

Roy Bourgeois led a U.S. delegation to El Salvador in August of 2015, to meet the women of 'Las 17' who are incarcerated—one for 40 years!—at the prison in Ilopango. Incredibly, their miscarriages and stillbirths have been construed as homicides. The delegation also met with four women who have been freed, with activists and lawyers working on behalf of these unjustly imprisoned women, and with some government officials.



Left: Irene Rojas, Roy Bourgeois, and Sr. Kathleen Desautels, part of a U.S. delegation to El Salvador in August of 2015 advocating for Las 17, give testimony at a meeting of the Public Health Commission of the Legislative Assembly. Right: Leslie Schuld of the [Center for Exchange and Solidarity](#) joins the delegation for the 25 August 2015 press conference in San Salvador.

25 August 2015
Press Release for
U.S. Citizens in Solidarity for the Freedom of The 17

We are citizens of the United States and, more importantly, citizens of the world. Our concern for universal human rights crosses borders. And so we are here in El Salvador to be in solidarity with the women known as Las 17. These are women whose only crime was to suffer a sudden loss of pregnancy (in English, these are called miscarriages) through no fault or intention of their own, while lacking the resources for effective medical assistance.

We have discovered that there is a basic and serious confusion among many prosecutors, judges, and even some medical personnel – namely, that miscarriages and stillbirths are the same as intentional abortions and therefore crimes. To be clear, it is completely natural and well documented that many women lose pregnancies and have complications during childbirth

through no fault of their own. Surely it is a grave injustice that these women are serving prison terms, some of them up to 40 years.

After two delegations which included visits with 16 of these women – 12 of them confined in Ilopango prison and four of them recently freed – we feel compelled to speak on their behalf and call for their immediate release.

We must note that Ilopango prison is notorious for its deplorable conditions. With 900% occupancy, nine women live where there should be a single prisoner. One of the inmates described to us having to share a single mattress on the ground with five other women.

These women of Las 17, many of them already mothers, suddenly found themselves traumatized by medical emergencies that resulted in the loss of their pregnancies; they were further traumatized by their pain, blood loss, fear and emotional distress; they were then shackled, humiliated, and criminalized instead of receiving compassionate medical care; and they were separated from their children and families. Indeed, a number of these women reported to us that the most painful part of their ordeal is the separation from and worry for their children.

All of these women come from humble backgrounds. Many of them lived in rural communities and were dependent upon the police for transport to emergency medical care. In many cases, women waited hours for assistance to arrive, and their pregnancies were utterly lost before help arrived. Additionally, many of the women were taken straight from the hospital to jail, their charges increased to aggravated homicide, and they were then found guilty in cases full of irregularities, with no real evidence against them. They could not afford lawyers, their cases were not investigated appropriately, and in some cases, details of the accusations even appear to have been copied and pasted from other cases. For instance, one woman's case refers to a homicide involving a male and a gun. These women have been persecuted without due process, without proper investigations, and above all, with the presumption of guilt regardless of reality.

We call upon the Supreme Court and the Salvadoran judicial system to immediately release these women, now known internationally as Las 17. We also call upon the judicial system to stop criminalizing women who find themselves having medical emergencies during pregnancy or childbirth. We also call for improved medical protocols that protect patient/doctor confidentiality and ensure the well-being of women who seek help for emergencies during pregnancy or childbirth. We urge you to respect and protect the human rights of these and all Salvadoran women, including their due process and a presumption of their innocence.