference to sexual aggression to an underage and disabled person, states that: the sexual aggression performed with or without violence, which does not consist of carnal access, to a person under fifteen years of age or in other person, taking advantage of their mental disability, state of unconsciousness or inability to put resistance, will be punished with eight to twelve years in prison.

For many others, life could not go on. There were no more dreams; days and months turned into a dead-end street. According to data from the Ministry of Health, in 2015 there were 20 maternal adolescent deaths registered, and 5 of them were suicides.

We are certain that what these girls and adolescents experienced could have been different: if they had only had education tools to empower themselves and report the abuse, or to discern the situations that put them at risk so that they could make choices instead of leaving major life decisions to chance. If there was no tolerance to social complacency about women's value, transcending to a different view to appreciate women as subjects of rights; if the legal framework started to change to ban child marriage, enforcing the best interest of the girl and placing limits to lax social values with a justice system less benevolent towards inequality against women.

Justice should not be delayed. In 2016, according to data from the Legal Medicine Institute (Medical Examiner's Office) there were 1,844 girls and female adolescents registered as having suffered sexual violence in El Salvador (about 5 cases daily). An 80% of these violations were perpetrated by a relative or an acquaintance who is part of what is supposed to be her protective environment. Institutional violence should not coexist with these violations, as investigations reveal that "in 2013, 2014 and 2015, reports of rape of girls under 15 years that were sent to trial and ended in conviction were just about 10%".²

Silence must be stopped, and impunity must be broken. The country needs all girls and female adolescents as right holders, with bio-psycho-social wellbeing, contributing to the national development as fully developed persons. The opposite immerses Salvadoran society into a debt that is accumulating throughout time and that will be unpayable in the future. All of us are on the same boat, it would be phantasmagoric to have the boat sink only on the side filled with the stories of these girls and adolescents. Girl and adolescent pregnancy involves all of us.

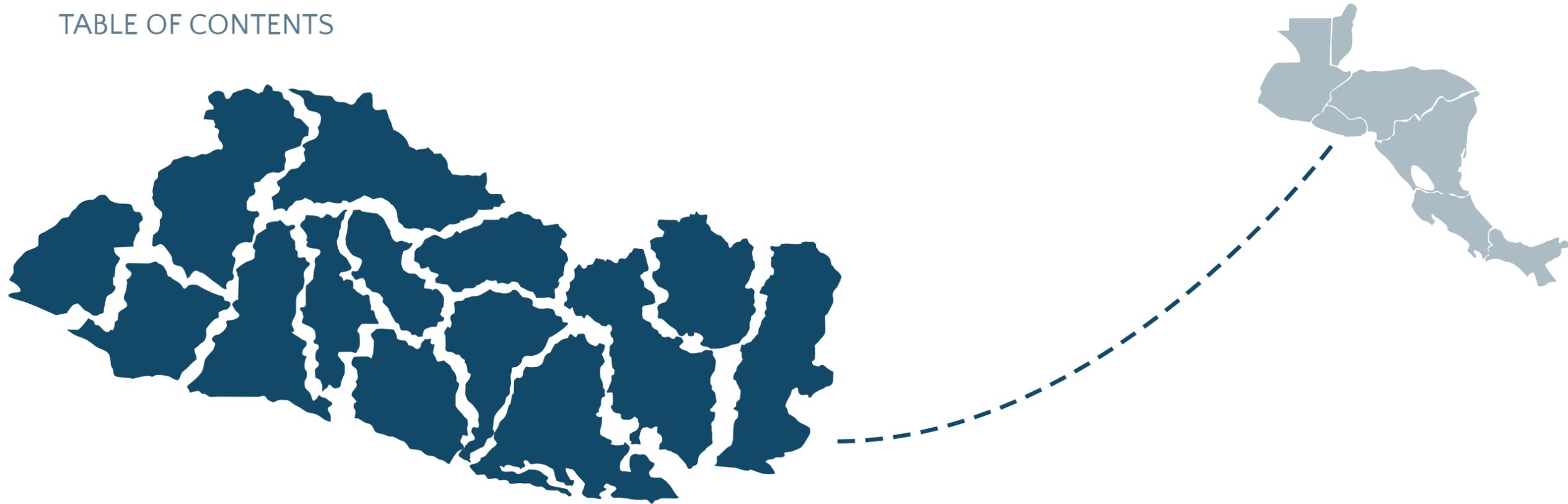
Hugo González

Representative, United Nations Population Fund
El Salvador

2 María Luz, N. y Aguirre L. (Martes, 31 de enero de 2017). *Un paraíso para los violadores de menores*. elfaro.net Recuperado de: http://especiales.elfaro.net/es/el_paraíso_de_violadores/ Eng.: *A Paradise for child rapists*. January 31, 2017.

14 STORIES

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Photography: Lucy Tomasino



Susana Joma
Journalist

Evelyn's story causes great sadness. This young woman, who became a mother when she was a girl, putting her close to death, is still as vulnerable as in her first years of childhood, when she lacked good guidance and family care.

Even though she is now an adult, the cycle is not broken yet, as she has a sickly child and does not even have access to basic education. You cannot foresee in the short term that she will be able to have access to a good job opportunity or to ensure a decent future for herself and her son.

It is outrageous that in our society, especially in the rural area, it is still perceived as "normal" that girls have sexual encounters with adults, without anyone raising a finger to stop it.



AHUACHAPÁN

“I could have died the day my son was born.”

Evelyn, 18 years old, one child.

The first day of Evelyn’s son’s life was almost Evelyn’s last. They both could have died.

– ***“It’s a miracle that I’m alive. I was saved by a health worker.”***

It happened four years ago. Evelyn was 14 years old and eight months pregnant. Her delivery was not scheduled for that day, but she was not doing well. She was feeling vanished in her house in a community of Ahuachapán. She was alone.

– ***“The health worker came on a routine visit to the house and checked me. I had very high blood pressure, I was tired, I was sweating. I felt like I was going to faint. I didn’t feel like the child was going to make it because of how faint I felt. I had gestational diabetes and preeclampsia.”***

Evelyn’s pregnancy was complicated and risky. She spent most of the time at rest and in constant discomfort. She found out that she was pregnant when she was still 13 years old. Her partner was 17.

– ***“The doctor told me that it was going to be a complicated pregnancy because my bones were not well formed because of my age. My in-laws took care of me. Because of my age, the pregnancy became more and more complicated. I had bleeding and very strong pains, so they gave me blood. I could not do anything, I stopped studying. I spent the following months exhausted. I was always tired, I had trouble breathing, sometimes I felt like I was going to faint, I had diarrhea and a fever. Sometimes, I would get up to urinate and not urinate, I would see blood. My son tried to be born earlier four times. All four times we could have died.”***

Evelyn’s partner’s family lives from their farming, so they are dedicated to sowing. She tried to help but the pregnancy made it impossible. When the health worker found her, her in-laws were in the field. She had to go to the cornfield to warn them that Evelyn was in serious condition.

– ***“When I got to the hospital, some nurses scolded me for being so young and pregnant, but a doctor supported me until my son was born, he took an interest in my case. The first time he saw me, he said: “I cannot believe it, you should be playing with dolls or studying.”***

First, Evelyn was taken to the health unit with high blood pressure. The whole pregnancy had been complicated. That day in the health unit was terrifying, and what was happening was unclear. It was difficult for her to breathe. After being tested, she was sent to the hospital because blood pressure increased. They had to give her an injection. She had also lost amniotic fluid.

– ***“The boy is dry, we are going to take him out. Otherwise, he could die,” the doctor explained.***

– ***“They were going to do a cesarean section because of the urgency. The doctor told me that women complain about caesarean sections because of the scar. But you think of your child, that they are born healthy, that you are going to be well, that you don’t care how your body looks like. I said yes to everything, and I didn’t worry about the scars.”***

After delivery, Evelyn was admitted, and her son had to go to the incubator. Today, her child continues to have many health complications, gets sick often, especially in the stomach or respiratory tract. Despite the complications of the first pregnancy, she and her partner have thought about having another child. The best age to have children should be 23, she thinks.

– ***“My mom also had us early in her life. The first of us was born when she was 15, and it took her a lot to raise us, because she was also so young. When you have the chance, it is better to stay studying, to grow properly. I am only able to tell this story because I was lucky that day that the health work came by. If she had not checked in on me, maybe I wouldn’t be telling this story, maybe my son would not have been born either.”***



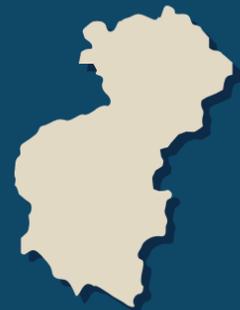
Reverend Martín Ignacio Díaz Velásquez
Protestant Evangelical Church of El Salvador

The case that follows proves that, like Paola, hundreds of girls suffer a lack of access to a decent life, health and education, that is, they are totally abandoned by the State. This contributes to perpetrate the vicious circle of abuse, sorrow, distress and poverty.

Paola's case is not the only one, unfortunately. On the contrary, there are thousands, hundreds of thousands of girls like her. And these horror stories, with an extremely high human cost, occur when public policies are designed based on sophisms and biases without any base of evidence.

Sexual and reproductive education, the decriminalization of abortion and having safe and free access to it are urgent measures that the Salvadoran State should take to protect the life and health of the most vulnerable demographic groups, meaning children who live in situations of risk.

