

PROYECTO  
**ELLA** ⚡

# WITHOUT BORDERS

Lives that inspire



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**Without borders, Lives That Inspire**

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**First Edition  
2023**

*In response to the Venezuelan humanitarian crisis, Plan International, with funding from Global Affairs Canada, designed and is implementing the ELLA: Empowerment, Local Leadership and Accountability for adolescent girls and young women from Venezuela and host communities.*

*This book is a compilation of 15 inspiring stories of adolescents and youth from Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia, and aims to demonstrate how their lives were transformed after participating in various activities of the ELLA project. These are stories demonstrate their resilience, agency, empowerment, and leadership skills, and seek to motivate more people to embark on their own path of transformation.*

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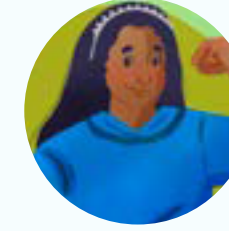
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# Foreword



Since March 2022, with funding from the Government of Canada, the ELLA: Empowerment, Local Leadership and Accountability for Venezuelan and Host Community Adolescent Girls and Young Women project, implemented by Plan International in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, strengthens the agency and empowerment of adolescent and young women in all their diversity, to exercise their right to protection and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

To achieve this goal, using a gender-transformative approach, the ELLA project works in three areas. The first is focused on improving skills and knowledge about protection and sexual and reproductive health and rights. The second is aimed at strengthening institutions and providers of health and protection services through trainings and the provision of equipment and supplies so they can provide inclusive and adolescents friendly services. Lastly, ELLA works with civil society organizations, including organizations led by women, adolescents and youth, and migrants and refugees, to promote their active participation in intersectoral coordination spaces.

Plan International is pleased to present the life-changing experiences of 15 adolescents and youth who participated in

various activities of the ELLA project in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, with the aim of demonstrating how these experiences of learning and growth contributed to their agency to exercise their rights and make informed decisions regarding their present and future life plans. In addition, they allow us to see the resilience of people, especially Venezuelans, who, despite adversity, continue to dream and seek better futures. This powerful compilation would not have been possible without the co-creation and partnership of the 15 young people who have generously shared their stories.

From the ELLA project we invite you to read and share these stories, to be inspired by their experiences and to learn from their drive and empathy. Recognize that we can always build a more just and inclusive society, where gender equality and the exercise of rights allow adolescents and youth to fulfill their dreams.

# Ynez María, Leadership, Empathy and Solidarity

Mimoso, a polar bear; Quiqui, a brown bear; and Chocho, a dog, are the only three stuffed animals that Ynez María (15 years old) was able to bring to Ecuador from Santa Ana de Coro, in western Venezuela. She arrived there with her mother and brother a little less than a year ago and settled in Loja, in the south of the country's inter-Andean region, joining the 52,514 Venezuelan people settled in Ecuador<sup>1</sup>. They live in a third-floor apartment from where they have a privileged view of the city, a landscape that inspires tranquillity and a certain sense of belonging, she says.

In her country, her mother worked very hard and earned very little, the teenager says. An aunt, whose daughter had migrated to Ecuador seven years ago and who then followed her, told her about better job opportunities and standard of living in this country. Ynez María's mother took the risk of travelling alone

first, leaving her two children with their father. In six months, she settled down, rented a house, gathered money and returned to Venezuela to pick up Ynez María and her brother, and returned with them to their new home.

Jennys, her mother, is not yet practicing her profession in Ecuador; she will soon begin refresher courses. In the meantime, like 21% of Venezuelans with a formal job in the country<sup>2</sup>, she works in a relative's bakery and puts into practice her knowledge of baking, another activity that she enjoys and loves, says her daughter.

*"I left my musical instruments in Venezuela: the flute and the cuatro, my childhood toys, some books. These are things that I will be able to recover or replace at some point, but I couldn't leave my stuffed animals because I grew up with them. Each one has a special meaning and keeps alive some memories of people who are important to me, like my father,"* says Ynez María with maturity and some nostalgia.

In her own room – the first one in her life, which she associates with freedom and privacy – Mimoso, Quiqui, and Chocho occupy a privileged place, next to the numerous books that, meticulously arranged on a shelf, testify that reading is one of her greatest hobbies. Every detail of her room showcases her priorities, dreams and desires.

*"Having my own space is a new and wonderful feeling for me. I can stay up late reading, talk on the phone without anyone else hearing me, and listen to music without headphones."*

<sup>1</sup> R4V: Regional Interagency Coordination Platform for Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants, led jointly with UNHCR and IOM in Ecuador.

<sup>2</sup> Report published on July 28, 2022 by the Working Group on Refugees and Migrants (WGRM).



Going to school as soon as they arrived in Loja was a big step for her. “I was surprised that here each student has their own books. In Venezuela they only had one for the teacher and we had to have it dictated or copy from the blackboard. It was also difficult to

get material for practical work. You had to recycle what you found. Of course that’s good, but sometimes at home there was nothing left to reuse; making photocopies was expensive, not to mention the (poor) internet connection,” she says while explaining that the list of differences is even longer.

In fact, Ynez María says that in the few months that she has been at school, she has already been in singing performances, in a play, and even in a pageant in a cultural event; she also knows how to swim different styles, dance ballet, and paint, skills she learned as a child in her hometown. “I have adapted to school. I want to finish high school there. The teachers already know me well, for good things, not for anything bad,” she says.



### Solidarity as a motto

When talking to Ynez María, it is easy to identify her leadership traits. “I would like to be a leader, yes. I am working on many aspects of my personality, such as empathy, for example, essential to being an equitable leader, respectful, not a boss,” she says while sharing how important it is for her to seek the welfare of the people around her. “I like to collaborate, put other people before me.”

In her youth club, Marcando la Diferencia (Making a Difference) – one of nine clubs that Plan International has promoted through the ELLA project in Loja, Quito and Manta that host 264 adolescents – Ynez María is the one who makes sure there are enough chairs and that everyone has the necessary work materials. She also helps distribute lunches. “When each participant has his or her snack, I take care of myself. ‘I can wait, nothing will happen to me’ is my motto.”



“Me and my brother (20) collaborated, distributing water, cleaning wounds, giving medicine or feeding girls, boys, men and women who, like us, were also migrating with the same dream: a better life and a better tomorrow.”

Her desire to help may be innate, inherited or learned from her parents. She grew up watching her mother work as nurse and her father as a firefighter, performing community service activities. Even during the migration process, her mother assisted many other Venezuelan people.





