

# BOOK REVIEWS

Bonnie Shepard

*Running the Obstacle Course to Sexual and Reproductive Health: Lessons from Latin America*

Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006. xxi + 215 pages. Cloth, \$69.95, ISBN-10: 0275970663.

Over the past several years, international attention paid to sexual and reproductive health in Latin America has diminished significantly in spite of the region's many critical unmet needs. One of the reasons behind this limited focus is that regional and national average indicators for Latin America are better than those for most other parts of the developing world. These compounded indicators hide huge differences among countries and population strata, however, differences that reflect socioeconomic inequalities and a conservative cultural and policy environment that affect disproportionately the most vulnerable groups. Although sexual and reproductive health needs remain critical, so do the contributions of hundreds of organizations in Latin America, from which valuable lessons and inspiration can be drawn for the benefit of the entire region and that of other settings as well.

By describing the obstacles that the sexual and reproductive health community in Latin America faces in its efforts to achieve the agenda formulated in Cairo in 1994 at the International Conference of Population and Development (ICPD), as well as the commitment, ingenuity, successes, and setbacks of regional activists and professionals, Bonnie Shepard's *Running the Obstacle Course to Sexual and Reproductive Health: Lessons from Latin America* will help attract attention to the region's dire situation. Her informative monograph is a welcome addition to the literature on sexual and reproductive health and rights in Latin America. She describes a number of critical initiatives in three South American countries in an intelligent, well-researched, and eloquent manner, and analyzes the salient factors that explain their successes and failures. Shepard uses each case study to go beyond the anecdote in order to reflect on historical, cultural, and policy influences—emphasizing the roles of conservatism and religion—within the agenda of the sexual and reproductive health and rights movement. From this broad analysis, she draws conclusions and lessons that are relevant and applicable not only locally but also in the rest of the region and beyond.

Shepard is a distinguished specialist in sexual and reproductive health and rights, particularly in Latin America, where she worked for more than three decades. She describes research projects conducted in Chile, Colombia, and Peru and focuses on four case studies that illustrate

what she recognizes as the two main obstacles to “implementing Cairo,” which are the resistance of conservative societies to the new ICPD paradigm and the need for practical guidance on how to translate values and principles into concrete actions.

The book combines an academic approach and methods with a description of the case studies in an easy-to-read style. Each chapter presents an abundance of information and ideas, and each could be expanded to book length. For her descriptions and analyses, Shepard uses an impressively wide range of sources: published and gray literature, interviews, observations, site visits, e-mail and telephone exchanges with key players, and her own experience working for an institutional donor and as a reproductive health professional in the region.

In Chapter 1, the author focuses on abortion in Chile and Colombia and on divorce in Chile and engages in a motivating and useful discussion of how to move the Cairo agenda forward. She describes the civil society movement and the sexual and reproductive rights advocacy agenda in Latin America in detail in Chapter 2. She focuses on the obstacles that the external environment poses, the role of the government, and the financial challenges of civil society networks that advocate for change in these controversial matters. This political, sociological, and cultural analysis of nongovernmental organizations' activity in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights in Latin America is enlightening, as are the author's suggestions concerning ways to move forward. In Chapter 3, Shepard analyzes the hierarchical context of health services in Latin America (especially in Peru), in which “both health professionals and users are prisoners of unspoken assumptions and corresponding roles” (page 99). Shepard uses the Consorcio Mujer project to describe and analyze an experiment aimed at empowering local women to advocate for and collaborate in the improvement of reproductive health services in their districts in the context of health-sector reform, decentralization, and initiatives to improve the quality of care.