Children and youth are not the future, they are the present. They need responsible policies that respect the rights of people now.”



SANTA ANA

“I don’t even want to remember what happened. Those things make you feel unsafe.”

Paola, 18 years old, one child.

Paola lives in front of the highway. In a mesón (boarding house) of Santa Ana, she lives with her mother, her sister, her stepfather, and her four-year-old boy. She and her son share a room, and the rest of her family lives in another room. Surrounding the house, there is nothing more than highway. Highway, dry environment, buses, smoke, and noise. Those are what she sees every day, but she never goes outside. Her mother tells her it’s best to not work. Paola does not go to school, she dropped out when she was 10. She became a mother at 14.

When she left school, Paola was having a harder time than her classmates with learning to read and write. This made her feel insecure, and she was ridiculed and felt ashamed.

– “Studying is not for me. I thought it wasn’t for me. It was like everyone else was better than I was. So, I said, why go to school, and I just stopped going. I dedicated myself to my home-life.”

Ironically, it appears that Paola has been able to make decisions in her life like not going to school. After leaving school, Paola dedicated her days to helping her mom at home in the inn. She was a child, she had friends, and they played. One of these friends invited her over to her house and Paola accepted. ***“The girl might have already known what was going to happen. She took me to her house and she left me there.”***

Paola was left alone with the girl’s older brother, an 18-year-old. Everything that happened after was beyond her control.

– “I don’t even want to remember what happened. Those things make you feel unsafe.”

What she remembers is confusing and she describes it with difficulty. At 14 years old, she was not expecting to have this kind of experience. Her friend’s brother was not her boyfriend, they did not know each other well, there was no courtship, and she did not feel an attraction towards him. He put on a movie.

– “I’m going to put on a movie that you might like’, he said to me. I said, maybe, I don’t know if I’ll like it.”

Paola remembers that the movie made her uncomfortable, it was a pornographic movie. After, the friend’s brother forced her to do things she did not want to do. ***“What happened, happened, twice, I don’t know. I don’t remember how many times it was.”***

Paola became pregnant after her very first sexual encounter. The father of her child was not her boyfriend or a friend, she was not even sure how old he was.

– “I didn’t want to have a baby so young.”

Her pregnancy was hers alone. She never saw the father of her child again and he has never supported her financially. A while ago, he wanted to take her son away from her, but her family, particularly her stepfather did not allow it.

As the baby grew in her womb, she found his movements sweet. Though at the same time, she felt anxious, ***“like I didn’t want him, but he was already inside.”***

Paola knows she was sexually abused. She knows it was a terrible experience and she says she counsels her friends. Her story is not unique; it is so common that she is able to elaborate on it and say what her suffering is about. ***They come here to attack us. Let us live.***

Her life changed, because since then her life consists solely of being a mother. Her days are spent in a room with her son. She would like to work as a ticket salesperson at the bus station near where she lives, in the terminal. But her mother tells her no, that she should dedicate herself to her son. She cannot add or multiply, so she faces great difficulty daily to pursue her dreams. What Paola wants for herself is hard to attain: a computer, a tablet, or a cell phone. Everything she could want, she conveys as a desire for her son.

– “I have to raise him well, so that he behaves well with me, so that he is not spoiled. When he studies, I want him to bring me good grades and happy moments. I have faith in him being able to study. I want to be a good mother, because I want my son to be a good father when he marries, to love his children and his wife. I want whoever he is with to say, ‘Your son is a good father, he loves me and his children’.”

Paola has had to assume the role of a single mother. She is an adolescent with the responsibilities of an adult, but she lacks means. Without being able to read, write, and do math, her future is confined, like a small room in the inn.



Photography: Lucy Tomasino



Yanira Argueta
ISDEMU's Executive Director

Rosario's story shows a multidimensional issue of inequality, exclusion and vulnerability faced by girls and adolescents who live in conditions of poverty and extreme poverty.

An underage fifteen-year-old girl's pregnancy is rape, there is no possibility of consent, it's the product of sexual violence, of gender stereotypes, of power imbalances that perpetuate the existence of generalized practices considered normal but that violate the rights of women throughout her entire life.

The great challenge posed by stories like Rosario's is that we need to advance firmly towards creating and operating a comprehensive system for the care and protection of women, girls and adolescents victims of sexual violence and gender based violence, to provide integral assistance to the victims, protecting the best interest of girls, ensuring their access to justice, the provision of adequate reparations promoting their empowerment, the strengthening of their autonomy, and full guarantee to fulfill their human rights.



SONSONATE

“There are some women whose goals aren’t to have children early, but who would rather study or work.”

Rosario, 18 years old.

– We got together when I was 12, and I had my first child at 13. My partner is 14 years older than me. Now he is 32, and I am 18. All of that was my choice. I fell in love with him, and I decided to be in a relationship with him. I did not think much about it. I said, “Well, I’ll be with him and, God willing, everything will go well.”

Rosario’s story began at 12, an age when other girls play or study, when they have no autonomy or decision-making power. In Rosario’s case, she had few alternatives and had no idea that what was being normalized was a crime. An adult cannot be with a girl. The law allows the possibility of marriage at age 14, with parental consent.

– “I told my mom I was in love. She was always giving me advice, telling me that I should choose a good man to father my children, one who would take care of me, and that I should think things through. I said I didn’t care what wanted or didn’t want, since I was already in a relationship. ‘In any case, you’ve already decided,’ said my mother, resigned.”

Her current partner was a security guard who worked close to her home. She had been watching him and saw good qualities in him: he was polite, he was single and had no children, he was respectful, and he treated her well and with kindness.

At first, they moved to his friend’s mother’s house. His friend’s mother asked Rosario why she had married so young, and Rosario said that she was in love. ***“There is no remedy when one is in love.”*** After a year, when she was already pregnant, they moved out on their own.

Nobody said anything, as relations between minors and adults are standardized in different levels in El Salvador. Their first child was born when Rosario was 13 and her partner was 27. It was something that Rosario wanted. She had no complications in pregnancy, had a natural birth, and breastfed for two years.

Despite being a mother, Rosario was still a child. She didn’t know how to cook or do many of the things that adults had to do.

– “I could cook a few things to begin with. Then, he taught me to do things. He has taught me many things. To swim. Even to kiss. I knew nothing about it and didn’t know how.

Life with her older partner is based on the admiration she feels for him. He has taught her much of what she knows, and she lives with him, and they have small joys together. ***“Sometimes, we go to a dam to fish, we take a chicken, and we eat. Sometimes, we swim.”***

Now, at age 18, when many young people are just finished school, Rosario has two daughters that she looks after and she feels responsible for her mother.

– “My mom lives far away and works in a house. She comes to see me every two weeks, or I go to see her. When she comes, she brings me little gifts, but I tell her that she doesn’t have to come to look after me, I take care of her. I tell my partner that when my mom is old, I want to bring her here to live. What has hurt me, the saddest thing so far, has been being separated from my mother and not having her constantly with me.

Rosario wants her daughters to study and train. Although she doesn’t think about returning to studies herself, she believes that education is important.

It is unclear what she wants for herself because for ages have another path compared to other women. ***“In 10 years, I feel like I’ll be an old woman, but, I’ll be 30-I’ll be young. Maybe I’ll look like my eldest daughter’s sister.”***

Rosario is afraid of losing her partner or her daughters to violence, and she’s afraid of being killed. She is happy to have a family, living parents, her daughters, and her partner.

– “I like being a mom, but it doesn’t have to be the same story for all women. There are some women whose goals aren’t to have children early, but who would rather study or work.”



Photography: Lucy Tomasino



José María Tojeira
Director of the UCA Human Rights Institute

When looking at a case like Gloria's, the first thing we must do is hold a deep respect. This is the case of a daughter of malnutrition and hunger, born into a society that had denied her the development of her abilities ever since she was in her mother's womb. Despite this, there she is, wanting her daughters to make it farther in life than she could.

Teenage pregnancy was for her the beginning and end of a story without a personal future. She had a single hope instilled by her loved ones: Find yourself someone without vices and who will feed you. The interrelation between poverty and teenage pregnancy is clear. Gloria was lucky to have a husband 28 year older than her; at least he takes care of her and does not mistreat her, as happens to so many other young women like her.

Caring for the Glorias in our country, girls submerged in exclusion and hunger, their rights forgotten, condemned to teenage pregnancy, is essential for dignified human development.

Going from childhood to the mature responsibility of motherhood, often amid circumstances in which poverty and violence blend in multiple ways, does not promise a decent future, and in many ways, it can amount to a prison sentence. Prevention, education, protection and defending adolescent women contributes to building a decent coexistence, gender equality, and the creative capacity of society itself. Forgetting, excluding, or even mistreating our teenagers condemns us to moral and economic underdevelopment. We cannot forget the dignity of those who have the same and equal amount of dignity (as we do).



CHALATENANGO

“Scarcity. Poverty. The transition of life through a cycle that restarts, without end.”

Gloria, 20 years old, two children.

There are those who have nothing but their imagination. Then, there are some who cannot even enjoy their imagination. When imagination does not exist either, there is no way to envision—to imagine, precisely—hope.