## Building the future

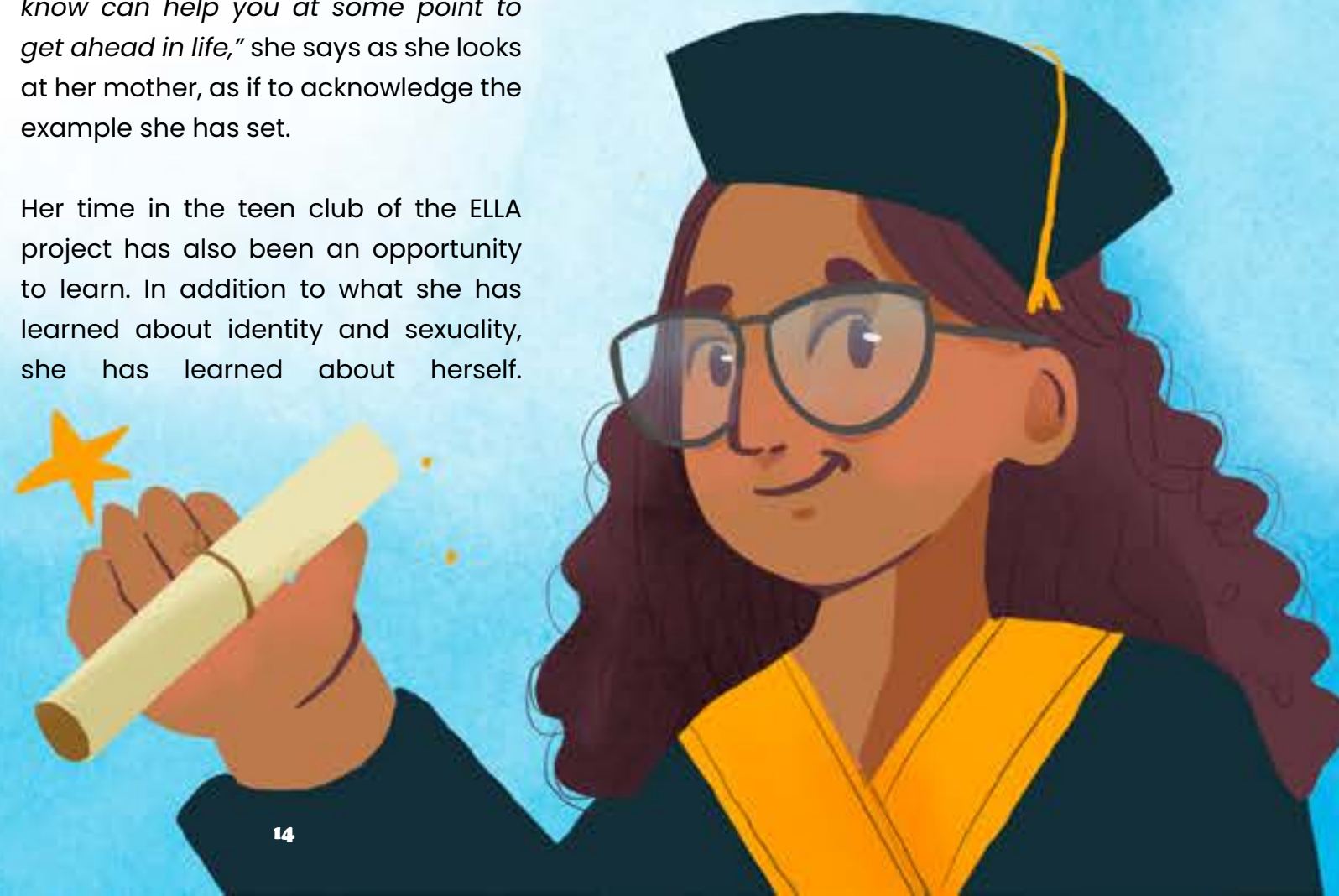
*"I love to talk about my life plan. First, finish high school, then go to college to study psychology or law, work, start a family and, something very important, fulfill the dreams of my father." She will not be at peace until she gives her father, who lives in Venezuela, the ranch he has dreamed of, wherever she makes a living— whether it is in Venezuela if she returns, in Ecuador, or wherever life takes her.*

*"At some point I want to get married and start a family. Being a mother does not mean for me that it is a fulfillment as a woman but a right as a human being. It will happen at the right time, when I am a professional, mentally and economically stable. I think that will be paramount to give a good life to the people I bring into the world."*

She knows that fulfilling her goals and dreams will not be easy, so she works hard in school and tries to perform well and improve in all disciplines. She is open to learning everything that is put in front of her. *"One should know many things. Possibly some of what you know can help you at some point to get ahead in life,"* she says as she looks at her mother, as if to acknowledge the example she has set.

Her time in the teen club of the ELLA project has also been an opportunity to learn. In addition to what she has learned about identity and sexuality, she has learned about herself.

*"Something else I learned, and that I put into practice every day, is the importance of not stigmatizing people because of labels that society places on them. You have to accept people as they are,"* she emphasizes.



## The First Achievements

The conversation continues while sharing the spaghetti bolognese that Jennys has prepared for lunch, as we sit on the spotless floor of what would be their living room, still unfurnished, as it's not the family's priority.

*"In Venezuela, the truth is that we never stopped eating, but there was always the fear of one day not having anything to buy or how to buy food,"* recalls the teenager, who is still surprised by the ease with which they now have access to not only food but also clothing and toiletries.



Ynez Maria hurries to finish her plate, barely having time to brush her teeth and glance at herself in the mirror. She looks calm, confident and relaxed, but in a few minutes she has a very important appointment: a key virtual meeting with Plan International's ELLA project team in Ecuador and dozens of young Ecuadorians and Venezuelans living in the country.

It turns out that Ynez María was nominated to be part of the group of six teenagers who would travel to Bogota in November to represent the country in the multi-country meeting of teenagers from Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia. Her participation in the forum was excellent: Ynes María dutifully represented the immigrant youth of Ecuador through her extraordinary commitment.







## Joselyn and her invisible companion

In a country where issues such as machismo and gender violence are prevalent, being an adolescent woman is an act of courage. This is what motivated Joselyn, a 16-year-old feminist leader, to become an activist three years ago. From the district of Comas, in the northern part of Lima, Peru, she has dedicated herself to fighting for women's rights and against inequality.

For Joselyn, knowing herself and valuing her abilities was pivotal in discovering her passion for activism: *"When I was 13 years old, during the COVID-19 pandemic, my teachers at school told me about a workshop on public speaking, Peruvianism and self-esteem. It was very useful to me, because it was the beginning of this path,"* she says.

The district of North Lima has the third-highest rate of femicide in the country, according to the Public Femicide Registry (2022)<sup>3</sup>. Being surrounded by this context, as well as experiencing sexual harassment in the streets and listening daily to news about gender violence, awakened Joselyn's calling to reduce gender inequality and stereotypes and to promote justice for women.

### Sorority, invisible partner

Joselyn does not walk this path alone. She is aware that much of her activist journey and the success she achieves is due to sisterhood. The relationships she builds with the people around her, with her fellow activists and with all women feed her courageous heart through empathy and inspiration.

The bond with her activist friends is strong and unbreakable, a source of refuge and support. Joselyn knows she can count on them without fear of being judged, but rather listened to and encouraged. For her, that is what sorority is all about.

*"Sorority is like an invisible companion, but also like an advocate, like a secret weapon," she says. "Sorority is that alliance that you generate with women as if they were your sisters, those people who will always listen to you, those women who will always be there to give you motivating words that allow you to search for your essence and, maybe, not be someone that society wants, but be who you really want to be."*

<sup>3</sup> Public Prosecutor's Office (2022).  
Feminicide in Peru 2009 - 2022.  
Registro de feminicidio del Ministerio Público.

