

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Teenage Pregnancy in Colombia

"I cannot ignore the reality here and what surrounds me...I cannot imagine myself doing anything else."

— **Catalina Escobar Restrepo**, Founder and President of the Juan Felipe Gómez Escobar (Juanfe) Foundation

"The world desperately needs to help kids avoid unintended pregnancies — for their sake and for the sake of their children."

— **Nicholas Kristof**, Journalist and Co-Author of *A Path Appears: Transforming Lives, Creating Opportunity*

Individuals Featured in This Episode

- **Nicholas Kristof** — Journalist; Co-author, *A Path Appears: Transforming Lives, Creating Opportunity*
- **Sheryl WuDunn** — Journalist; Co-author, *A Path Appears: Transforming Lives, Creating Opportunity*
- **Eva Longoria** — Actor/Advocate
- **Catalina Escobar Restrepo** — Founder and president, the Juan Felipe Gómez Escobar (Juanfe) Foundation

COLOMBIA IN CONTEXT

Colombia is one of the most populous nations in South America but also has a highly stratified society influenced by a colonial past. Traditionally, rich families of Spanish descent have benefited from the country's wealth to a far greater degree than the majority, whose cultural and racial heritage is a combination of indigenous, African, and European ancestry. The extreme economic disparity and limited social mobility led to a long history of political unrest that included the rise of left-wing activists and insurgents and brutal, right-wing paramilitary groups. In recent years, the country has been working to change the global image of Colombia as a troubled nation associated with drugs and kidnapping.

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Colombia is a middle-income country, but development is slower to take hold in rural areas and among the millions of people uprooted by conflict (2008). Adolescent fertility is high, and the maternal mortality rate indicates substantial gaps in health services. Inequalities exist in the access to contraception, according to wealth: 75 percent for women at the richest level, compared to 67.5 percent for women who are less wealthy (Naciones Unidas en Colombia, 2014). A 2010 report by Profamilia in collaboration with the Colombia Ministry of Social Protection and the Directorate of Public Health highlighted a decline in fertility rates of adolescents aged 15 to 19: from 90 per 1,000 women in 2005 to 84 per 1,000 women in 2010. However, roughly "16% of adolescents were already mothers, 4% were pregnant with their first child, and 20% had been pregnant at least once" (Pan American Health Organization [PAHO], 2012). The risk of dying from pregnancy-related causes is four times as high for adolescents under the age of 16 than it is for women over 16. Pregnant adolescents are also more likely to have preterm or low-birth-weight babies, and newborns of teenagers have higher rates of neonatal mortality (Naciones Unidas en Colombia, 2014). Legal abortions are only available in Colombia when the mother or baby is at risk.

Sexual education became obligatory across Colombia in the 1990s in the hope that young people would have a place to discuss questions and concerns about reproductive health—conversations which are perceived as taboo in many communities. Efforts to provide education and free contraception have been problematic. In a country that is 90 percent Catholic, resistance to these policies from the Catholic Church has had a notable impact. Representatives of the church have expressed concern that the programs were promoting ideas of sex over abstinence.

In 2006, Colombia implemented a pilot project in four cities to improve sexual and reproductive health education in schools called Education for Sexuality and Citizenship Construction. This curriculum was based in civil rights and covered sexuality and reproductive and sexual health.