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STATE INNOVATION EXCHANGE

State Legislator Delegation Visited El Salvador for Fact-Finding Mission on Abortion Bans (PHOTOS)

State legislators on the front lines of abortion ban battles met women who have been imprisoned as a result of El Salvador's total abortion ban



Back row from L to R: FL Rep. Cindy Polo, AL Rep. Merika Coleman, GA Sen. Nikema Williams, OH Rep. Stephanie Howse, AZ Rep. Raquel Terán inside Izalco Prison with 13 women incarcerated as a result of the total abortion ban.

Delegation examined the connection between abortion bans and sex education, sexual violence, maternal health and the separation of families as a result of incarceration

San Salvador, El Salvador -- A delegation of five state legislators from states hostile to abortion rights, including states like Alabama, Georgia and Ohio, which each passed high-profile abortion bans in 2019, traveled to El Salvador last week to examine the consequences of abortion bans. El Salvador has criminalized abortion since 1998 and, as a result, more than 140 women who have experienced obstetric emergencies have been prosecuted, including at least 36 women who have been sentenced to up to 40 years in prison.

Participating state legislators from State Innovation Exchange's (SiX) Reproductive Freedom Leadership Council included: **Alabama** State Representative Merika Coleman**, Ohio** State Representative Stephanie Howse**, Florida** State Representative Cindy Polo**, Arizona** State Representative Raquel Terán**,** and **Georgia** State Senator Nikema Williams.

During the fact-finding trip from November 12-15, 2019, the state legislators visited: leading activists and a human rights lawyer who handles cases of the incarcerated women; a sex education program working with adolescents, who account for one third of all births in the country; the country's primary maternity hospital where physicians care for pregnant girls as young as 10-years-old and women with high-risk pregnancies; a former congressman and leading businesswoman who are addressing the private sector on this issue, among others.

During their visit to Izalco prison, the legislators met with the 13 women currently incarcerated. These women, who were prosecuted after experiencing obstetric emergencies, including miscarriages and stillbirths, all come from low-income communities. The majority have other children, however, they have not seen their families for an extended period of time. Following the prison, the delegation met with four freed women, including Teodora del Carmen Vazquez, who was released in 2018 after serving 10 years in prison, to talk about reuniting with their families and the challenges of reentering society and finding work.

"All of the unintended consequences we talk about as possibilities when abortion bans pass were made very real during my time in El Salvador," said **Georgia state senator Nikema Williams**. "Unintended consequences now have a name, a face, a family, and a story. As I continue to fight against abortion bans, I'll carry with me the moment of holding Sarita's hand in prison as we cried together and prayed together that she would be released and no other woman, anywhere, would ever be sentenced to prison after seeking access to abortion, let alone the loss of a pregnancy."

The fact-finding trip provided a rare opportunity to compare and contrast societal challenges that stem from abortion bans in El Salvador and the United States, and what might happen in the U.S. if abortion bans are allowed to go into effect. The trend of introducing abortion bans in U.S. state legislatures has gained steam this past year. In 2019, Alabama banned abortion entirely, while Georgia and Ohio passed bans on abortion starting at six weeks in pregnancy - before most women even know they are pregnant (none of these laws are currently in effect while litigation continues). Florida filed a similar bill in October, and Arizona is a longtime home to abortion restrictions.

While OH Rep. Stephanie Howse was in El Salvador, two Ohio legislators introduced bill banning abortion under all circumstances.

"There is a transparent and systematic attempt to ban abortion in the U.S., and the Supreme Court will soon hear yet another case about how far states can go in restricting abortion care," **said Kelly Baden, Vice President of Reproductive Rights at State Innovation Exchange (SiX).** "Really understanding what it means to ban abortion is critical for Americans. These state legislators traveled from their homes and their families to come bear witness to the devastating impact of abortion bans on women, families, and communities, sending a powerful message back to their states that our human rights are not up for debate."

El Salvador is considered to have the most extreme abortion ban in the world and regularly charges, prosecutes and imprisons women for aggravated homicide if they are suspected of having an abortion - even in cases when women have suffered a miscarriage or obstetric emergency. Earlier this year, the case of Evelyn Hernández made international headlines after she was tried a second time with aggravated homicide having delivered and lost her pregnancy she did not know she was expecting that resulted from rape. Hernández was previously sentenced to 30 years in prison and served three years before being released in early 2019. She was retried a second time in August 2019 and acquitted of all charges. However, the attorney general's office is currently appealing the judge's decision, opening the possibility of a third trial.

"This delegation demonstrated tremendous empathy as they traveled within El Salvador, looked these women and girls in the eye and told them that they matter and the world sees them, despite the government's negligence and disregard for the lives of its own citizens," **stated Paula Avila-Guillen, human rights attorney and the Director of Latin American Initiatives at Women's Equality Center.** "We need to see El Salvador as a warning. With more than 35 women having served time in prison, we already know the impact that total abortion bans have on a country, on society and families."

Media interested in photos or interviews with the legislators and experts, contact eme@stateinnovation.org.

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About State Innovation Exchange

The State Innovation Exchange (SiX) is a national resource and strategy center that collaborates with state legislators to improve people's lives through transformative

public policy. SiX provides legislators with on-the-ground support; creates tailored policy research, trainings, and communications guidance; and fosters collaboration between legislators—across chambers, across regions, and across state lines—and with grassroots movements.

SiX launched the Reproductive Freedom Leadership Council (RFLC) in 2018. Now a cohort of more than 425 legislators from 46 states, RFLC members work to protect and expand abortion rights and access and amplify the need for sound and strong state policies that support reproductive health including access to abortion care.



The SiX state legislator delegation listens to an OBGYN at the country's primary maternity hospital where they care for pregnant girls as young as 10-years-old and women with high-risk pregnancies. From L to R: OH Rep. Stephanie Howse, GA Sen. Nikema Williams, FL Rep. Cindy Polo, AZ Rep. Raquel Terán and AL Rep. Merika Coleman.