# COMAS



### Ideals into action: an encounter with Plan International

During her second year as an activist, while participating in the Kuisqa Organization, Joselyn read about Plan International and did not hesitate to apply to the call for proposals. Since then, she has been involved in campaigns for the International Day of the Girl and International Women's Day with the ELLA project. *"I managed to participate in the International Women's Day video with a prose that is inspired by the reality in which I live, fighting for gender equality, undoing the discrimination and violence that often exists,"* she says.

With these types of actions, Joselyn noted that activism is a powerful mechanism that allows girls, adolescents and young women like her to amplify their voices and be seen by the world: *"You can make your voice heard. And having our voice heard as women, adolescents or girls is fundamental to expressing everything we feel, the reality in which we live and what we want to change in this society,"* she says.

WE WANT TO  
BE FREE

WE ARE STRONGER  
TOGETHER

WE WANT  
TO FEEL SAFE  
WALKING HOME

IWD

MORE  
EQUALITY!

Since December 2022, Joselyn has been part of the program "My Path to Transformation"<sup>4</sup>. *"From the project, I believe that every activity we do is empowering for women,"* she says. *"It allows us to have a safe space where we can share, talk without being*

*judged. Even though it is a mixed group, even though there are men, we feel safe because we know that they are also supporting this part of us and they will want the best for us too. From there, I see sorority."*

<sup>4</sup> My Path to Transformation is a training program promoted by Plan International through the ELLA project. It is a space that seeks to strengthen youth leaders on issues such as prevention of all forms of violence, access to sexual and reproductive health and rights and protection of their rights.





### When you choos a life of activism

Joselyn knows that the road as an activist is not easy. She says, *“Many times you can encounter obstacles or people who say that you are wasting your time – ‘You’d better dedicate yourself only to studying.’ But I believe that they must go hand in hand, both the studying and this activist part, this motivation.”* As an example of this, Joselyn balances her student work, helping out at home, and her fight for women’s rights very well. Her family’s unconditional support to this process is key, as they provide her with the necessary support to continue her activism.

Today, Joselyn serves as the school president, seeking to share her knowledge with the student community and emphasize her leadership. *“At school I like to give talks on self-esteem, which is the basis of everything, because from there we strengthen our identity,”* she explains. *“Every day, during training, I give talks on micro-topics. Now we are dealing with bullying and violence prevention.”*

Joselyn has great aspirations, as she prepares to study law and international business. She believes that this academic training will allow her to acquire the necessary tools to expand the positive impact she has already had on society and work toward a more just and equitable future for all, especially on issues related to gender equality.

*“Actions must be taken today and now with the participation of everyone, by listening to them. It is important that each idea allows us to move forward and continue building this society we want without machismo, without stereotypes and, above all, where there is gender equality, which is, after all, what we want to achieve,”* she says with a determined smile, knowing that her work has just begun.





## Keep Moving, Go For It!

Being a woman, and also a migrant, is not easy. Society stigmatizes those of us who have left our land in search of a new life. Many times, we have been singled out, judged, and susceptible to harm for being women, for being migrants, for simply being. Some people may think I am exaggerating; however, perhaps they can understand me a little through these words, while reading my story.

My name is Gabriela, I am 22 years old, and I am a Venezuelan citizen. Like many, I crossed the border looking for new possibilities for me and my family because, as you know, in Venezuela things are not easy. So many people have sought the possibility of continuing to grow, to build a future in a new land.

In 2018, when I was 17 years old and my sister 19 years old, my mom returned to Venezuela after being away for a while, trying to find a way to provide us with better opportunities, looking for a way

to feed us. In the meantime, we stayed with my father, an absent man who did little to help us, which forced us to learn to cook with firewood. At the beginning, when food was not so scarce, we could make soup. Then we began to eat only yucca and cheese.

When we had fewer and fewer options, we decided to move to Colombia. At the time, we wanted to do it legally – that is, to cross at an authorized crossing point – but circumstances forced us to make another decision.

To get here, we had to travel for 37 hours from the State of Carabobo, Valencia. From there we went, first, to San Antonio; that journey lasted 25 hours. Then, we walked two hours by trail and from there we went to Cúcuta. On that trail we met an armed group that threatened us with a Taser and told us that if we said anything, there would be trouble, and that if we heard noises on the road we should get down. I think the fact that we were women made all this even more complex – surely, they could have taken us against our will.

To make matters worse, we were very hungry, but we had no food or money. There were few options, to the point that people suggested we cut our hair to sell it. After that, we took a six-hour trip to get to Ocaña. The road was long and difficult; we were afraid someone would steal the little we were carrying. We arrived in Ocaña on August 18 and rested that first night. At that moment my mother told us: *“Tomorrow we are going to sell coffee and chocolate.”* When we arrived, I was terribly sad, but despite everything, I have always been a very self-confident woman.



I was the one who announced that we were selling coffee on the streets of Ocaña. We would leave at 4:30 in the morning and return at 10:00 in the morning.

During the first two weeks my mother accompanied us in selling coffee, but in the third week she started selling chicharrón dumplings, a food similar to tamales.

Everything was going very well until we started to be harassed on the streets. Cab drivers and mechanics would harass us and tell us that they would give us 60,000 pesos (\$14) to stop working and in exchange we would have to go with them.

During that time selling, I met Raul, a boy who sold candy on the street and who was also Venezuelan. One day, he noticed that a man was harassing me and grabbing me, telling me he would not let me leave until I went with him; I started to cry and didn't know what to do. Then Raul called me with a name he made up and said, *"Come here, what are you doing here so late?"*

*My aunt is at home waiting for you."* Raul saved my life! From that moment on we formed a good friendship, so much so that he recommended me to a restaurant, and that helped me to get a new job as a waitress.

From that moment on I became known for my abilities and started working in a pool hall. I was there from 10:00 at night until 3:00 in the morning; they paid me 30,000 pesos (\$9) a day. That helped me pay for transportation and food for the day. The bad thing is that the time that I was leaving was very dangerous and I could not afford to pay for a cab.

Before the crisis and the difficulties, I dreamed of finishing high school, going to college, and studying to become a doctor. But now I am not very sure about my future. In Colombia, I have requested that they give me the opportunity to finish my degree since I am only one grade away from finishing.

My plan was to authenticate the documents and continue with my education, but I have not been able to do it yet because I was told that as a Venezuelan immigrant, I could not have access to that option. But not everything has been bad – doors have also opened for me, and I have been able to increase my knowledge and become more secure; in those two words I can summarize my experience with the ELLA project.



A few months ago, my mother-in-law told me that women were signing up for some workshops; she told me that surely it would be something good for me, so I decided to attend. There I realized that they valued the situation of migrants and our voice in the decisions made in the community; they especially focused on talking to us about our rights.

I really liked the times when sexual and reproductive rights were discussed, because in the community, pregnancies among migrant women have increased and, although some may be desired, there are others that are not. Also, the different types of gender-based violence were addressed, and they explained to us how to act when faced with such situations.

The project has also allowed me to set short-term goals, like the development of a project that seeks to integrate and link people in my community. I remembered a sport I had played since I was very young in my country, kickball. And I decided to start this project, because I believe that through this sport our community can encourage integration processes. Also, this initiative has become one of my greatest achievements, because I have shown that I can lead processes in my neighbourhood.