Gloria is 20 years old and has two children, but she has a hard time seeing herself in the future, thinking of herself as a woman with dreams, with hopes. She has a hard time seeing herself as a woman, as a woman in her own right. Her identity, her existence, is tied to motherhood. Only in motherhood does she make sense. Before, she was just trying to survive. Her life is constrained to the landscape in which she grew up and in which she continues to live.

In the rural area, the resources are minimal, and the opportunities are scarce, a life that depends on sowing in one season, on fishing in another, and on luck the rest of the time.

Her first daughter was born when she was 16 years old, the second was born two years ago. Her partner is a fisherman who is 28 years older than her—he is now 48.

– “When our relationship began, I was 15 years old, and my parents didn’t say anything. Not even about the age. My parents had told me to choose a husband who would work to feed me, one that I would not have to work to support. They told me to be careful too, because there are many men in prison and their wives work to support them in jail and to support themselves and their children. I do not know how many girls around here have husbands that are in jail, but there are several of them.”

Her parents didn’t say anything because they hadn’t told her much about life at all. They had educated her to find a husband who knew how to provide for her so that she would not go hungry. They had told her the basics of survival. Simply survive.

– “Although he already had grown children, he was alone when I joined him. Since he already had boys, it did not bother him that we had two girls.”

Gloria’s biggest concern was not studying or working, her main concern was survival. Eat, do not go hungry.

– “When I lived with my parents, I went hungry. There were six of us children and there was not enough food. My parents also sold fish. We endured hunger when there was no money, when sales were bad. Since being with my partner, that does not happen. Although he does not let me work, sometimes I wash clothes to get some money, for something, some food, but he does not want me to do it, he says that’s what he is for.”

Gloria’s life moved from her parents’ house, to her partner’s house. Her children depend on her, and she depends on her partner. But she does not depend on herself, to know who she is, what she would like from life. It is like a waterspout, a funnel that takes her to the same life cycle as her parents, and surely as her grandparents. A cycle in which life does not have different paths, neither in space nor in landscape nor in desires, and that sometimes, throws fish.

They have lived only on fish. Her partner fishes in an artificial lake. There is no other way to imagine life because there is no other life for her. Gloria studied up to 5th grade, and her partner never studied. ***“He only knows how to write his signature”***, says Gloria.

– “I stopped studying because my parents did not have enough money for notebooks, all my siblings studied up to 5th grade. My husband does not know how to read or write. But since he is a fisherman, he knows how to manage the accounts of what he sells.”

– “What has been the most beautiful thing in my life? I say nothing, but maybe the most beautiful thing is having gotten together with my daughters’ father. What are my dreams? I do not know either. How do I look in 10 years? I do not know; my daughters are going to be great. What would I want? Work, maybe.”



Photography: Lucy Tomasino



Margarita O'Farrill
Professional and mother

Without studies, without official identity, with a precarious economy, and having become a mother at 14, Arely questions with her story the basic principles of the LEPINA law, the discourse that she could demand having access to fulfill her rights. Arely is the measurement of the country's progress in human rights matters.

For Arely, school was optional, but motherhood was not.

She spent the happiest moments of her life playing at the river with her girlfriends, her daughter and her son. When it was her turn to be protected and to dream about building her future, she started an early motherhood that turned her into a full-time caregiver.

She says that she has not suffered violence. To be a teenage mother, to see her grandmother die due to lack of access to health services, to not have an identity document and continue tied to work perceived to be done only by women, with very low wages, those are the conditions that life threw on her plate.

No state institution, no person from the community or her family group provided her with guidance to develop integrally. Physical contact, tenderness, pleasure, were not a right that Arely exercised progressively, but only through genitalized sexuality she got to feel important, loved, wanted. For a short time, and after that, again, the abandonment.



LA LIBERTAD

“Life in a cycle of losses, including identity.”

Arely. 22 years old, two children.

The same year that Arely became a mom, she became a widow and an orphan. She had not yet turned 15.

– ***“My daughter’s father disappeared before our daughter turned 1. I was left as a widow, I still do not know if he died, if he was killed or not. He disappeared. They disappeared him. I say he was killed because 7 years have passed, and nobody knows anything about him. Not even his family.”***

The love story was short lived. They were teenagers: she was 14, he was 15. They met at his parents’ house, then moved in with Arely’s grandmother. The pregnancy was immediate, and the losses too.

– ***“He wanted to have a child, so we had a girl. When the girl as older, I resigned myself to thinking that her father was missing, that he had been killed, but nothing of him, or the corpse, ever appeared. Afterwards, my grandmother died. She had asthma, she choked a lot, she could not breathe, she had respiratory arrest. I was an orphan.”***

Arely was raised only by her grandmother. Her father and mother separated when Arely was little.

– ***“My dad lives in another department, with another woman. My mom went with another man, who is now her husband. The man did not want her with a daughter and so she left me. Now, she has two daughters with that man. Yes, I know her, she comes to see me from time to time, but I do not feel anything for her as a mom. My grandmother was a mom to me.”***

Arely is alone. She has had three partners and two children. She has no family, no network to protect her. She was only left with abandonment by the second partner:

– ***“I fell in love with another guy my age and became pregnant. He was not on a good path, he had problems with gangs. He and his family fled. I did not hear from him again. But before fleeing he told me he was not going to take care of the child. His grandma saw the child once and gave her five dollars. After that, nothing. The boy only carries my last name. That is another problem.”***

Arely has no identity. She does not have a DUI - Unique Identity Document. Her mother registered her in one city hall, her father in another, so she has two birth certificates. ***“In one, I have my mother’s last name, in another, my father’s. That’s why I can’t get the DUI.”***

The story is increasingly complicated. Without family, without identity, and penniless, Arely does not have a job. Sometimes she washes clothes, and on average, she earns three dollars per wash. On weekends, she is paid four dollars for one night of making pupusas. The money she makes is not enough. At city hall, they told her that to get the DUI, she must pay a lawyer to make an identity change and have a single birth certificate. But she cannot pay.

Although having a legal identity is a right, clearly the case of Arely shows that it is not a right for all.

– ***“Because I have no identity, I have lost many things: aid, food, improved seed, gas subsidy. It is a loss, because with the improved seed, even if one does not have land, you get a piece of property and can work the land. But I cannot have anything because I have no identity. If I had one, I could get a job. Although I studied up to the second grade, maybe I could work in a factory.”***

Here she collides again with the impossible: you must work to save to get DUI, but without a DUI, you cannot get a job. The image is of a bull beating its head against the wall. A sheet wall. Arely’s life is fragile and desolate. Now, with her third partner, she has a companion. Still, she is overwhelmed by fear of a new loss.

– ***“When I lost the girl’s father, I worried about what I was going to do with her. When the boy’s father abandoned me, people judged me, I wondered how I was going to do it. But that does not matter anymore, what people say doesn’t matter. My dream is to always be with my children and stay with my new partner until death separates us.”***



Photography: Lucy Tomasino



Laura Aguirre
Sociologist and Researcher

This story reminded me of a recurring nightmare I would have during my childhood. I, very small, was in an enclosed space, empty and completely dark. I was running from one place to another, desperately looking for and calling out to my parents. I would wake up just at the moment I realized that they had abandoned me, that I was alone. She is my nightmare come true. She is the embodiment of the helplessness in which thousands and thousands of girls in El Salvador live.

Forced to suddenly grow up because of an early pregnancy, living in an unwanted partnership, without being able to study, and now without even being able to move from her house and threatened with death by the gang that governs her neighborhood, this demonstrates that for many, childhood in El Salvador is a lie.

Being born a girl and into an environment of economic poverty has practically become a prison sentence, a sentence to survive however possible, abandoned by a State and a society that continue reverting to repressive measures that have turned out simplistic to solve complex problems.



SAN SALVADOR

“The jailer of violence.”

She, in any place of San Salvador, preferred to omit age, name or pseudonym.

19 years old, two children.

“We do not mess with anyone,” she says.

And she repeats again: ***“We do not mess with anyone.”***

She is sitting in a health unit, in a suburban area. She lives in a neighborhood divided between two gangs. She risked her life leaving her home, even visiting the health unit to vaccinate her one-year-old daughter is a risk.

She does not say her name, nor does she choose a fictitious name. She is quiet and reserved. Around her there is noise: her 4-year-old son plays, and other babies cry. Her daughter is nursing from her breast, and her life is summarized as follows: she is 19 years old, has two children, had two partners, was raped by two men from her family, her stepfather and her mother’s stepfather.

She has no friends. ***“I don’t really have friends, I do not get along with anyone. I have some problems, so it’s better to be like this, alone.”***

She was threatened with death—twice. The first death threat was made by the father of her son. The second threat was made by the guys of the gang. Her body and motherhood were treated as a territory. She is condemned to death because she gave birth, because she had a daughter with another man.

The father of her son told her that he could not forgive her for having a daughter with another man. The guys in the gang believe that her daughter’s father is part of the opposing gang. The neighborhood where she lives is divided into streets; half of the streets are controlled by one gang, the other half by the enemy gang. Just as the neighborhood is controlled by gangs, her life is also controlled. The gang has sent her word to say that she must prove that her daughter’s father is not from the opposing gang, otherwise they’ll kill her. But the reality is that they wanted to kill her from the moment she became pregnant.

– “It is a miracle that I am alive. The girl’s father went to register her at city hall, but the guys from the gang are fixated. They said that when I was pregnant with the girl they were ready to kill me. One day I was sitting on the steps outside the house, and that time they were going to kill me. Later I learned that the one who was going to do it said he didn’t because he thought of his own family.”

