

Gender-based equality and violence in Galapagos

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Equality is a vital component of societal progress, underpinning cultural and environmental protection and feeding into almost every element of sustainable development. Inequality takes many forms, including discrimination in employment and pay, unequal access to education and other basic services, and violence. In Ecuador, one major barrier to equality is the high levels of abuse suffered by women and girls. A National Survey in 2019 found that one third of women had experienced some form of abuse (including psychological, physical, sexual, economic and gynaecological) in the last 12 months, and two thirds had experienced the same in their lifetime (INEC 2019). Abuse of non-cis, and non-heterosexual people is also a serious issue, although it has been studied less. Important steps toward tackling abuse of women have been made through the development and ratification of various conventions, laws, plans and commissions in Ecuador since the 1980s, and, more recently, the creation of the Comprehensive Organic Law to Prevent and Eradicate Violence against Women in 2018. This Law enables the implementation of policies and actions for the prevention of violence and the care, protection and reparation of victims (LOIPEVCM 2018), with the support of the Integral National System for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence Against Women. The National Plan for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence against Women 2020-2030 was then established to aid the implementation of the Law and its regulations.

In Galapagos, 22% of women reported experiencing abuse in the last 12 months and 56% reported experiencing abuse in their lifetimes, most commonly in their homes (INEC 2019) and predominantly at the hands of people known to them, typically males (USFQ 2020). However, abuse is often normalised among the community and these statistics are likely under-representative. As in the rest of the world, reports of domestic abuse increased significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic (UN Women 2021). Galapagos also has high rates of teenage pregnancies, with 21% of women having had their first child under the age of 17 years (USFQ 2020), and pregnancies have been recorded in girls as young as 12. Contraceptives are not readily available, particularly to teenagers (who typically require parental consent if purchasing under the age of 18), a significant percentage of both men and women feel uncomfortable accessing them in public, and only 66% of people report receiving any form of sexual education (USFQ 2020). Abortion is only legal in cases of rape or a threat to life, which leads to illegal procedures which often cause serious physical and mental harm. The residency system of Galapagos can be a complicating factor, with abuse arising through labour exploitation and dependency of some women and other vulnerable individuals (and their children) on their partners for residence (UN Women 2020). Systems in Galapagos do not adequately provide protection for individuals against abuse or support for victims (UN Women 2020) and trust of institutions relating to police, public health and justice is low (e.g. 57% of women in Galapagos reported little trust in public health systems; USFQ 2020). In addition, average income for women in Galapagos is lower than men, more men attend university, and the unemployment rate is double for women, which also likely increases their vulnerability to violence.

These issues have been repeatedly highlighted as priorities in recent years. The Galapagos 2030 Plan calls for the development of mechanisms to eradicate violence against women, increase care for victims and eliminate teenage pregnancies (2030 Plan). In the 2021 SDG prioritisation process for Galapagos, Target 5.2 (“Eliminate all forms of gender-based violence”) was identified as one of the most urgent, with 3.7 (“Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health services”) following closely behind (ODS Galapagos).

The Strategic Plan for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence Against Women in Galapagos 2021-2025 details strategies and actions to reduce violence, promote the rights of women, protect women and girls and increase care for victims of abuse and their families. These include strengthening institutional management and inter-institutional coordination against gender-based violence, providing trained personnel and specialised services, and strengthening frameworks for the protection of victims and prosecution of perpetrators (UN Women 2021). As recommended in this Strategic Plan, the Ordinance for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence Against Women in Galapagos was signed in 2021, to strengthen the 2018 national law at the local level. It outlines steps for reducing violence through the creation of public policies and a Commission for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence against Women in Galapagos, to be formed of the representatives of the Integral National System and CGREG (Ordenanza 2021).

Several themes feature across these studies and plans, which must be considered as priorities for Galapagos. First and foremost, education and awareness on violence linked to gender and sexuality should be improved as a matter of urgency, as well as education on sexual and reproductive health and rights. Part of this can be with the contextualised curriculum, which can be further adapted with a gender and inclusivity focus. Importantly, campaigns and resources should be developed for men and boys, as well as women and girls. Violence prevention campaigns are also needed to reduce normalisation. Access to contraceptives should be improved, and access to quality gynaecological care should be secured for all. Policies for equality regardless of gender or sexuality and support for victims of abuse should be created and implemented across all institutions, and diversity should be increased within decision-making spaces. Particular efforts should go towards improving the protection and care of women, abuse victims and other vulnerable people by the police, justice and healthcare systems. The latter should include provision of quality and confidential mental health support, with specialised professionals. Prevention of violence will require different institutions to work in a more articulated and coordinated manner (which the new Ordinance aids progress towards). Safe spaces, including emergency shelters should be established on all four inhabited islands to help victims and their children escape violent situations and receive support, and the residency regulations should be analysed and improved to decrease the vulnerability of non-permanent residents suffering abuse. In addition, robust and confidential systems should be established for collection and analysis of data related to violence against women and other vulnerable groups, rates of pregnancy among those under 18, and equality in employment, to inform further progress. Finally, the rule of law in Galapagos should be strengthened to prosecute perpetrators of violence. In the design and implementation of all the above, input should be sought from a wide range of people, with diversity in terms of age, gender, sexuality, situation and background.