Kickball is like baseball. It emerged in the U.S. in 1962 and came to Venezuela because at that time there was a migration crisis. Each team is made up of 10 people. We play in the neighbourhood field.

At the beginning, we had 20 people, but some of them left because perhaps they didn't understand the game very well and we didn't have the right ball to play with. To resolve the issue, we held a raffle and bought a ball. Then we invited people to play again, but only six people showed up. We kept insisting and now there are 21 of us: 14 women and seven men.

In addition to kickball, I practise dance, which I like very much, and soccer and taekwondo too. However, the project helped me to remember that women have every right to play, to have fun and to live free of stereotypes. I have



always thought that playing sports is important because it strengthens us physically, but also as a community, because there are several migrant women on the team.

For some time, we only thought about working because we needed money and, at a certain point, we thought that recreation and doing different activities would allow us to have fun and get away from reality for a while. Today, my life is still difficult. I would like to feel good both physically and emotionally, I would like to have economic stability and the opportunity to move forward, but right now I don't have a job.

That overwhelms me a lot and makes the days more and more difficult. My mom knows how I feel, and, for that reason, she has invited me to live with her, as now she lives in another city in Colombia. She has been tremendously supportive in this journey.

A message I would like to share with the people who read my story is the importance of empathy with migrants, since xenophobia is still evident. In addition, I want to tell migrants who have been discriminated against and those who left Venezuela looking to fulfill a dream, to keep moving, go for it!



# Kilver: An Intense Race to Discover His Passions

One day before his school's soccer championship, Kilver (17), as a regular starter, was practicing in the southern goal on the field in the main park of Carapungo. It is better known as the "youth park" for the large number of young people from this neighbourhood, located north of Quito, who come daily to practice various sports and outdoor activities, especially under the intense sun of the first days of summer and the refreshing breeze of the winds typical of this time of the year.

*"If we win the championship, the prize for everyone on the team is a good final grade in the subject we're weakest in, not to mention the perks for whoever scores the winning goal,"* Kilver explains with a big smile, as if justifying the overtime training.

Even if you're a student with good grades, a little help is never a bad thing, he acknowledges. *"I don't think I'm the best student, but I am the most social student in the school, no one beats me at that. I've always tried to be positive and get along with everyone. You have to learn to understand people who don't think or act the same way you do,"* he reflects with great maturity.

## The migration process, the hardest experience

Sports are part of Kilver's everyday life. He is athletic and quite tall, which also helps him in basketball. *"Four years ago, when I was 13, my mom and my sister and I arrived in Ecuador and we were reunited with my dad, who came three years earlier. He hardly recognized me. The thing is that when we separated, I was small and chubby, and I grew quite tall, almost his size, and thin because I had taken a liking to sports and because of the forced diet we had in Venezuela."*

His father had sent them money, but due to restrictions, it was not possible to buy sufficient groceries, Kilver says, and they also had to raise money for the rest of the family's trip to Ecuador.

Discussing the migration process brings back many memories for the young man who has not forgotten what he calls the most traumatic experience of his life. *"We left by bus from Los Teques to Caracas. At the central terminal we took the bus to Maracaibo and from there to Paraguachón, in Colombia. The truth is, it is a very ugly border where you see horrible things."*

According to data from the Colombian Foreign Ministry, about 1,000 migrants pass through Paraguachón every day through irregular paths on their way to Colombia, Ecuador, or Peru.

He recalls, in great detail, that they went through a route with hoodies on motorcycles so as not to be distinguished by the military and asked for documentation. Then, like hundreds of other people, they went down a trail where they had to pay every time they walked a certain distance to be allowed to pass. "I was terrified because along that trail all the trees were burned.



Apparently there was a shooting, and some trucks exploded that smuggled gasoline – as it was cheaper – from Venezuela to Colombia. It was horrible, like a horror movie. We finally arrived at the border between Colombia and Ecuador and passed into Rumichaca using the Andean Card on August 26, 2019, at 22:00. This was just two hours before the closing of the border for migrants from Venezuela without a visa.”

Reuniting the family after three years was an emotional moment for everyone. The tears of the father for having missed his son’s growth from child to teenager was what impacted him the most, recalls Kilver, who values his parents’ support and accompaniment. It is his decision to always try to be a good son.

### Living his own career

In order not to fail in the commitment he has made as a son to build a good future for himself, Kilver does not stop learning, researching, and looking for what he is passionate about, hoping to find, sooner rather than later, the topic he will dedicate himself to as soon as he finishes school, in June 2024.

*“I’m not going to go to university. Paying for the private one will be impossible, and because of the migratory situation, the public one is not an option. Besides, I don’t want a career that will tie me to be an employee for many years. I want to be my own boss, definitely.”*

Thus, he has other passions beyond sports: food, coffee, beauty, finance, the stock market, digital marketing, and entrepreneurship. Despite his young age, he has learned about all of these in several in-person and virtual courses, and he perfects his skills on his own, using tutorials rated by YouTube.



*“I’m interested in taking as many courses as possible, not only to have a lot of skills and knowledge, but also to find out what really captivates me enough to dedicate myself for a long time and, at the same time, be lucrative,”* says the teenager, who plans to become an entrepreneur, earn enough money soon to achieve a good standard of living for himself and his family, invest in the stock market and start to see the world as early as possible. That is the philosophy that drives him today.



He has a special interest in food, knowing about cuts of meat and handling kitchen equipment. Gastronomy was one of the first courses he took, at 16, when he was the only teenager enrolled among 30 people. Although he has a valid certificate, he does not see himself as a professional cook in the future, much less a restaurant owner. “

*Maybe food will allow me to earn my first dollars, but it would be temporary until I become the owner of my business, which will not be a restaurant, because it is very complicated indeed,”* he says categorically.

He likes cooking very much, but just to have fun, he clarifies, while confessing that ravioli is his favourite dish to make:

*“I like to make wheat flour pasta. It comes out well, but I still have to refine it. I will keep trying until I get it just right,”* he says, as if to show how much he likes to perfect his skills on his own.

This quality stands out in almost everything Kilver does. For example, in the barista course that he takes two afternoons a week, the techniques he is taught using coffee are not enough for him; he likes to experiment in creating new drinks, with different types of essences, milks and flavours. *“I will not stop until I achieve my own creations,”* he says.



Kilver also shares how he learns, also on his own, about new makeup techniques that are not part of the curriculum of the beauty, makeup, and hairstyling course that currently occupies his Saturday mornings. *"I learned with a tutorial. I am perfecting the shading on the eyelids. Makeup is what attracts me the most. Although I like everything a lot, it is a profession that I would be interested in practicing in the course of my life."*

Kilver is again the only teenager in the course, and the only male – a scenario that does not bother him at all, he clarifies. *"It's not that there are some activities for men and others for women. We can all do whatever we want and like."*

*We must break the boxes in which society has placed us because we are men or women. That limits our freedom to express ourselves with our individuality."*

He says he feels comfortable among the women; he has been able to win their affection and respect and they treat him as an equal regardless of the fact that he is a teenager, because they see and value his potential and dedication, he says.