Chapter 4 describes a sexuality-education program in Chile. Again, the author frames the description and analysis of a concrete case within a comprehensive discussion of young people's unmet health needs and dearth of rights, and discusses a nationwide program implemented in the late 1990s within the cultural, health, and social context of Chile at the time. Finally, in Chapter 5 she analyzes cross-cutting dimensions, including the political dynamics surrounding the most controversial sexual and reproductive health issues, democracy, citizenship and participation,

organizational change, and the limitations of a project approach to much broader social change requirements. She explains the challenges of sustainability and scale-up in the context of ICPD and the region's history and circumstances. Each chapter is complemented with extensive notes and the book with a selected bibliography.

Some of the issues Shepard discusses have been extensively documented in Latin America (for example, the burden of unsafe abortion on women's health, particularly among women in the most disadvantaged groups, and the advocacy efforts of activists and civil organizations to make termination of pregnancy safer and more accessible). For some issues, a substantial body of literature exists—most notably the recently published work of Faúndes and Barzelatto (2006). Nevertheless, Shepard's study makes some unique contributions. Indeed, she reaches beyond the documented facts to describe the cultural, legal, and political circumstances that frame debate and practice surrounding sexual and reproductive health and the history of the different approaches taken by activists and members of the feminist movement in Chile and Colombia. Shepard also describes an unexplored dilemma that civil organizations advocating for reproductive choice often face: whenever a new piece of evidence about the negative impact of unsafe and illegal abortion becomes available to the public, the repression and crackdowns on clandestine abortion clinics increase, with severe negative consequences to women seeking to terminate their pregnancies. This counterintuitive but easy-to-grasp association has been observed repeatedly in Latin America, and it demonstrates the complexities of this process and the necessity of coordinating carefully and strategically the efforts of researchers and activists. In Colombia, soon after Shepard's book was published in 2006, the law was changed to establish that abortion is not a crime when the life or health (physical or mental) of the woman is in danger, when pregnancy is a result of rape or incest, or when grave malformations of the fetus make its life outside the uterus impossible. This positive change in the law resulted, to a great extent, from years of evidence-informed advocacy of the kind Shepard describes in her book.

An issue that has been little explored in the reproductive health and rights literature—and which Shepard describes in detail and analyzes—is divorce. Until 2004 (when the law in Chile was finally changed and divorce was made legal), there were only three countries in the world where divorce was illegal: Chile, Andorra, and Malta.

In Chapter 1, the author describes the consequences of this legal restriction on women, couples, and families (for example, high rates of birth out of wedlock, no mandatory division of marital assets when a couple separates, and fathers' frequent noncompliance with child-support requirements). She also analyzes how the better-off sec-

tor of Chilean society tended to cope with this restriction: those with sufficient resources to hire a lawyer accessed a "civilian annulment," which was not an option for people lacking the wherewithal and information to engage in this fraudulent process.

The framework the author uses for most of these discussions is the so-called "doble discurso" (the double discourse system, or "the art of espousing traditional and repressive sociocultural norms publicly while ignoring—and even participating in—the widespread flouting of these norms in private" [page 15]). As Shepard points out, "safety valves" always exist that allow people to overcome restrictions to obtain what they want and need, but they are much less accessible to people who have few financial or other resources. To a great extent, the double discourse concept that so well characterizes the Latin American culture also applies to most (if not all) settings where conservatism prevails, religious leaders are powerful, the line between church and state is blurry, and sexual and reproductive health and rights are controversial.

*Running the Obstacle Course to Sexual and Reproductive Health* addresses critical issues in a region where unique means have been developed and implemented (with different outcomes) to address the challenges of sexual and reproductive health and rights in a conservative environment and in the context of large economic and social gaps. This book should be obligatory reading for anyone who wishes to understand reproductive health and rights in Latin America and the role of organizations seeking to move the Cairo agenda forward.

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## Reference

Faúndes, Anibal and José Barzelatto. 2006. *The Human Drama of Abortion: A Global Search for Consensus*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

Ylva Hernlund and Bettina Shell-Duncan,  
editors

*Transcultural Bodies: Female Genital Cutting  
in Global Context*

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For the second time in the past ten years, editors Ylva Hernlund and Bettina Shell-Duncan have brought to-