She keeps all of this to herself. Her mom knows she is threatened with death, but she does not know any more than that. ***“I do not trust her as a mother to tell her such a thing. I am very quiet.”***

Her silences were created when they took her voice away. The silence began very early in her life. At four or five years old, she does not remember exactly when.

She did not know her father, only her stepfather. When she was a child, her mother was with another man. At night, her stepfather would leave the couples’ bed and enter the girl’s bed. He touched her against her will, penetrated her, raped her. She never told her mom. She never said anything. Later, her mother sent her to live with her grandmother. Then, the step grandfather, with the same tactic as her stepfather, went to her bed at night. ***“That man also abused me.”***

– “They ruin your life. They feel pleasure touching a girl, but the girl suffers for life. That abuse is never forgotten.”

At 15, she became pregnant. Her boyfriend did not know that she had been constantly abused as a child.

– “I had problems with the boy’s father. He asked me why I had not bled when I lost my virginity, if he was my first partner. Really for me, he was my first. Before it had been by force, they forced me, but with him, I wanted to do it.”

Initially, her boyfriend was doubtful about the paternity. It weighed on him that she had not bled, but she still told him nothing. When they moved in to the in-law’s house, her boyfriend did not want to have a formal relationship with her, so she left him and returned to her mother. Months later, her boyfriend went to prison. They had no contact, and she thought he had forgotten her. She met another boy, fell in love, and got pregnant again.

Men are the ones who decide the lives of women in stories like these. They make decisions about their body. ***Men pressure girls to have sex and they get pregnant, and the men do not pay attention to the suffering that girls are left with. “They are fathers one day, then they are not.”*** she says.

Men also decide what spaces women can be in, what streets to cross, at what times to go out. ***“I can only be in my street in my neighborhood. I can’t go out. I do not leave my house. I really have a very complicated situation.”***

She cannot study again, she cannot work. She cannot study because to get to school, she must cross many roads, territories that do not belong to her. She cannot work, because she has a low level of schooling, she stopped at 7th grade. The only time she worked after her daughter was born was when she would leave her house at 4 in the morning, when it was very dark, so they would not see her leave. She would come back until 7 o’clock at night, so they would not see her then either. ***“It is the territory that I cannot leave.”***

She does not want to have a partner again because she is afraid that this new man will abuse her daughter, and she cannot have a new partner because it would be a greater risk to her life. ***“I want to have a job to leave that neighborhood, because I do not want to live there anymore.”***

But after expressing her longing, she returns to the complicated narrative of her confinement.

A labyrinth that is her own home. She cannot look for work, because she cannot leave her street. She is there, just being, nothing more than a mother. A mother who could die, precisely because she is a mother.



José Jorge Simán Jacir
Distinguished Friend of the UNDP

Everyone thinks of their home and family as a space of love and protection in which they feel security and support. On many occasions, having a family that takes care of you and protects you is much more valuable than living with comforts. Unfortunately, many Salvadoran girls face sexual assault and physical abuse within their family space, inflicted by their parents or close relatives, and the most terrible thing about it is that they are not just a few cases and that we are not aware of our responsibility to help prevent them.

Carolina is just one of those cases. At just 10 years old, besieged by her own father, without a mother to turn to, with her sister who is already a victim of her father, and with society against her, what options does she have?

In whom and where is a 10-year-old girl supposed to find refuge and love with all the doors closed? What were the responsibilities that Carolina, at 10 years of age, did not fulfill? Does Carolina deserve to be blamed for having to take care of three children at 19 years of age? Sectors of society consider her responsible for her situation, and others consider her victim of a society that is unable to protect girls from sexual violence.

For Carolina, school and games were not a priority as might be expected for a girl her age. Her priority was to escape rape and suffering. What opportunities will Carolina have in life and how far can her aspirations go in an environment that has taught her that she has no rights? As Salvadorans we have the obligation to not consider pregnancy in adolescent girls as something normal and to help the family and schools become a safe space for teenage girls in every corner of our country.



CUSCATLÁN

“I moved in with a man when I was 14 to get away from my father.”

Carolina, 19 years old, two children.

Carolina’s story is the common, horrific story of many girls in El Salvador.

– ***“I entered a relationship when I was 14 to get away from my father. I stopped living with him when I was 10. My mom had cancer and died before she was 30. So, when I stopped living with my dad, I didn’t have a mother either.***

Carolina is the youngest of her siblings. Her older sister has a different father. In fact, her sister is now her dad’s partner. ***“After my mom died, they were living together. Like husband and wife.”*** Her older sister did not support her when she told her father what he was doing.

– ***“My grandmother was the only one who believed that my dad wanted to abuse me. When my mom was sick and dying, she told me that my brother--also my father’s son--and I had to be careful. She told me that if my dad did not want us, we would leave the house, and if we left, we could go to the home of one of my uncles to be taken care of. But I do not remember those uncles. I saw them once, and when my mom died, they didn’t come find us.***

Carolina’s family network was minimal, only her grandmother and an aunt. For most pregnant teenagers, their family network is reduced so that, as a mother, their children become their only network, but as dependents. The duty of raising the children lies with her. Many of the men responsible flee after finding out a girl is pregnant. Many of them are older than the girls and flee because of their crime. Many of the younger men flee to preserve the freedom of their youth. As a result, the girls are alone, just like Carolina when she lived with her dad.

– ***“My dad wanted to abuse me first when I turned 10. I told him that he couldn’t do that to me because he was my dad. I knew what he wanted to do to me was not good. I learned at school, the teacher told us that we should not be touched, nor even by our own dad, because it was bad. I fled from my dad and did whatever I could to avoid him. But he followed me and headed me off, so I ran.***

– ***“You’ll be mine.”***

– ***“No, I’m your daughter,”*** she said when she managed to escape.

She wanted to complain, but nobody believed her. At age 10, she had the idea of reporting him because she knew that cases of rape of girls were common in their environment. But precisely because it was common, it was normalized. Because it was normalized, nobody complained.

– ***“Here, in this area, there are a lot of such cases. I tell girls not to let parents see them when they bathe, because that’s how it begins. A neighbor wanted to abuse his daughter because the girl was sleeping in a skirt. When the mother found out, she took the girl and left him.”***

When Carolina said her father wanted to rape her, he said it was a lie. Her older sister also said it was a lie. The neighbors didn’t believe her. At school, she didn’t feel protected. Her grandmother was afraid.

– ***“My grandmother said that if I went to school, my dad would grab me there, so I stopped going. When we had gone with my grandmother to be with an aunt, we were still scared my dad. So, I found a relationship.”***

In many cases of abuse, girls and adolescents decide to move in with a man to escape violence or to prevent it, as was the case with Carolina. She wanted to feel helped, protected, taken care of. Carolina started a relationship with a 31-year-old man when she was 14. Their courtship sparked desire, but above desire was the need for protection, care, love.

– ***“He courted me for over a year. He would say things to me that would make me go crazy, things I am embarrassed to repeat. He gave me gifts, he brought me stuffed animals, some pretty flowers, and later he bought me two cellphones.***

Her partner has had a child before. Carolina took charge of that child, who is now nine years old, and she cares for him. At age 19, she has many responsibilities.

– ***“I am raising my children, a four-year-old and a one-year-old, as well as his son. We all live in the same house with my mother-in-law. He was a good dad, but we haven’t seen him for a year.”***

Her partner is in prison, pending sentencing. Carolina, who lives in a community, commutes to the town, to the prison. But she doesn’t see him. You can’t see anyone. She brings him food three times a day with clean clothes, and she takes his dirty clothes with her to clean at home and return for the next day.

– ***“Every day, I leave the community at 7 am, and I go by bus to town. He hasn’t gone to real jail yet because they haven’t found anything on him. And I know they won’t find anything, because he has done nothing. God makes that kind of miracles, I know that for sure.”***

Her partner was accused of collaborating with the gangs. In the area, says Carolina, there are no gangs. The police arrived at dawn, pulled him out of the room. Her partner was the primary breadwinner. Her mother-in-law doesn’t work, and neither did she. Before his arrest, her partner told her to continue studying, that he would support her when the children were older.

– ***“I also thought I could continue studying when the children were older. I still see my friends from school, some finished high school, some just went up to grade nine. But right now, I can’t because just paying for his things is a big expense, and I have no job. I get a little bit of money from selling leaves and lemons from the plants on the small farm. But this doesn’t provide enough to eat.”***

Since her partner is in prison, Carolina’s life has been precarious. She goes back to the town at 2 in the afternoon to feed the three children, wash clothes, and play with the children until evening, when she prepares food and washes clothes. The next day, the routine begins again at dawn.

– ***“I have no family. My family is my partner and my children. And I never want to see my dad again.”***



Byron Sosa
Journalist

The limitations in our society that continue to regenerate and repeat over time, are the limitations that continue to destroy the dreams, projects and goals of girls, adolescents...of women. Behind everything they have lived, there is irresponsibility from the father or the mother who brought them to the world, the deformation of society in which we live and the lack of commitment to help children and adolescents, where people look the other way to the things that are going wrong and demanding rights is often considered a rebellious act or wanting to go against the current. Here, there's no room for political or religious views, what is needed here is to prioritize on the rights of children and adolescents.

