Policy Brief

Unleashing aspirations while ensuring opportunities could help reduce teenage pregnancy in Latin America and the Caribbean

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KEY MESSAGES

- Two-thirds of youth aged 15-24 out of school and out of work in Latin America and the Caribbean are girls, mainly because the region has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the world.

- There is empirical evidence that teenage pregnancy is linked to girls’ low aspirations, which are shaped by lack of role models, information, and confidence due to social norms.

- Policy interventions can help boost adolescent girls’ aspirations and opportunities through exposure to role models, vocational training including life skills training, and conditional cash transfers.
CONTEXT
Teen pregnancies are common in Latin America and the Caribbean and pose risks for the mother and her future family. Though it has fallen, the region has the second highest teen pregnancy rate in the world (55 births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19), after Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank 2023a) (Figure 1). Teenage pregnancy poses risk of health complications and can lead to lower educational achievement and fewer job opportunities (Azevedo et al. 2012; The Economist 2019; World Bank 2023a).

Indeed, young women are more likely to be out of school and to be jobless than men. Two thirds of the region’s youth (aged 15-24) out of school and out of work are women, a quarter of all women of this age (16 percent for men) (de Hoyos, Rogers, and Székely 2016; World Bank 2023b).[1] The most important predictor for young women to be in that situation is teenage pregnancy (World Bank 2023a). [2]

Teenage girls’ low aspirations can be both a cause and a consequence of their early pregnancy. Aspirations are people’s ideals for the future, including their education level, type of job, wealth, family, and social status, all of which are shaped by their circumstances and social environment (Ray 2006; Genicot and Ray 2020; Fruttero, Muller, and Calvo-González 2024).

Aspirations can be motivating life goals. However, they can also be limited prospects that lead to missed opportunities, especially in the context of poverty (Ray 2006; Dalton, Ghosal, and Mani 2016). With low aspirations and no clear foreseeable opportunities, teenage girls can think of getting pregnant as a relatively appealing outcome (Azevedo et al. 2012). Further, dropping out of school and being jobless can reduce adolescent mothers’ aspirations.

Figure 1. Teenage pregnancy in Latin America is falling but stubbornly high

Average birth per 1,000 women aged 15-19 in five regions, 2000-21


[1] 15- to 24-year-old who are out of school and out of work are referred to as “NEET”: Not in Education, Employment, nor Training.
[2] In 2010, 20 percent of NEET girls in Latin America and the Caribbean had started their own household with children, compared to only 1 percent in the case of NEET boys (de Hoyos, Rogers, and Popova 2015). In 2019, 70 percent of NEET girls compared to 10 percent of NEET boys were responsible for household care work (World Bank 2022).
STUDY DESCRIPTION

A framework paper (Muller et al. 2024), supported by the Latin America and the Caribbean Gender Innovation Lab (LACGIL), presents a framework to foster aspirations, while ensuring that opportunities are in place to accomplish them, offering a tool for policymakers and researchers to diagnose situations and design policy interventions. Aspirations are linked to a range of educational, employment, and business outcomes (Fruttero, Muller, and Calvo-González 2024), but high aspirations without the opportunities to achieve them can backfire, make people worse off, and can lead to frustration (Ray 2006; Genicot and Ray 2020).

To facilitate the design of policy interventions, our framework highlights that addressing either aspirations or opportunities in isolation can lead to unfavorable scenarios, such as falling into an aspiration trap (missed opportunities due to low aspirations), experiencing frustration (when aspirations are enhanced without matching opportunities) or a perpetuating a poverty trap (when only one of these dimensions is fostered).

While the framework applies to a broad range of policy fields (from antipoverty programs to coaching programs to microentrepreneurs, mentoring for students, and role models interventions for student girls and adult women, among others), it is useful to think about its implications in the context of teenage pregnancy in Latin America and the Caribbean.

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THE EVIDENCE

There is empirical evidence that teenage pregnancy in Latin America and the Caribbean may result from an aspiration trap, in which girls miss opportunities by being unaware of them or feeling unable to achieve them. [3]

Cross-sectional and panel data show that adolescent girls with lower educational aspirations are more likely to become NEET (Not in Education, Employment, nor Training) and to become pregnant while in their teenage years. Youth with higher educational aspirations are significantly less likely to be NEET in five out of seven Latin American countries that took part in a cross-sectional survey in 2017-18, especially female youth (Alvarado et al. 2020).[4] Remarkably, the correlation holds even after controlling for socioeconomic characteristics, which means low aspirations are linked to being NEET beyond income status. Consistently, panel data in Peru show that 15-year-olds aspiring to complete university in 2009 were less likely to have unprotected sex at the age of 19 (Favara and Sánchez 2017), and teenage girls with higher education aspirations and self-efficacy (confidence in abilities to achieve objectives) were less likely to become pregnant at the same age (Favara, Lavado, and Sánchez 2020).[5]

A 2012 qualitative study on teenage pregnancy in Ecuador also concluded that limited aspirations for the future — reinforced by a lack of agency — was one of the key determinants of the outcome (Azevedo et al. 2012). For most of the girls interviewed for the study, the pregnancy was unplanned and did not aspire to a clear path towards higher education or anything similar that would have been interrupted.