## Growing with responsibility

Transforming masculinity and how to develop and apply it is one of the major themes he has learned about during his time at the adolescent club Caraquitos, a space that welcomes 55 adolescents from neighbourhoods north of the Ecuadorian capital. It is one of nine clubs that Plan International runs in three cities (Quito, Loja, and Manta) through the ELLA project.

Kilver is a leader of a group of young people trained to disseminate the knowledge they have learned among their peers and in other spaces – including how men can be allies to prevent gender violence and promote equality, disseminating women's rights and protection routes.

Among all that he has learned, he confesses that the sexuality classes made him a little uncomfortable:

*"At the beginning I was serious so as not to appear nervous, but now I am clear that it is important to know about the subject. There are many early-age pregnancies; at least in my school, there are several cases."*

*"Adolescents should know about contraceptive methods, everything related to sexuality, sexual and reproductive health, because it is normal that at some point we are all going to start our sexual life, so the idea is to learn to protect yourself and know how to act,"* he says with his characteristic smile, a smile that almost never leaves him, showing a determined, disciplined young man who, despite only recently turning 17 years old, has clear goals and will not stop until he achieves them.





# The transformation of women in the new era

Hi, I'm Daniela and I'm 15 years old and I live in Colombia. I like books, like The Diary of Anne Frank, and movies that highlight the bravery of girls and women. One movie I really like is G.I. Jane, because it tells the story of the first female lieutenant in the United States Navy who defied military training.

Also, I have great admiration for my mother. She not only takes care of the family and works to provide for all of us, but she also pursues her dreams. I admire her tenacity in the face of circumstances that arise, her struggle and determination to get ahead.

Despite this, since I started high school, at the age of 11, I realized that I live in a macho environment, where both men and women believe that girls and women are not capable of doing what we set out to do, even though we have the same rights and capabilities as men.

Even in my family, it is believed that women are only born to get married and be mothers. Although it is accepted that we can also work, women who are employed are harshly criticized.

These family dynamics made me think about the need to generate changes in the way they perceive women. Some time later, a friend whom I help with chores told me that an organization called Plan was giving a talk on women's rights in the neighbourhood. That caught my attention, so I decided to go and I really liked what I heard. Since then, I continued going to these spaces. Never had I seen an organization come to our neighbourhood to talk to us about our rights.

In these meetings with the ELLA project, I have clarified many doubts I had about the rights of girls and women. I have learned about the laws, the entities responsible for guaranteeing them and how to protect them.

Likewise, these spaces have made me aware of the situation of migrants, especially girls and women, who sadly do not receive fair treatment. They do not have decent jobs, nor access to food, housing, or education. Therefore, we must seek for them to have access to the same rights that Colombian women have.

Thanks to these meetings, I am now aware that in my community, basic rights such as decent housing, social security and education are not being guaranteed, regardless of whether you are a migrant or not.



Attending these workshops of the ELLA project has given me strength and ideas to continue my community work in other spaces. For example, I lead an initiative in the church where I bring together almost 60 girls and boys for recreational and sports activities. There, we learn how to improve coexistence with our families.

I also help my friends and girls in my neighborhood with their homework. I learned this from a neighbor who gave me support, and she has been an example for me. She has defied family tradition by continuing her studies and demonstrating her intelligence. She helped me solve many academic doubts, so I like to replicate what she taught me with the girls who come to me for help in school.

I feel that I am now a role model for my cousins and friends in the neighborhood and school because of the way I think. Although I still have a long way to go to reach my goals, I believe they see in me a woman with a different mentality in terms of the traditions and teachings instilled in our families.

In this sense, I try to be very participative in the events I attend. I like to speak out so that they see that women have important opinions and that we don't have to remain silent, that we can be leaders.




In addition, the spaces of the ELLA project have helped me to be more critical, not only with my family environment, but also with the institutions themselves.

Now I can see the inequality that is fostered in schools, such as in the tasks they assign us or in the spaces they give us for our recreational and sports activities. For example, in the soccer championships, although there are tournaments for both sexes, we must play on a smaller field, which is unfair, since women also have the ability to play on the same field as men.

On the other hand, wanting to do things differently from what I have been taught, and the expectations to start a family, my dream is to become a military woman. I believe that this career requires a lot of discipline, effort, and courage, and those are qualities that women possess. From this position, I can show the women around me that we can also achieve everything we set our minds to, and that







this job is not exclusively for men, even though many people think otherwise. I would like to be an example to show that women have many capabilities and that our destiny is not limited only to having children, cooking for the family, or having to depend economically on a husband. On the contrary, we can get ahead on our own merits, study, work and achieve everything we desire.

In that sense, being mothers should not be a reason for women to stop striving to achieve their goals. We can consider a life beyond the family. Even during adolescence, we should not normalize getting completely absorbed in a dating relationship, neglecting the important life projects that we should

cultivate from an early age for our personal fulfillment. I would love to see machismo come to an end, since, although it has diminished compared to the past, it persists. My ideal world is one in which girls and women have the same opportunities and rights, beyond motherhood or marriage. Also, I would like families to support women

who want to get ahead and value everything they do to achieve it.

**My invitation is for girls and women to keep fighting for their dreams, to strive and be brave, because we have those capabilities. I also encourage them to be consistent and disciplined, leaving aside the criticisms and oppressions that seek to keep us in a traditionally limited role.**





# Menstruating Flowers: restoring dignity to menstruation

In a classroom on the second floor of a school in the Los Olivos district of Lima, Peru, seven young people organize themselves to facilitate a workshop. A banner with a red background and beige letters with the phrase “Flores Menstruantes” adorns the door. The chairs are neatly arranged. On the table are flip charts, markers, and tape, ready to be used.

Meanwhile, teenagers are arriving in the hall to participate in the space, called “School of Leaders,” organized by Flores Menstruantes (Menstruating Flowers), a community youth organization that works to provide free menstrual education in Peru, especially for girls and adolescents in schools.

The clock strikes 10:17. Ana Gabriela, 21, the assistant director of Flores Menstruantes, starts the meeting. The youth listen to her describe the guidelines for the first activity of the day: a list of demands. They form groups to discuss the problems that the participants identify in their school, community and municipality and, finally, offer proposals for solutions.

Forty minutes pass and it is time for the teams to present their ideas. The answers overlap and many are repeated: the lack of availability of menstrual hygiene products, inadequate infrastructure and insufficient clarity in addressing menstrual, sexual and reproductive health issues.

According to the baseline study developed by the ELLA project<sup>4</sup>, only 57% of the women interviewed were aware of risks related to inadequate menstrual health management.

Likewise, when analyzing actions for adequate care, only 32% identified changing menstrual management products as one of the strategies to be used. And this knowledge is considerably lower among men.

With this knowledge, and with the pressing need to share accurate information about menstrual management, Flores Menstruantes was born. “*The motivation for founding Flores Menstruantes was mainly my own experience,*” says Ana Gabriela after finishing up the workshop. “I think all the members have this reason in common. Since we were children, we have not received enough information about menstruation, about our menstrual cycles. We have grown up often listening to myths about menstruation, thinking that menstruating is an activity that limits us from doing many other things.”