Learning about the life of a 19-year-old young woman, with a 4-year-old son, that for almost two decades did not have any help from her father -and who had to be coerced to start paying child support-, whose dreams of improving her education and her life were frustrated, and who is living in a union with a 50-year-old man... it makes me sad, angry, it outrages me and makes me wonder why don't we, as a society, act and stop this scourge harming El Salvador's girls and adolescents? Are we, those of us who look the other way, also participating in the violation of their rights?

The type of relationship she has with this 50-year-old man is a typical case of what girls starting at age 10 are facing -sometimes even younger-, in which many men perceive them as being ready to have sexual relations, procreate and work. The law is clear: he who would have carnal access whether by the vagina or using personal deceit with an under age 15-year-old person and under 18 years of age, will be punished with four to ten years in prison; meaning, that he is committing rape, but there are problems still to apply the law. Until when, El Salvador? To respect girls' rights is not an excess of Liberty, it is allowing them to be themselves, full human beings, so that there is real gender equality in our country.



LA PAZ

“My partner is now 50, I am 19.”

Gloria, 19 years old, one child.

Gloria is sharp and determined. She speaks very little, but she does so clearly. She has the spirit of a strong woman. Every day she drives a truck, which is her business and her asset. She pulls dirt from a brick factory and makes trips to deliver it to different buyers. Her partner, 33 years older than her, gave her the truck as a source of work. But she points out: ***“It’s me who manages my money and my business with the truck. I have a 4-and-a-half-year-old son, and all my work is for his future. I save my money, so he can prosper.”***

At 14, Gloria entered a relationship with a man who is older than she was. They had a son, who is about to turn five. Despite being pregnant, she finished school and got her high school diploma. Then, she took out a license to haul heavy loads in her truck. Now, she wants to enroll in the academy of public safety. She wants to be a police officer.

She speaks very little about her partner.

– “My partner is now 50, I am 19. We both work and have responsibilities distributed in the house. My partner has a plot of land and lives off the rent and land sales. The truck is his, he taught me how to drive and he explained the business to me.”

At school, she has faced discrimination.

– “The teachers told me that I could not continue studying because I was going to have a child. The director told me that since I already had a child, I had to look for something else. I decided to have my son and then go back to school, but that meant losing the year according to the program. Then, I decided to study from a distance. So, I graduated from high school, I did the PAES, I got my Unique Identity Document (DUI) and my driver’s license. I wanted to continue studying, even if I was a mom.”

Though she speaks very little of her partner, he is a source of inspiration for her and of autonomy. He allows her to do what she wants, like studying and working. Although, sometimes, he qualifies that and asks her not to do everything she wants to do, like study at the Academy of Public Safety. He is afraid of me entering the Academy, because the present times are very violent. “He is afraid that something will happen to me, but I am not afraid. Or he wants me to study medicine. If I tell my partner, he will support me, but for now he may not agree, because the boy is with me and likes to follow me everywhere. But I do want to continue studying.” While driving, her child accompanies her. He likes to travel in the truck when he does not go to school.

– “Since my son was born, my way of thinking changed. Now I think differently, with more maturity and consideration of him. Everything I think, or do, is driven by my son.”

She needs a lot of strength. The routes she drives are long and some areas are contested by gangs or have face other violence typical of the area. In the same place where she tells her experience as a teenage mother, a murder happened some time ago.

She must fight against everyday life; sometimes, she must negotiate the territories she crosses, and she does so with respect and caution. She says she has never been at risk of any danger or violence. Neither at home, nor at school, nor with her partner. She is prudent and brave. Only on the road is she able to look behind. In life, never.



Photography: Lucy Tomasino



Yeymi Muñoz
Director, National Youth Institute

Marcela's case, who resumed her studies, is one of the many situations faced by girls and adolescents, that happen frequently in our country and show a clear violation of human rights. We must reflect, using a rights approach, what we do or not do as citizens and by playing the roles we have in our society.

Every person, that is, men and women, in any stage of life, regardless of their social, economic or religious situation, cannot be subjected to discrimination; we are EQUAL; as established in our Constitution.

Girls suffering sexual abuse, in front of a silence from their immediate environment, that acts as accomplice and becomes natural, just because they are girls. Adolescents must postpone their studies because of a pregnancy and to raise their children.

These and other conditions limit Salvadorian girls and adolescents to dream, to aspire, that is, to fulfill their potential, a decent life and to reach the highest wellbeing.

This life story evidence the appropriation of rights of girls and adolescents, as State and as citizens, let's comply with our obligations to respect, protect and serve.



CABAÑAS

“Studying distracted me from that great pain.”

Marcela, 21 years old, one child.

Marcela became pregnant in her senior school year. She began a relationship before graduating. Her partner was barely a year older than her, and he worked as a bricklayer. They have been together for four years and they got married a year ago.

Her son was born the same year her other classmates graduated from high school. Her partner encouraged her to finish school, and she also wanted to. But, although she wanted to, she could not go back.

– “I stopped going to school because people criticize. They told me that a pregnant student must stop going to school. I thought that I would have a child and my classmates, and my teachers would judge me. So, I resigned myself to not going to school and I got discouraged.”

Marcela’s family network is made up of her partner and her mother. Her mother was the one who supported her to continue studying. ***“Having one child is like having none,’ my mother said. What she meant by that was that even with a child, I could still accomplish anything.”***

Marcela’s mother worked as a janitor in a girls’ school, so she insisted that studying is important.

– “The teachers at the school where my mother worked supported me. That’s how I finished the second year of high school, thank God.”

Marcela finished high school at another school during night classes. The principal herself told her that by being pregnant, there was nothing for her to do. Marcela was discriminated against. Now, Marcela knows that this is discrimination. “I did not know then, and I thought that the director was right.” On top of it all was the stigma of losing her future by getting pregnant young.

Although in most cases pregnant teenagers are forced to leave school, Marcela had the motivation to break that trend. It is very clear to her that life is a struggle.

– “The important thing about studying is bettering oneself, and having more job opportunities, helping your partner, so you both contribute both to the family. There are girls who think that life is about being in a relationship and that’s it, and of having children and that’s it, but no, it’s about fighting.”

She is mature and determined. She entered a relationship at 17, very much in love but without using any method of family planning. The pregnancy happened swiftly and was unexpected. ***“We did not prepare for anything, we didn’t plan. But when it happened, we assumed the consequences of our actions, we faced it.”***

Just as she took on the challenge of her, she has also confronted the challenge of motherhood. Marcela’s plans are to work with her partner to support her son and family. For her, family is a clear figure, it is a network, it is interwoven, and above all, it is a space to sustain oneself, and to resist together. ***“Partnership is a relationship of working hard for each other. It’s about fighting, two people working to build together, just as a house is built,”*** she says.

She has always had to fight. Before getting pregnant, she struggled with tremendous pain and did so throughout her schooling.

– “I have overcome many things, and everything I have wanted, I have achieved. When I was 10 years old, my stepfather raped me. I was abused by him from 10 to 11 years old.”

Marcela told him that she was going to report him, but her stepfather threatened her. Then she told her mom, and at first, she did not believe her. ***“She was blinded by him, I did not know what was happening, she did not believe me.”*** Later, her mother believed her, and she left her partner. They left the house. ***“Years later, repentant, she asked me for forgiveness. I, as a daughter, forgave her. But it was sad that she did not believe me from the beginning.”***

That time was painful. Marcela was afraid, she had sadness, she had pain. ***“A trauma,”*** she says. ***“It’s like a wound that is left inside of you. And as the time passes, one overcomes it.”***

Marcela overcame it by studying at school. ***“I focused on school, I focused on studying, my mind was occupied doing homework. Studying distracted me from all the pain.”***



Christian Salazar

Resident Coordinator of the United Nations
System in El Salvador

Raquel's story is very hard. I know that many Salvadoran young women are going through a similar situation: a life filled with violence, poverty, early pregnancies and sexual abuse. The dignity and human rights of millions of women and girls are under threat and attack, day by day, even in their own families. We cannot allow this to continue happening.

At the same time, I am impressed by Raquel's strength to move forward, how she sacrifices herself for her daughters and hopes for a better future for them. She doesn't ask much, just the very basic- education, food, respect. But that request, even though it seems like little to ask, it seems unreachable.

Her story challenges us. We must work to change her reality and that of many girls and women who do not have the opportunity to live a decent life.

That is why we are supporting the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals. These objectives demand the State and society to invest to improve life conditions of all Salvadorans, with a special focus on gender equality, in the fight against discrimination and impunity regarding any act of violence against women. I am certain that Raquel and her daughter can have a better life, if the Salvadoran State and society prioritize on women's rights and act with the conviction of leaving no one behind.



SAN VICENTE

“I will go hungry before my daughters do.”

Raquel, 21 years old, two children.

Raquel lives in a house made of corrugated metal on the edge of the Pan-American highway, a line that divides the possible from the impossible. The house has two rooms: her little sisters sleep in one room, and her family sleeps in another. Her family consists of her partner, her two daughters, and her. They sleep in a hammock and in a bed. It is the first time that Raquel, 21, has a house.

Before, she lived in poverty with her mother and grandmother.

Actually, it is the first time that Raquel has a family and a house. And she will lose the house, the possibility of a home.