Although there is no evidence to unveil unambiguously the causes of pregnant teenagers’ low aspirations, two interrelated factors may influence it:

1. Girls may not be aware of the opportunities they could aspire to, such as various educational paths or job types. Illustrating the impact of providing information, tenth graders in Mexico who received information on the benefits of education and the availability of higher-education scholarships through interactive computer software got higher math scores in a national test two years later (Avitabile and de Hoyos 2018). Girls particularly benefited from the program and were more likely to choose to study economics in high school and were less likely to wish to be married at ages 18-20.

2. Girls may incorrectly believe that they are incapable of fulfilling higher aspirations. The underestimation of abilities and opportunities often results from a combination of lacking role models, restrictive social norms, and stereotypes, which are self-reinforcing. As a result, the scarcity of women in traditionally male-dominated fields can discourage female students from pursuing careers in those areas. [6] Such factors may explain, for example, why women are less likely to study in STEM fields around the world, including in Colombia (Dulce-Salcedo et al. 2022).[7] There is evidence that female role models do inspire girls. Indeed, female students in Colombia who were exposed to a higher proportion of female STEM teachers during secondary education have a higher probability of enrollment in tertiary STEM programs, while such a relation is not observed for men (Dulce-Salcedo et al. 2022). Similarly, in Peru and Mexico, showcasing success stories of women alumni doubled girls’ applications to a software-coding program (Del Carpio and Guadalupe 2022). The 2012 qualitative study in Ecuador illustrates the role of restrictive social norms and stereotypes: the study finds that pregnancy was perceived by teenage girls as a faster transition towards adult life and that it

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[3] Empirical studies measure aspirations with indexes built from surveys. For a review and discussion of empirical measures of aspirations, see Fruttero, Muller, and Calvo-González (2021).

[4] The seven countries are Brazil, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Haiti, Mexico, and Paraguay. The statistically significant and negative correlation holds among youths in all countries but El Salvador and Haiti.

[5] These studies are observational, rather than causal, and could be biased by unobserved factors, endogeneity and measurement errors, they show robust associations controlling for other relevant factors.
fitted traditional gender roles and stereotypes highly prevalent among youths in the country (Azevedo et al. 2012). For both girls and boys, the predominant association with being a woman was being a mother; they described the home as the predominant space of the woman and described the role of the man as that of breadwinner and decisionmaker.

Teenage girls may also suffer a poverty trap, in which they are in a vicious circle of low aspirations (possibly caused by the same factors above mentioned) and low opportunities. Indeed, poor girls tend to be more likely to become pregnant as a teenager, for example in Peru (Favara, Lavado, and Sánchez 2020), and to be NEET (de Hoyos, Rogers, and Székely 2016).

[6] It is also possible that even though girls would be aware of their opportunities and feel capable to pursue them, they might not be willing to do so to avoid social isolation. For example, girls may avoid STEM careers to avoid male-dominated fields.

[7] In the United States, for instance, women with strong math abilities underestimate their math skills, which prevent them from pursuing STEM majors, despite large returns to such degrees (Saltiel 2023).
While a review of interventions aiming to improve the well-being of adolescent girls found no interventions to be categorically effective across multiple contexts in delaying pregnancies among adolescent girls (Bergstrom and Ozler 2023), some related to increasing aspirations and opportunities are promising.

Increasing aspirations through role models
Role models can play a crucial role in expanding horizons and demonstrating that seemingly unattainable outcomes are, in fact, achievable. They could include live role models. For example, a school in Colombia introduced a “sexual-citizenship” curriculum, which involved older students talking to younger ones about sex and reduced the number of pregnancies among its 4,000 pupils from 70 a year to zero (The Economist 2019). Being exposed to role models through videos could help too, especially in countries like Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico where long-lasting soap operas are highly popular. For example, in the 1960s fertility rates started to drop in Brazilian cities that could receive soap operas featuring families with fewer children than the average Brazilian family at that time (La Ferrara, Chong and Duryea 2012). Similarly, in the United States, the MTV show 16 and Pregnant, which depicted the problems that young girls face when they get pregnant, contributed to a significant reduction in teen pregnancy rates during the months after its introduction (Kearney and Levine 2015).

Increasing aspirations and opportunities through job and life skills training programs
Job training programs mixing vocational and life skills training can enhance aspirations and better opportunities and discourage early pregnancy. An example of this type of program in the Dominican Republic included workshops to increase participants’ self-esteem, self-efficacy, and enhancement of life plans. It reduced teenage pregnancy by 20 percent by improving adolescents’ socioemotional skills and aspirations (Novella and Ripani 2016). There are some successful examples from other regions too. Take the case of a club for adolescent girls in Uganda, which combined vocational training focused on small-scale income-generating activities and life skills training to foster aspirations and help girls make informed choices about sex, reproduction, and marriage (Bandiera et al. 2020). The program raised the likelihood that girls are self-employed by half, without reducing their schooling enrollment. It also reduced teen pregnancy, early entry into marriage/cohabitation, and the share of girls reporting sex against their will. A similar intervention teaching socioemotional skills, especially around traditional gender roles, to teenage girls without vocational training increased school enrollment and higher take-up of health services and use of modern contraceptive methods in Argentina (World Bank 2020).

Increasing aspirations and opportunities through conditional cash transfers
Conditional cash transfers (CCTs) can also provide an opportunity that raises aspirations. For example, a CCT program in Colombia where adolescent girls received a subsidy if they attended school, completed their school year, and enrolled in the following year, reduced pregnancy among adolescents across all grades included in the program (Cortés, Gallego, and Maldonado 2016). A likely channel is that staying longer in school raises aspirations, while also increasing current opportunities (the subsidy) and future opportunities (employment).[8]
REFERENCES

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