Since its founding in 2022, Flores Menstruantes has been dedicated to providing menstrual education, leadership and self-defence workshops in the Lima districts of San Juan de Lurigancho, Los Olivos, Villa María del Triunfo and Rímac. Although the organization’s main audience is girls, adolescents and women of menstrual age, workshops are also held for adolescent boys.

Ana Gabriela says, “*We believe it is important to address it as a human rights issue and not only as women’s rights. We also think it is important for children and adolescents to be aware that menstruation is something normal, and that they do not have to stigmatize and reinforce prejudices about menstruation.*”







Ana Gabriela knows that working on menstrual management issues is synonymous with constantly facing stereotypes and taboos, especially when activities are carried out in schools: *“Many times we have encountered this issue, that even educators continue to reinforce these myths and do not want these types of workshops to be taught within their institutions, because they may go against, perhaps, the beliefs of parents or other teachers.”*

Thus, the group concluded that the best way to fight against myths was to provide reliable and timely information to girls and adolescents of menstrual age so that they themselves become spokespeople for their community.

*“What we want is that this information does not remain with them, but that they can also continue to disseminate it to younger generations ... and that they can have a freer menstrual cycle, have greater autonomy with their bodies and no longer have these prejudices that are normally held when a person is a menstruating person. We hope that they can grow up with greater freedom,”* says Ana Gabriela.

However, ideas and effort need to materialize. *“We have had many ideas for activities to provide information on menstrual management that, many times, cannot be carried out because, unfortunately, we need adequate resources to be able to do it and, many times, we do not have enough means to do it as we are university students. Finding different contests, initiatives that allow us to carry out and manage the whole project also allows us to make all the ideas come true.”*

It was on the search to find resources that the group decided to participate in the “Building Community” contest organized by the ELLA project. Ana Gabriela says, *“I saw the contest application on Facebook. Then, we said: ‘This is the right opportunity to be able to present the ideas that we had been formulating.’ We filled out the form, the proposal and applied. And, well, we got a satisfactory response.”* Flores Menstruantes won the contest and received additional support through instructional, informative and office materials to implement their activities.

Now, after one year of activities and 21 volunteers, Flores Menstruantes is an organization that fully recognizes

and trusts the capacity of adolescent girls to become agents of change in menstrual management issues. *“We have learned that adolescent girls have a lot of capacity to impact, to lead and that they also want to continue to see these issues in other spaces. We have learned t h a t they have the power to continue influencing and demanding information spaces from society.”*





# Abraham and His Link to Community Activism

Crossing the borders between Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador is an unimaginable journey for any 15-year-old boy, and even more so if he does it unaccompanied by an adult. But for Abraham (now 18 years old) there was no alternative. It was either that or remain separated from his family, who had already emigrated some time before. So, he did not hesitate to put himself at risk in order to be reunited with his mother and siblings in the Ecuadorian port of Manta.

The journey through Colombia was not at all easy and was plagued by misfortune. He had to pay people

dressed as soldiers to let him continue travelling, since they had demanded his papers and threatened to send him back to Venezuela for travelling alone as a minor. He gave them the last \$20 he was carrying to pay for a trip that ultimately took four days.

Then, once in Rumichaca, on the Ecuadorian side of the border, the first of the guides his mother had paid to help him enter Ecuadorian territory never showed up, and the boy was left to his own fate.

But just as there are people who take advantage of migrants' situation, there are also those who show solidarity. That was the case of an Ecuadorian man who accompanied Abraham and paid for his transportation. Abraham remembers the event with deep gratitude: *"I didn't find the other guide either, but I did find this gentleman who was a good person and happened to be travelling to Manta, so he offered to accompany me. He just asked me if I had an identity card, and since I had an Ecuadorian one, he told me that I could pass with it. From there we took a cab to Tulcán. The man paid my fare to Quito and from there to Manta. Once here, my mother gave him back his money."*

This experience may have forged the young man's character, or perhaps it was the catalyzing force from which an innate leadership quality emerged. What is certain is that after his return to the educational system, Abraham, an Ecuadorian by birth who lived in Venezuela for 14 years, felt a deep calling to community activism. The feeling was so strong that it led him to become involved in some youth clubs.





Currently, he is part of the club Together Is Better, one of nine clubs that Plan International supports in Manta, Quito, and Loja through the ELLA Project. *"In this club, I went deeply into issues such as human rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender equality, self-esteem and others through the My Paths of Transformation program, which for me was a very good guide,"* says Abraham.

He was also in the club Jovenes del Cambio (*"Youth for Change"*), in the municipality of Manta, where he collaborated in the painting of murals and in the cleaning of beaches and streets, assisted in delivering of food and clothing kits to people in need, and took part in talks among young people.

In the health centre club of the parish where Abraham lives, he was elected, along with other boys and girls, as a community leader to work on various projects that benefit the youth of this rural area of San Lorenzo parish.

On two occasions he participated in the Manta Youth summit, an event implemented by the municipality of Manta, in which influencers, public figures (including winners of contests such as Master Chef) and even Ecuadorian Olympic medalists tell their life stories and how they managed to achieve success with or without help. This experience led Abraham to reflect on a question that now guides his life: *"If they could do it, why can't I?"*



### The leader of the hive

Abraham is class president in his third year at the only high school in his town. In his class, he exercises leadership and enjoys the trust of most of his classmates. *"We are like a beehive, where if something happens to any of its members, we must all come to help them, and also pay attention to the group's behaviour so as not to affect the relationships with teachers and the school,"* he says.

He is also vice president of the student council of his school and has promoted recreational activities for both students and teachers. In his opinion, the best thing to do is to have a peaceful attitude: *"Students often do not raise complaints to teachers because they are afraid of being scolded or their grades being affected, but I think you*

*have to say what you feel. If others do not say anything, I am not afraid of facing the consequences. Anything to improve relations between students and teachers. If we students are asked to improve, then the teachers should as well."*

These are the qualities for which Abraham was chosen as one of six young representatives from Ecuador to participate in the multi-country meeting of adolescents from Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador, to be held in November in Bogota, Colombia. He recalls that during the selection process, he answered the questions by being true to his own thoughts. *"The truth is that it was not complicated for me to share my point of view of what I really think. Nothing I said was previously memorized, because one has to know how to react in an assertive and appropriate way,"* he says without hesitation.



However, he recognizes that representing Ecuador in the event is a commitment that, beyond the excitement and enthusiasm, requires him to prepare himself thoroughly, and for this reason he has not left any detail to improvisation. In the months before the event, he is practicing the oratory resources for public speaking he learned in school.

*"A professor told us we had to learn how to present a topic [publicly], not only because it is important to get good grades but because it will help us in college and at other times in life when we disseminate our work, projects and thoughts. I feel no embarrassment in presenting in front of an auditorium."*

### The life plan

Abraham is very good at mathematics and has thought about studying architecture, but his family does not have the resources to pay for a full-time degree. His Plan B is to work to finance his studies in cybersecurity, one of the new careers he learned about in a workshop run by technicians at a private university in Quito, the capital. He is very interested in this program, even if it means he has to leave his family and home in Manta to achieve his goal.