– “We arrived at this land after living on the street. When I was little, my mother, my grandmother and I walked in the street. Sometimes we went to the house of an aunt for a place to sleep, but when she would not take us in, we looked for an empty house and slept outside in a corridor. We were cold and hungry.”

Raquel’s house is on government land. The house has no water or light. At night, it is illuminated with candles and an oil lamp. A neighbor sells her water and she pays three dollars a month for it. The lady assures her that the water is only for washing, but she uses it for her daughters, to keep them clean, to wash their food, to keep them healthy. ***“To save water, I wash in the river.”***

The river is far from her house. In order to wash her own things and those of others, Raquel waits for her sisters, aged 15 and 13, to return from school, and she prepares food for them. She has taken on the role of raising them since her mother works in Santa Tecla. Her sisters accompany her to wash clothes, and from those trips to the river Raquel earns two or five dollars, depending on the size of the mountain of clothing.

To support her family, Raquel sometimes makes two, three, or five dollars in a day. Those are the good days. Sometimes, there is simply nothing. Occasionally, no one has a job, neither Raquel’s mother nor her partner. ***“We have endured hunger,”*** she says. But Raquel, who has known what hunger feels like since childhood, is extraordinarily persistent.

– “I do not want my daughters to go hungry because I’ve already been through that and it’s sad and ugly. I will go hungry before my daughters do. No matter what, the children eat. Even if it’s rice soup. When there is nothing to eat, we go to the river and catch some little fish and with that, I make them soup. I make them rice soups, of any herb or vegetable, but I do not let them go hungry.”

Neither member of the couple finished school. Raquel’s first relationship was at age 16, and her partner was 17. He had not studied, and she had only completed the sixth grade. He worked in a corral, milking cows and cleaning the pigsties. She was dedicated to all the work of the house and to sowing seeds. This is the reality for both: they can only work with what the earth gives them.

But Raquel feels that soon she will lose even that. There is a threat to evict her because a supposed owner of the land wants to parcel it out. Raquel insists that with the construction of the road, the land is government owned. She is responsible for clarifying the process, so she travels to the city hall and asks for help, but the likelihood of her being helped is so low that she fears she will soon have nothing.

The father of her daughters is her second companion. When Raquel was 14, she had her first relationship, though she was not in love, she was running away.

– “I started a relationship with him because my stepfather raped me from the time I was 7 years old and I never said anything. I didn’t tell my mom, I kept it to myself. The only time I said anything was recently, to a health promoter and I felt relief.”

Her first partner drank a lot and smoked marijuana. He was violent, and he threatened her.

– “He spoke differently, he said he was going to shoot me if he found me with someone else. I was not with anyone, but I left him and went back to my grandmother’s house.”

He was a persistent man. He looked for her and followed her. When she got together with her current partner, the first boyfriend returned. He threatened her because she had gotten pregnant with another man. In his head, Rachel belonged to him.

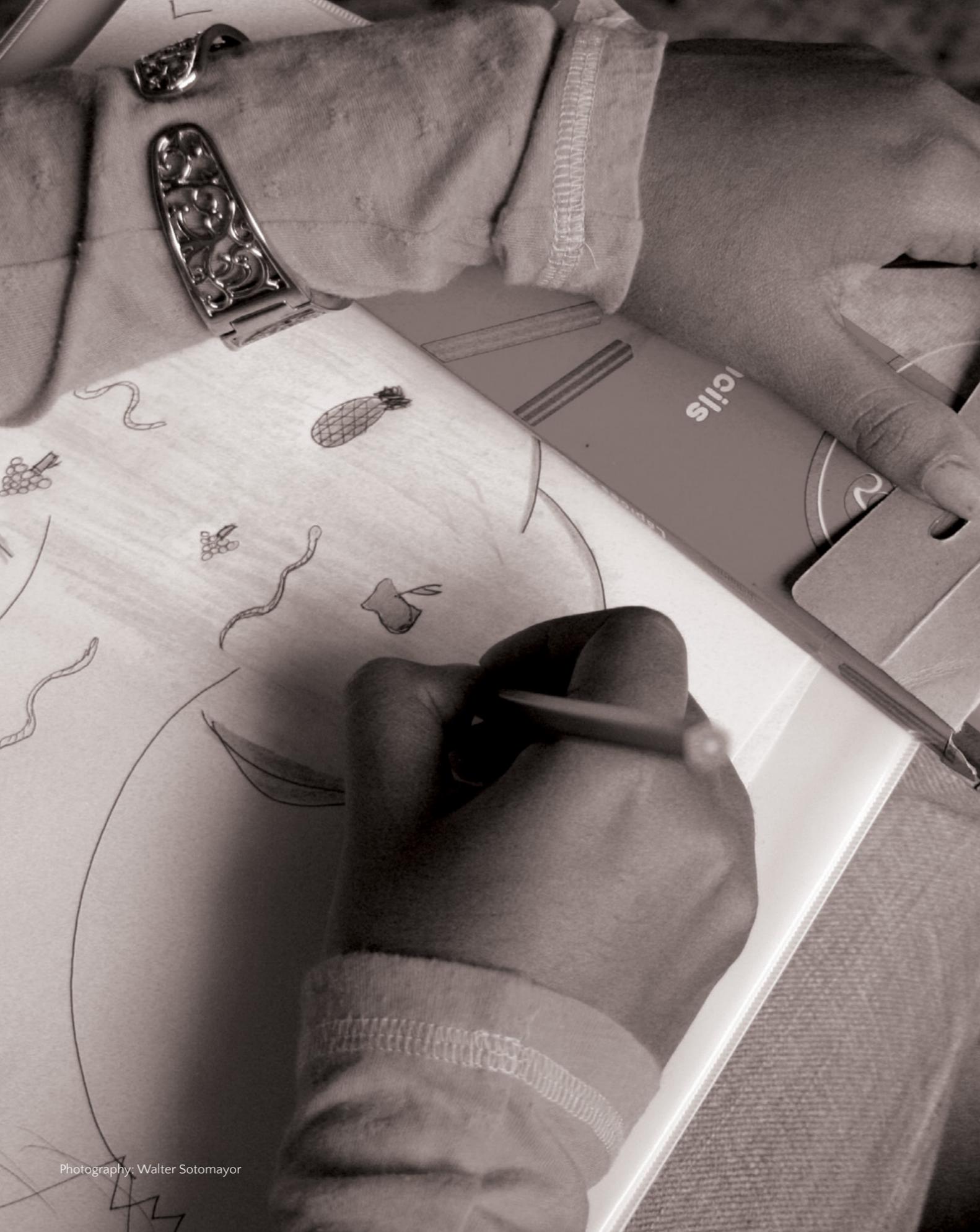
– “He told me that he was going to kill me and the girl’s dad, that I could not be with another man. Even when the girl was born, he kept threatening me.” Finally, about two years ago, her partner was killed.

Raquel says that poverty is very hard. She had a high-risk pregnancy, which became riskier because she has problems with blood clotting and hemorrhaging.

– “I was at risk of having a stroke when I was pregnant with the first daughter. That’s why the girl was born sick and they had to give her a blood transfusion at Hospital Bloom, in San Salvador. We were there for 15 days.”

It was her first time in San Salvador (the capital). The mayor of her town has told her that only in San Salvador can they solve her eviction problem, that he cannot help her, and that he has no jurisdiction.

– “I have not been able to go to San Salvador because I do not have money for the bus and I do not have anyone to take care of the girls. I am afraid that they will kick us out of the house, where we are finally settled. They do not help us, I say they treat us badly because they see us as poor, low-class.”



Photography: Walter Sotomayor



Zaira Navas
Director, National Council for Children and Adolescents

Rosario: I would like to tell you that school will be waiting for you. That your voice will be heard in the classrooms; that the drawings you made in dreams will be the life traces of the life you decide to live. That you will have a partner to love and who loves you back. That your daughter will not live the horror you went through. Your story, Rosario, despite everything, can still be different.

Rosario used to like going to school, she still dreams of learning and puts her hopes in taking care of her daughter and teach her to take care of herself. Give her the opportunity that she did not have as a little girl, because she became a woman without living her childhood and adolescence. She ran away from home, from her brothers, from her step father; from the cycle of violence that her mother and her sister experienced. She ran away from the family that was supposed to take care of her. To be with “the husband”, as Rosario calls her partner, a man 28 year older than her, who was for this girl at age 12 the alternative to break with violence and abuse. In her words, he “takes care” of her and “treats her well”. To survive, unknowingly, and with no opportunities on sight, she decided to join a man that she now serves and leave her dreams behind to become a mother and caregiver.

To be born a girl and grow to be a woman means for many women being deprived of their most basic rights. The extreme violation to their integrity and dignity, without rights over their bodies, without voice, without anyone to listen to them, to believe them. To grow up with fear, without hope, running away to survive.

To end with this violence and the naturalization of it, educating girls, Boys, adolescents, women and men, is a priority and unpostponable task for El Salvador; and the protection of girl and adolescent victims of sexual violence is our most urgent duty.



USULUTÁN

“My brothers tried to abuse me, they never treated me like a sister.”

Rosario Guadalupe, 18 years old, one child.

Rosario Guadalupe left home at 14 years old. She left with some man 28 years older than she was. Now he is 46, and she is 18.

When Rosario Guadalupe was 9 years old, her family moved out of their community and she met her daughter’s father.

