

EMPOWERING WOMEN AND GIRLS

REPRODUCTIVE AND SEXUAL HEALTH IN EL SALVADOR AND HONDURAS Spring 2016

A year into the project, Christian Aid's partners The Christian Agency for Integrated Development of Honduras (OCDIH) and Organisation of Salvadoran Women for Peace (ORMUSA) are seeing the fruits of their labours. In El Salvador alone, ORMUSA has so far reached more than 5,000 people – helping women and girls to get the healthcare they deserve and empowering them to claim their rights. The next few years of the project look very promising, and none of this could happen without your support.

Equal rights for all

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he writes: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.' (Galatians 3:28). This radical verse tells us that, in Jesus, all people are saved – regardless of race, gender or social standing. Paul suggests that all of us are equal in God; the early Christians clearly believed that Jesus overcomes the unequal division between women and men. This message of equality inspires Christian Aid's work and that of many of our partners across the globe. Every person, regardless of sex or gender, is entitled to a full and dignified life – but women and girls are so often held back.

**'There is no longer Jew or Greek,
there is no longer slave or free, there
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Galatians 3:28

ORMUSA and OCDIH are making Paul's words a reality in the world; they're striving to empower women and girls in places where their needs are often overlooked. Many women, especially those from indigenous communities, don't have access to essential healthcare – so pregnancy and childbirth can be very dangerous. Our partners are teaching women about their reproductive and sexual health, giving them the tools to stay well. They're also uniting women in self-help groups and equipping

them with knowledge about their rights. Together, these women are stronger, able to call for the services they desperately need.

What's more, ORMUSA and OCDIH know how important it is to educate girls on their rights as early as possible. By arranging school visits and assemblies for children and parents, they're making sure young women know the fundamentals of reproductive and sexual health. Thanks to their work, a new generation is finding the confidence to make their own life choices.



Thanks to ORMUSA, Norma is now confident about the best ways to care for her baby.

A helping hand with Norma's pregnancy

Norma García is 17 years old, and lives in Barrio El Tunal, a community in southern El Salvador. She lives with her partner and his family, and is expecting her first baby. She had to drop out of high school when she became pregnant, fearful of the negative treatment unmarried, teenage mothers receive. She's too scared to attend school near her partner's home because of possible discrimination.

Now, she spends most of her time at home doing housework. Her partner is a farmer. They're on such a low income that things are hard: despite having a regular supply of water, their house is made of mud and has a dirt floor. They hope they can improve the home before the baby arrives.

Fortunately, our partner's been supporting Norma through the challenges of young pregnancy. ORMUSA assisted the local health unit to set up a self-help group for pregnant women, which meets once a month. They've learnt all the essentials: how to breastfeed and care for a baby, as well as the ways to look after themselves. They're also learning about HIV and ways to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections in the future.



Norma's group is a lifeline for single mothers.

Norma explained how the group is a lifeline for single mothers: it's giving 'comfort to girls and women who don't have the support of the father of their future babies. Some of the members of the group are in this sad situation. Thanks to God, I am not, but some of my pregnant friends are alone.'

Although her education has been interrupted, Norma dreams of going back to school. She hopes that she can find a job that will support her family. Now she understands contraception and is able to make the choices that are best for her.

Norma's incredibly grateful for the work of the project. Her message to Christian Aid supporters in the UK is simple: 'Please, go on helping and supporting the project. God bless you all.'



Thanks to ORMUSA's work in schools, girls like Gabriela are taking control over their futures.

Gabriela's determination

Gabriela Durán is 14 years old and lives in the same district as Norma. She's from a big family, with five sisters, none of whom are mothers yet. Gabriela loves to draw and to listen to music, and she regularly goes to church and the local youth club. But she's determined to work hard at school, too: 'I endeavour to study because I want to help my family,' she says. Her father has an unsteady job, which causes tension at home, so Gabriela wants to be able to support her parents and herself in the future.

'The thing that most impressed me was that I learnt that we (girls) have the right to say no when a boy wants to have sexual relations with us'

Gabriela Durán

Thanks to ORMUSA, Gabriela has learnt all she needs to know about reproductive and sexual health. Last year, our partner organised an assembly at her school. Because her family doesn't feel comfortable talking about the subject, much was new to Gabriela; but because many girls her age are pregnant, she knows how vital these lessons are.

'At the beginning of the student assembly I got scared, because that was the first time for me to listen about that issue. But I liked the way ORMUSA explained things. It was very entertaining! The thing that most impressed me was that I learnt that we (girls) have the right to say no when a boy wants to have sexual relations with us,' Gabriela explained.

Now, Gabriela is confident and in control. She realises she's not yet ready to have a sexual relationship, and wants to focus on her studies. She's dreaming big: she aims to study for a technical qualification in aeronautics – and she's unswayed by expectations of her because she's a girl: 'I know that there are more boys than girls studying that, but I think that I can do it,' she says.

This project is transforming the lives of young women across El Salvador. Gabriela has this to say to supporters in the UK: 'Thank you very much for your support. This project benefits us because it contributes to preventing early pregnancy. For El Salvador, early pregnancy is not good because pregnant girls leave studying and cannot progress in their lives.'

'Please, go on helping and supporting the Project. God bless you all'

Norma García

The Zika virus: a new hurdle for women

The Zika virus has become a world issue in recent months, with the World Health Organization declaring it a global health emergency in February 2016. Spread by mosquitoes, numbers of reported infections are growing across Latin America and the Caribbean. Expectant mothers and women of child-bearing age are a particular cause for concern, because the infection is suspected of leading to babies being born with underdeveloped brains.

El Salvador hit the headlines in February when the health ministry warned women not to get pregnant until 2018. Although officials later revised their recommendation to 2016, this decision reveals the deep inequality that women in El Salvador suffer. Many women – especially those in indigenous communities – simply don't have access to contraception. Others have yet to learn their rights to reproductive and sexual health, so can't always control if and when they get pregnant.

Fortunately, our partner ORMUSA is empowering vulnerable women, giving them the confidence to control when they fall pregnant. This way, they can ensure their children have the best start in life, and can stay in charge of their own futures. What's more, because so little is known about the virus and its impact on women, ORMUSA is supporting the government to research the disease, bringing treatment and effective prevention closer.

Please pray with us:

- Thank God that girls like Gabriela are determined and dreaming big. Praise God for ORMUSA's work in schools, and pray that more girls will learn about their rights as the project continues.
- Pray for Norma and other young expectant mothers, and ask that they'll be supported through the challenges of pregnancy and childcare. Pray that more vulnerable women will be reached by ORMUSA, and given the help they need.
- Pray for the women of child-bearing age affected by the Zika virus, and ask that they will be able to access contraception. Lift ORMUSA and medical researchers across the world up to God, and ask that treatment and ways to prevent infection are swiftly found.



If there is any way we can help your group, please contact your local Christian Aid office, email cpartnership@christian-aid.org or visit christianaid.org.uk/partnerships