Getting a job and a scholarship that will allow him to continue studying is his short-term goal, but Abraham

admits that he will not be away from his family for the rest of his life, because at the end of his career he plans to return to El Aromo, where he hopes to create a foundation to help stray animals.



Abraham once had eight cats and two dogs. He started with four cats, but one day when he came home from school, the number had doubled because one of his cats gave birth. So, the boy started looking for responsible people who wanted to adopt them.

Abraham's interest in animals may seem common, but what is truly remarkable is that Abraham suffers from asthma and has experienced severe health crises since he was a child, to the point that he was hospitalized in Venezuela.

However, his great sensitivity and empathy for the animals outweighs his fear that his contact with them will trigger an asthma attack. Although he says that since he arrived in Manta his illness has diminished considerably due to the warmer weather (22-28°C), Abraham undoubtedly strives to be a better human being and leave his mark on the planet.





# Breaking Barriers

Hello, my name is Moreila and I am from Fortaleza<sup>6</sup>, a neighbourhood that was created 12 years ago in Ocaña, Colombia, to provide housing for low-income people. Throughout the years, immigrants have come to our neighbourhood and have been involved in community activities.

The neighbourhood is gated, with only one entrance and one exit. It is characterized by its abundant green areas and cooperative people. It also has places where we can relax and enjoy a different atmosphere. However, there is a problem in a specific place called *“the bridge,”* where robberies have been committed, generating a feeling of insecurity in that area.

<sup>6</sup> Name changed to ensure safeguarding of the participant

My family and I arrived six years ago, occupying a vacant lot in the neighbourhood because we were displaced. It was a very difficult experience, because we had to sleep with a plastic sheet, the few things we got soaked, and my young daughter got sick. At the time, I was 18 years old and lived independently with my partner.

Although family support has helped us to be more stable, we were displaced because we were forced to leave our former community, as an armed group wanted to recruit my partner. So we decided to leave and seek refuge in this neighbourhood. Not all migration cases are the same; there are people who must leave because of violence.

It is a very difficult process. It is complicated to adapt to a place we did not know, to get to know a new community. Six years have passed, and I still remember with fear what we experienced back then.

Regarding the migration of Venezuelans, most of them have received help from the community. We have not had any major conflicts. I recognize that there are people who I feel are doing things wrong, but I think they have not had the chance to demonstrate their skills and make themselves known.

In the community, we have been striving to offer more activities in which all people can participate: dance therapy, home gardens, organic composting. We also painted a mural together with the children. All of these activities have helped us unite as a neighbourhood, because before we were not.

To be honest, participating in the ELLA project has been key in this process, because it has united us as a community, which was very divided before. At the beginning, our meetings were not well attended, but with the help of the project, we got the necessary jump start to believe in ourselves and in our ability to work together. It was like a spark that ignited collaboration in the community.



At the beginning, we had the idea of creating a WhatsApp group, so we went from house to house, requesting the numbers of the people living in the neighbourhood. We set up the group and through it, we shared information about all the activities we were going to carry out, such as dance therapy, soccer games, cleaning day, cleaning the main road, etc. At the beginning, people did not want to join because they did not believe that we were going to work in the neighbourhood. However, with the initial members, we began with a clean-up day and we cleaned up the church lot and held sports championships for the children.

With perseverance, the community began to see that it was real, that we had a schedule, people believed us, and they began to sign up. Currently, we have 60 girls and boys in our training sessions. Recently, we organized the first championship, and we have already competed with other teams from the surrounding neighbourhoods, so they have been very encouraged by this.

As for the dances, we started with just my partner and me, but now there are eight of us working together on the choreographies. In the dance therapies, for example, spaces are open to talk about doubts that people have regarding sexual and reproductive rights, so little by little the stigma that people have about this topic is being reduced. There the project was very important, because they gave us information and training about our sexual and reproductive rights and, in this way, familiarized more people in the community.

In the case of women, often they are not allowed to make decisions about their family planning or about whether they want to have sexual relations. It is a complex issue for them, since the fear of violence leads them to say “yes” to everything. In my community, I see that many girls lack knowledge about their sexual and reproductive rights. It is an issue that we need to address collectively. Thanks to the work with ELLA, we have been able to help women develop their capacities, to recover their dreams and to be recognized in society.

We still have many challenges, especially with girls. We must continue to work on their confidence and their rights. With the ELLA project, they have been able to work on their life projects, thinking beyond a family life, so that they can dream and be much more influential than they already are.

DANCE THERAPY - TODAY

SOCCER

DANCE

COMMUNITY CLEAN-UP



On the other hand, and without saying that it is less important, we must address the problem of drug addiction, since we see a wide consumption of drugs among adolescents, who are tempted to use them. We want to continue working on activities that allow each person to enhance their skills, whether in sports or art, so that from these activities we can promote knowledge that will help them achieve their goals.

Being a leader implies overcoming many barriers. People question you; they don't believe you or they say that it is the man who leads or who has the perrenque [courage] to do things.

However, I have set out to prove that women can also lead. Here in the neighbourhood, I consider myself a leader, and I have learned to address the needs of the community, although I still have a lot to learn.

I used to be a very reserved person and did not participate much in activities, because I preferred to be unseen. However, I have realized that I like to help and serve the community. I have left behind the stigma that only men can lead or have a role of power; now there are more women who collaborate with us and are leaders.



When I participated in the ELLA project, I tried to give my opinion as little as possible. I did not want people to make fun of what I said. But as I became part of this space, I became very interested in the topics that were discussed, and I began to participate more actively.

At the end of the activities, we started working on community initiatives. It was at that time that I became even more involved; for example, I took on the responsibility of creating the WhatsApp group, and as I visited people, I became more integrated with the community.

Little by little, we learned about the problems people were facing, which awakened in me the need to help and create spaces that would benefit us. At that moment, I felt the need to help them. I realized that I had to serve the community because it was what I liked.

I started to open up a little more; I no longer felt the embarrassment that I used to feel for what others might say. I have realized that I can express my opinion.

I hope that my community is recognized as a peaceful place, that the neighbourhood is no longer stigmatized as a dangerous place. I would like it to be recognized for its landscapes and to promote the local culture. I want our community to show its capacity and to be valued. As for my future, I want to continue living and understanding the feelings of the community, which is what I like, and that the community overcomes the stigmas it has. I want to be a person who leads and helps more people; I want to be an example for my daughter; I want to finish my career and start looking for new horizons.





# PsicoPRIDE, the quest for a freely diverse world

Alex is creating a hopeful future for the LGBTIQ+ community in Peru. And already, a present with more opportunities.

At just 22 years old, he has an admirable track record in human rights issues. At the age of 16, he enrolled in the Political Science program at the National University of San Marcos, and as he progressed, he realized that his passion lay in advocacy. This is how he began volunteering for NGOs and youth organizations.

His ambition for a fairer world led Alex to use his career as a catalyst for sustainable change in citizenship, addressing topics such as public administration, civil rights, and strengthening citizen participation. However, it was on this path that he found the purpose that moved him: working for the rights of people in their diversities.