– ***“He would accompany my cousin and me when they sent us to get water from the river. When he went to church, he invited us and took us in his car. He gave us churros and bought pupusas for dinner. He was very attentive with us, but I thought we were best friends and nothing more. I never imagined myself being in a relationship with him. First, because of his age. I did not want to be with him because of his age, but he always took care of me. I felt that he was the only one who cared about me.”***

As an older man, he was clear about what Rosario Guadalupe lacked and needed. He provided for her in every way. Her mother, who could not or would not provide for her, knew it. So, he used that to his advantage. ***“Tell him to give me such and such on loan”, her mother would say. “I can’t buy anything for you for school, ask him,”*** she said. And Rosario Guadalupe, with shame sometimes, did it.

In this way, Rosario Guadalupe was used as bait. Now, years later, Rosario Guadalupe sees that clearly.

Her history is one of violence and abandonment, all in what was supposed to be her safe space, her family. In her house, there was a chain of sexual abuse that was breaking family ties, tacitly, in a normalized way.

– ***“My two sisters, older than me, were in relationships at 13 years old and they fled from the house. My brothers abused my older sister and tried to abuse me. My other sister was saved from abuse because she found a relationship fast. When my sisters left, I found myself alone at home. Then my two older brothers tried to abuse me. They failed because I resisted, I fought so that they would not mistreat me or take away my virginity.”***

Rosario Guadalupe was fighting against her brothers, who were at least ten years older than she was. Her brothers tried to rape her several times, they were violent. Sometimes, they turned up the volume on the radio, so no one would hear the girl’s screams.

– ***“Once, my mom heard noises in the house and came in. She found my brother wanting to abuse me, but the first one she hit was me. She hit me because she said I did not scream. She beat my brothers in the face and scolded them. Nothing else.”***

Her mother had normalized the abuse. For her, it was something imminent.

– ***“My mom told us that it had happened to her too, that she had the same story. My aunts told me that what happened to my mom was because she was a flirt, that she has always been flirtatious and at 13, she left with a man. But he did not want to be with her, just take away her virginity. He left her. Now she lives with an old man of 66, who also wanted to abuse me.”***

When her mother left Rosario Guadalupe’s last stepfather, she sent her to live with an aunt. In that house, Rosario Guadalupe cleaned and cooked. When she did not do the work, they beat her. She got up at 4 in the morning, and at 8, she had to be at school. She was always late, and tired, and she did not have the strength to study.

– ***“I only studied until the sixth grade because my mom could not help me anymore. They gave me homework that required me to buy things and I could not. I felt embarrassed. The mother of a friend supported me and gave me things for my homework. Other times, I was supported by my now husband.”***

He helped her with everything. If she needed something for school, she would tell him, and he would give it to her. If she wanted to buy something, like clothes, he would buy it. He did everything so that nothing was lacking. She was a battered and dazzled girl. He was an adult, who could have been the age of her parents. She was so abandoned and had suffered so much, that after thinking about it a little, she decided to be with him. All the attention had paid off for the man and she felt wanted only by him.

– ***“My mom never said anything to me about being with him. She practically pushed me to be with him. Every time I needed something, she would say, ‘ask him, ask him.’”***

Rosario Guadalupe went with him and nobody said anything. No one batted an eye about the age difference. Not his family. Not hers. He had been providing for her for so long that it was normal for her to go with him. Five years have passed. Now they have a daughter. ***“He has been the only person who has shown true interest in me,”*** she says.

She believes it because her life before being a mother was atrocious. Although her partner no longer lets her study, things have changed, she feels protected and provided for by him. It is what she always lacked. Before, nobody watched over her, nobody was interested in her, nobody loved her.



Photography: Lucy Tomasino



David Morales
Former Ombudsman for the
Defense of Human Rights

Childhood, who destroyed it? Who stole it? Abused since she was 9 years old, enslaved by the adults who turned her into a mother at age 12; abandoned; Kimberlly, a child mother who dropped out of school, who changed children's games for loneliness, fear, sorrow, torture, sentenced to see a life project closed before even dreaming it.

What did we do to prevent it? Cruelty, discrimination, abuse, know no limits. To change the order of injustice and violence depends on our actions. On our reporting it, on our commitment, on the collective struggle to save dignity. Never again a raped girl. Never again a tainted childhood. Never again the State, the community, the family, as accomplices of this heinous and silent violence.



SAN MIGUEL

“My older sister’s boyfriend raped me when I was 9 years old. I thought I was worth nothing.”

Kimberlly, 18 years old, three children.

– I do not want to remember what happened. It’s as if I left everything behind. I remember a little bit of all that. Suddenly things come to mind, and I remember, but other things I forget like nothing had happened.”

Kimberlly is 18 and has three sons. Her first pregnancy was at 12 years old, the second, at 14, and the third at 17. Before she was of legal age, her life had been haunted by violent and sordid events. She had been abused and exploited. She has had two children of men who were much older than she was, men who fled, because they had financial exchanges with her and got her pregnant, and that constitutes a crime. But before that, much earlier, something happened that broke her life, and, as she maintains, twisted her future.

– “What happened is that my older sister’s boyfriend raped me. I was small, I was nine years old, and he was already a big boy, about 20. I was studying at school and I did not tell anyone. I kept it all to myself.”

Kimberlly suffered a lot from the rape. She resisted and was met with violence. She did not say anything, she was just a girl, she felt shame, she felt fear, she felt pain. ***“I had a fever, because I bled. I kept it to myself, I told no***

one, I was afraid, and I felt ashamed that people were going to talk about me.”

The impact from the experience was sharp and it determined her place in life.

– “I thought I was worthless, I had nothing to lose, it was not worth anything anymore. I would ask myself what I had left to lose, when I had already lost everything. Since I thought that I had nothing to lose, I agreed to have sexual relations with my first daughter’s father.”

That happened when she was 12 years old. Her mother was in the hospital, she and her siblings had nothing to eat. A 60-year-old neighbor began to provide her with things to eat. Small things, like cookies. He also asked her to clean his house, and he paid her two dollars. For her, that money was infinite, and she could buy food for her brothers. The man invited her more and more to his house. Her mother was still in the hospital. ***“We did not have anything,”*** says Kimberlly. Then, the 60-year-old neighbor asked her to have sex with him.

– “I agreed to have sex with him, because of the need that I had. He told me that if I wanted to, he could do it only between my legs, and he also said that he could not have children because of a surgery he got in the United States. I said yes, and then I got pregnant. I was 12 years old. I did not really know what pregnancy was. I had been raped.”

The rest was a scandal. Her siblings sued the neighbor, and he fled. Kimberlly spent her pregnancy at the ISNA home, which she recalls as an experience she does not want to relive.

After the birth, she returned to her mother’s house. Then, alone and without income, she fell back into the trap of an older man who wanted to have sex with her. He was also a neighbor, he was 50 years old. Kimberlly wanted to run away from home, but she needed money, and she was desperate. The man had harassed her for a long time, especially after she had her first child. ***“I was 14 years old, and I got pregnant the second time.”***

Her plans changed, and her life changed. At 15, she was the mother of two children and had not finished school. In addition, the fathers of the children had fled their responsibility. One fled to the United States, the other took responsibility for just a few months.

Kimberlly decided to leave her neighborhood and test her luck in the departmental capital. There she tossed tortillas, and she sold them informally. She earned \$ 10 a day and kept the money for her children. But when her son became ill, she returned to the old neighborhood with her mother. She felt that having children so young was the worst thing that had happened to her in her life.

– “Men do not want to be with a woman who already had children with another man, they want to be with one that they can make a woman.”

She thought that she could make a change in her life if she went to a church. She hoped that she would be respected, that no one would make fun of her, like the men who made her pregnant, that no one would see her as less because she had two children so young, that no one could humiliate her anymore. Two years later, she met the father of her third daughter.

Her sister sold fruit and asked for help one afternoon. While she was selling, a boy who was a little older than she was saw her. ***My sister told me that she wanted to give my phone number to a friend of her boyfriend, because he wanted to meet me. I told her that I did not give my number to strangers.*** She gave it to him anyway, and he called me and asked if I wanted to date him. I said, ***“I just met you and you are calling me. I’m not going to hang out with someone I’ve never seen in my life. First, we have to get to know each other.”***

On one of the afternoons of the sale, the boy who called her on the phone approached the fruit stand and waited for her to finish working. He accompanied her on the walk home.

– “He bought me some things to take home. I got to know him for a while before starting a relationship. I was afraid that he was a gang member, but he is a day laborer.”

Kimberlly moved in with him soon after into a small, corrugated metal house. She says this is the most beautiful stage of her life.

– “I had my third girl. Before, with my other two children, I felt they were nothing of mine. I did not have the love that I have for the girl. I took care of them, even though I almost did not feel love. On the other hand, my girl, I feel it more than with the two of them, I love her properly.”



Photography: Lucy Tomasino



Cristina Cornejo
Parliamentarian of El Salvador

It is with great sadness that I have learned about Dolores' story, which is only one more of the thousands of cases of our girls in El Salvador. She was forced to move in with someone, she was forced to be humiliated. Dolores' story is one more motivation to do what needs to be done, for Dolores, for her cousin's wife and for our girls, we need to ban marriage among minors, which is a rescue move to legalize abuse towards our girls.

