

## The Topic of Sex Draws Hundreds to a Binational Dialog

By Mariana Martínez

Sex education amongst teens, as well as sexual and reproductive rights have been greatly restricted by public policies enacted upon pressure from conservative groups backed by religious right, both in Mexico and the US, a situation challenging the separation of church and state in both of these countries.

This recent trend has led to situations like the one 23 year-old Sarah Calderón encountered. The young Tijuana native was a college sophomore earning a psychology major in 2006 when she was kicked out of school because she talked about sex.

"I attended this junior high as part of a teaching class; I choose to prepare a sex-ed class, with contents and methods approved by my teacher" Calderón tells us, "but when I started the class at this public school, the principal kicked me out, accusing me

of using foul language and inappropriate information: I was talking about contraception, calling body parts by their name...now the school has banned all student practitioners like me from working there."

The experience hit her hard and pushed her into activism. Currently the young graduate is the state coordinator for the Iberoamerican Human Rights Network.

Her experience is just one of many shared at the second Binational Dialog for sexual and reproductive rights in Mexico and the US.

State senator Denise Moreno Ducheny spoke at the event and highlighted the importance of such binational dialog for the advancement of a social agenda.

"More and more we are seeing binational foundations tackle health issues on both sides of the border. I hope there comes a point where governments learn from these models of

cooperation and learn once and for all its not by free trade but by abiding to a common social contract that we can make a binational community."

The event was held by *Planned Parenthood* and over 300 women attended the conferences and discussion groups, most of them pertaining to non-profits in both sides of the border.

"Our focus is education and the practice of safe sex to lower health risks, that's where 90% of our efforts are" said Planned Parenthood directive for the Pacific West, Tracy Loughridge.

"That's why it's so discouraging when our organization is portrayed as promoting abortion, when all we believe is that there should be a legal, safe way to terminate an unwanted pregnancy" she added.

Most of those attending the conference concur on the fact that talking openly about sexuality from a sci-

entific standpoint has become more difficult and efforts to demonize contraception or the voluntary interruption of pregnancy.

In the US, these hyper conservatives have taken the form of the Tea Party and even Sarah Palin was recently quoted as saying she doesn't believe in the separation of church and state.

In Mexico, those same tendencies have flourished. While on the one hand Mexico City, under a liberal leftist government - approved the legalization of pregnancy termination, guaranteeing free treatment in public hospitals to do so, and has approved same-sex marriage.

As a clear rejection of those changes, almost half of all 31 states in Mexico, Baja California included, have changed the terms of their state constitutions to confirm marriage be

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tween a man and a woman and defend "the right to life from the moment of conception" banning voluntary termination of pregnancy even in cases of rape.

This is a clear violation of the Mexican Constitution and at least a dozen international treaties signed by Mexico, where they vow to defend gender equality and social inclusion, said Elizabeth Maier, social researcher for the border think tank, Colegio de la Frontera Norte.

"There is logic from what I call the other discourse, —the parochial discourse—, that has clear objectives: One is the devalued power of the state and of science, and it's exactly those two main things we have to defend, otherwise we can end up under a regime like that of the Taliban under a different religion" said Maier.

The social researcher considers a worrying trend in Mexico when bishops can publicly condemn politicians who favor reproductive rights or even accuse Mexico City mayor and Supreme Court Judges of misconduct and corruption regarding the decriminalization of abortion in Mexico City.

All of it, without a sanction from the state.

"In a democracy with separation of church and state, the main characteristic is that the state guarantees each person can believe and practice what they choose without imposing it on to others, but that's exactly what's happen-

ing here, therefore the state is only apparently separate from religion" Maier added.

Those blurring lines between public and private matters has had terrible implications for the advancement of equal rights in Mexico, especially those vulnerable populations such as women, homosexuals and indigenous people, as it was stated by the guest of honor, María Consuelo Mejía, Director for Catholics for the Right to Choose in Mexico.

Addressing an adoring audience, Mejia explained there is an alarming lack of information and education both in Mexico and other Latin-American countries but is hopeful for a change after recent polls in México, Brazil, Bolivia y Colombia, show that Catholics do not share the views of the catholic hierarchy and wish for them to stay out of public discussions, and this is especially true in reproductive moral.

"We have to convince people making decisions, to stop considering abortion as a sin, it has to do with a right to choose over our own bodies, it is an issue of social justice, an issue of democracy, a problem affecting people's lives and that's why its key to take it out of the moral plain" said the activist.

But even from a religious stand point, feminist Catholics like Mejia consider it vital to disseminate an alternative moral and they have recently launched an education campaign aiming to educate about freedom of conscience, a term used in the Catholic faith but often forgotten.

The best argument in the campaign is one stating: "Even Mary was consulted before becoming a mom."