

Take Notice and Act

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When people use the term “personal responsibility” in the context of teen pregnancy, they usually refer exclusively to the teen girl’s responsibility not to get pregnant. And surely, that’s a critical part of the equation. Young Latinas are becoming pregnant in growing numbers, and they, more than anyone else, bear the burden of seeing their dreams for success slowed to a crawl, or come to a screeching halt.

But research shows, and we know from our own experience, that every individual within every community is interdependent. Teen pregnancy has serious consequences for the mother, her children, her family, her neighbors, and, indeed, for the entire society. Therefore, it is logical to involve the whole community in the effort to address the problem.

Supporting a broader sense of individual self-worth and personal aspirations is the beginning. There is no reason why the young women in our community should have narrower hopes and dreams than their non-Hispanic peers. The ambitions of young Latina women should include advanced education and successful careers, and not be limited to fulfilling certain fixed roles. Too often, however, even their own family members don’t do enough to help them to see and follow the pathways to future success. We cannot force young women to appreciate the great

opportunities they have, but we can help remove barriers, including those first established within the family.

Until recently, teen pregnancy rates had been falling steadily, in part as a result of aggressive outreach campaigns. But because few such campaigns target Latinos, not enough of them are receiving messages encouraging them to aim high and helping them to understand how to reach their goals. It's not that difficult to engage this population, as a result of unprecedented access to media and the Internet, even immigrant Latinas are embracing — some would say too readily — American pop culture. The problem is that we haven't tried hard enough to include young Hispanic women, as well as men, in teen pregnancy prevention efforts.

And perhaps Latino organizations haven't done enough either. Teen pregnancy rarely makes the list of top Hispanic organizational priorities. We must do better and I feel a personal responsibility to elevate this issue on our community's agenda. But if we're going to see our young Latinas reach their full potential, they must believe that they can dare to dream big dreams and that we're all in this together when it comes to making those dreams come true.

Janet Murguía has become a key figure among the next generation of leaders in the Latino community. Since 2005 she has served as the President and Chief Executive Officer of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States.