I wonder if we can imagine the life she could have if her rights had been respected, if she had not been obligated to get into a union; I have no doubt that this would be a different story, beyond that of the damaged goods'.

It gets my attention though, given the hardships she has endured at such a young age, that she is willing to move forward, to get better, it is impressive, commendable. Dolores' story is a story of violence, but let's pause and think about the type of future that her two children are building, reproducing poverty, lack of opportunities, a result of the violation to their mother's human rights.

Thanks for sharing her experience, thanks for the advice to prevent other girls from going through the same situation. Society will not have real development if we continue to violate women's rights, even worse, the rights of our girls, the girls that we must protect, the ones we need to help build a path towards development, the girls to whom we need to provide opportunities.



MORAZÁN

“In my house, they told me, ‘You are already his and we do not want damaged goods’, so they forced me to be with him.”

Dolores, 22 years old, two children.

Dolores has two children, both with different men. The story, on the other hand, is the same. They were men who abandoned her during pregnancy. Neither of them acknowledged their children

Dolores entered a relationship against her will when she was 14 years old. In her family, they believed that women went to school only to look for husbands, or to become pregnant. So, they took her out of school.

– ***“When I was in sixth grade, my grandparents told me I had to stop studying. They told me, ‘You can’t study anymore because when girls go to school they only go to find boyfriends, or to meet someone’.***

Her family environment was a broken network. Her mother abandoned her, so her grandparents raised her. Her mother has another family, and Dolores feels, with sadness, that rejection. ***“My mom did not love me,”*** she says.

As a woman, she was more exposed to everything in her family. ***“I did not have autonomy, the ability to make decisions, freedom or a voice. That’s how grandparents are in the villages, they do not trust you, they do not believe in young people. It hurt me to be taken out of school because I had the desire to improve my situation.”***

She was 15 years old when she finished sixth grade, her last year at school. They left her in the house, confined to domestic chores. Soon, Dolores met the father of her first child. He was 25 years old, worked at a sawmill and he started talking to her. Talking back to him was her mistake.

– ***My grandmother was told that I was already having sex with him. In my house, they told me, ‘You are already his and we do not want damaged goods here’, so they forced me to be with him.”***

They only lived together for three months, and they were months of violence and contempt.

– ***“He was suffering for another woman. He said that if I did not leave the house, he would leave, so I had to go. To this day, I wonder why he was in a relationship with me. After we separated, he got together with another woman. He never even met his baby.”***

Thus, a chain of abandonments continued to be woven. In the end, a child abandoned by their father. Alone and pregnant, Dolores started looking for a job. It was her, and no one else, who was going to get her child ahead.

– ***“I’ve always been alone. I lived with my grandparents, but you can see that they did not trust me. I did not see my mom again. One must find a way to earn money, not the easy way, but by working. A year ago, I left my neighborhood to find work. First, in a pupusería, making tortillas. I started working to have money when the child was born.”***

Her grandmother found out and returned her to her house. ***“After they had thrown me out of the house, they picked me up again.”***

She had her son and went back to work in a pupusería. There, she met the father of her second son. The story was very similar. Her second son had the same fate, her father abandoned her. Neither father of her children took responsibility. They did not even give them their last names. They did not register them at city hall, they did not get to know them. Nothing.

– ***“Sometimes you feel a bit humiliated. At the beginning, men fulfill what they say, then they turn their backs. They even came to doubt the paternity of the children. The father of my second son, told me, ‘You work in a pupusería, and there are so many people, that child could be any man’s.’ I could not believe that he said that, so I did not insist on being with him. It hurt me a lot. It has been difficult for me to be alone, but I have managed to get ahead with my children.”***

Dolores earns \$ 130 a month making tortillas. With that she pays the rent, the food and the children’s things, the clothes, the school, the medical expenses. ***“If I manage to be thrifty, I calculate that in about five, seven years, I will be able to start my own pupusería. I already know how to handle the trade,”*** she says.

Dolores wants her children to have a better life than hers. For example, they sleep in a bed. She always slept in a hammock. Life has been hard on her, but she is determined. She has a hardness that comes from strength, from an old story.

– ***“Men should have more dignity. Because they like to be with young girls of 12, 14, 15 years old, but they do not take responsibility for them. Men believe that the younger they are, the easier it is to cheat. Afterwards, they disregard them and treat them with contempt, like a small thing. And it is they, the men, who should have dignity.”***



Beatriz Alcaine
Cultural promoter

I read about Gladis and it sets off a mixture of memories, ideas, numbers, and crazy thoughts inside of me, and they all hurt. All of them. I do not want to write, but rather to scream. I, abused at the age of 12, could be her.

It hurts me how her whole story is “lukewarm,” “normal,” and how it’s just one of the 20,000 daily stories of girl-mothers in the world. It hurts me because Gladis herself does not see any light at the end of the tunnel. She is already excluded from all possibilities, and even if she manages to have the hope that her children can leave the salt mine, how can they leave if their only choice of school in this village of La Union, is the same one that the parents abandoned without teaching them the very first of their rights-dignity?

I see a dog chasing its own tail here. These children who are now 4 and 2 years old, already without a father because he went north, with a grandfather who earns \$ 7 a day (and only in the summer), at what age will they get a girl pregnant? And at what age are they going to leave her with the little one to go north? It hurts me because I understand

that Gladis, at 18, cannot conceive of a life without motherhood and says that having children is “the best thing that can happen to you.” Under those conditions, what could be better?

What could be better are quality early childhood programs. What could be better is an active and open school. What could be better are workshops on knowing yourself and vocational training. What could be better are specific and clear sex education programs. What could be better is access to contraceptive methods. What could be better is to focus on stopping “male abortions”*. What could be better are healthy leisure and recreational spaces throughout the country. What could be better are museums and bookstores and theaters. What could be better is understanding the strength of 580 million adolescent girls in the world if between 14 and 18 years of age they could feel butterflies in their stomachs and not a baby’s kicks.

* Male abortion is a term proposed by the journalist and writer María López Vigil to refer to the number of cases in which men inseminate women and avoid responsibility for the person who is on the way.



LA UNIÓN

“He left, just like that, from one day to the next. I feel like he betrayed me by leaving.”

Gloria, years old, two children.

Gloria is alone. In her house, with her children and her loneliness. External noise, that noise so heavy in the silence that it cuts out the children’s voices, and which sounds like the interference of an old radio signal. At times, wells of silence extend between Gloria and her biography. Gloria is alone.

She is dedicated to her role as a mom. Sometimes, she thinks about the possibility of working, doing small things, women’s jobs that she was raised to do. She had her first relationship when she was 13 and her partner was 22. When her first daughter was born, Gloria was 14. Her second son was born just a year before this interview, when she was 17 years old.

Although she was just a minor, Gloria was already the mother of two children and experienced two departures, and two abandonments. The same year that her son was born, her partner went to the United States. ***“He left the child when he was very small,”*** she says. That same year, her mother also left for the United States. She only took Gloria’s younger brother, who was 8 years old. Now they are both in New York.

She has a ruptured family. There’s no net. Before her mother’s migration, her parents were already separated. And shortly after the migration of her partner, Gloria lived through another separation.

– “From over there he would call me jealous. He called me on the phone and if I did not answer he would say ‘Son of a bitch, who are you with, who are you with?’ I was in the house, washing or cleaning and I did not hear the phone. Then he got angrier and told me we should separate. It was sad, but I agreed. So, we are no longer together, and the money for the children is sent to his sister and she comes once a week to bring food, like vegetables. The truth is that I do not miss him very much.”

She does not miss him because some days, some nights, her partner was violent. Sometimes he drank, sometimes he screamed. Other times, he threatened her.

– “He was my neighbor, and I fell in love. When my parents knew that I was with him, they asked me not to do it, because I was very little. I did not think much of it, really. School was hard for me and it was difficult to learn, so I imagined that my life would be about being in a relationship with someone. So, I left school in fifth grade. I learned to read and write but it’s hard for me to add and multiply.”

Gloria started a relationship with a man who had not finished school either. They had no home, no land of their own. They planted corn and beans, she ground corn and made tortillas. In the summer, her partner worked in a salt mine. At that job, his wage 7 dollars. Nothing else. In the winter there was no work.

Before her partner migrated to the United States, they had already separated once, but they got back together. ***We separated and tried again but his brothers did not want us to be together again. After the separation, his family spoke ill of me, they said that because of me he was in jail. But he was imprisoned for what he did, that’s what the judge said.*** The family judge took Gloria’s case. Her partner was violent and one night he threatened her with death.

– “He locked me in a room, with the girl, and broke a bottle. He shouted that with that bottle he was going to kill me. The girl got scared and started crying. So, he struggled to take her away from me. She was little, but that’s why she’s scared of him, that’s how she grew up. Since the girl was so afraid of him, and I said that he had threatened to kill me, the judge issued a restraining order against him.”

After the restraining order was given by the judge, the father of her children went to the United States, but they caught him. He has a record for interfamily violence. ***“His family is angry with me, they say it’s my fault, Gloria says.”*** Therefore, she is a single mother.

– “I do not miss him. He left, just like that, from one day to the next. I feel that he betrayed me for leaving, but sometimes those behaviors make one mature. Of all that, I gained strength to take care of my children. I’m not going to study anymore, but with everything that happened, I want my children to keep going, to study as far as they can, to go to an academy afterwards, wherever they want.”