## A diverse world is an urgent necessity

According to the First Virtual Survey for LGBTIQ+ People conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Informatics of

Peru, more than 56% of the population fears expressing their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Among the reasons, 72.5% cited fear of discrimination and aggression, 51.1% indicated fear of losing family, and 44.75% mentioned fear of losing job opportunities.

*"I witnessed several personal violations regarding negative experiences regarding my sexual orientation and gender expression. And, in some way, these made me realize that I needed to focus on my own, so to speak,"* comments Alex regarding their beginnings at the NGO Psicopríde.

Psicopríde is a youth organization that promotes and defends sexual and reproductive rights and

mental health, with interventions in Juan de Miraflores, Los Olivos, San Martín de Porres, and Villa María del Triunfo.

Alex joined at the end of 2021, amidst a still timid return to in-person activities due to the pandemic, but with a series of issues that needed urgent attention. With experience in public policy management and gender and inclusion issues, Alex and their team reinforced psychological care with an LGBTIQ+ focus, expanded volunteer recruitment, and participated in the materialization of the organization's first funds. One of them was the ELLA project fund, with which they were able to manage mobilizations, acquire materials, and implement capacity-building workshops for community leaders.







Now, Alex and their team divide their time between meticulous strategies and the most operational tasks. Their days involve creating content for social media, reviewing and responding to emails, forming alliances with organizations, creating workshops, and long days of fieldwork, but above all, satisfaction. *"I seek to make these volunteer hours not feel like a burden, but like a group of friends working for their own convictions,"* they comment.

*"The experience of preparing for the 2023 Pride march was the point where I realized my sense of belonging with LGBTIQ people. People who have had life experiences, perhaps a little different, but maybe just as tough*

*as now. And now, we are at a stage where we can feel good about ourselves, have the opportunity not only to watch the march, maybe on television or in secret, but to actively participate in it. That was the turning point where I noticed that something had changed, that something in this trajectory of my life I did right in some way,"* Alex recalls, mentioning one of their most significant experiences with the collective.

While telling us all this, Alex is outside of Lima, organizing neighborhood meetings and negotiating new spaces for Psicopríde. And despite the daily hustle and bustle, they pause to think about the organization's goals for the coming years: to consolidate as an NGO of LGBTIQ+ talents working in the service of LGBTIQ people and the community in general, not only in the psychological field but also legally. And, in turn, they mention the interest in covering the objective of training more organizations in the country on diversity issues.

With this, they make it clear that these lines not only express the vision for Psicopríde but for a world that deserves to be freely diverse. And that, as long as there are people with the same conviction, they won't take long to achieve it.



# Keimbily: The Plan that will Change Her Life



*"I am Keimbily. I am 28 years old, and I am ready to tell my story, not to revictimize myself, but with the intention that many women, mainly teenagers and young women, see themselves in my story and can be inspired by me. If my story changes just one life, I will feel good. If it changes many lives, I will feel really calm and extremely happy."*

*"I have lived in too much of a hurry. I practically skipped most of my adolescence and now the level of responsibility I carry on my shoulders almost exceeds my strength, but I have six reasons that drive me forward every day: my daughters and sons."*

*"Now I have a life plan. I know what I want and how I am going to achieve it. I am taking the first steps toward what I want my future life to be. It is never too late to reconsider, change and start again."*

Keimbily had been entirely blaming herself for how complicated her short life has been (although she says she feels she has lived about 100 years), but now she knows it was not all her fault, but rather the environment, the lack of communication and knowledge on the part of her parents and educators, the lack of timely advice or her not listening to it, the violence she has suffered, and how she was raised.

Keimbily was born in Caracas, Venezuela. Her father is Ecuadorian, part of the group who migrated more than 30 years ago to the then-prosperous Venezuela in search of better days. There he met Keimbily's mother, and they formed a family, built a house, and raised Keimbily and her brother.

*"I came to know motherhood at 16. At 17 my second child was born, both from my first relationship. Then came the third from a short-term relationship. The fourth was planned, desired, and expected; however, her father left us three days before her birth and disappeared completely. None of the partners were good to me: insults, abuse, beatings, and irresponsibility were my daily bread. The best thing that happened to me was to separate from them in time,"* says Keimbily.

Keimbily's mother, in an attempt to remedy the mistakes she made during her childhood and early adolescence – during which physical punishment was the norm, which turned her into a rebellious young woman – took charge not only of the upkeep of Keimbily's four children as soon as they were born (diapers, milk, medicine) but also of their upbringing and care. *"I would have liked for her not to take away my responsibility I had as a mother – that in exchange for her help she had forced me to study, for example. We could have looked for information and learned together about gender violence, sexual and reproductive health, and contraceptive methods... surely my life would have been different and more bearable,"* Keimbily says. It is the role of parents, she says, to guide their daughters and sons: *"You have to talk to them directly, and clearly."*

*She talks to her children openly about their mistakes and consequences, motivates them to dream and study, and urges them to always want to be happy and to do everything to achieve it. For the boys, she encourages them to act differently from their fathers, to respect and support all people, starting with their sisters: "I don't want my three daughters to go through what I went through. I fight with the 9-year-old. Seeing her is like seeing me at that age. I tell her not to follow in my footsteps, that I will be with her in every step she takes, advising her, accompanying her."*



## A new life in Ecuador

Keimbily left Venezuela six years ago, alone. She came to Ecuador because she has dual nationality and was attracted by the economy. When she first arrived, she experienced workplace abuse. Her employers made her work and did not pay her or paid her less than agreed. "I also suffered harassment in one of my jobs," she says. "I reported it, and to this day I am waiting for justice to be done, and to get my job back."



In Ecuador, she met the father of her youngest son and daughter. She says he is the only one who fulfills his obligations and covers the expenses; he takes care of the children and visits them. "He is a good father, but not a good partner for me because we fought a lot," she says, adding that she experienced psychological and emotional violence.

"He overshadowed me; he made me lose the desire to look good, to dress up, to empower myself." They separated by mutual agreement and since then their relationship as friends has improved, she says.

The first Christmas present he gave her, five years ago, was to bring her two daughters from Venezuela. From that moment on, and then with the birth of her fifth child, she began to learn how to be a full-time mother. When her mother died, she also brought her two older children from Venezuela. Until then, she had not even imagined

how complicated it would be to raise so many children, and even more so since the last one was born, now a year and a half old.



*"My last C-section, at 27, was a reality check that made me take the first step toward a definitive change: I told the doctor that I would not leave the hospital if I did not have my tubes tied. I say that it was my first sign of maturity. Since then, every step I take is with my feet firmly on the ground, convinced that this is how I advance, slowly but surely."*

Thus, the continuous therapy she began during pregnancy bore its first fruits, because when she found out she was expecting another baby, it was as if the world fell apart and she sought professional mental help.

Keimbily currently lives in Manta, where her father was born and where she has met good and bad people – as with anywhere else, she clarifies. She does not have a steady job, but she pays rent, food and school expenses, and she tries to get ahead.

*"The owner of the house is an angel. I owe her five months of rent, but she tells me to pay her little by little. When she has extra food she shares with me; she asks me to prepare empanadas for her friends to buy from me. The owner of the hotel around the corner calls me to do the cleaning when she has people coming over."*

The neighbours ask her oldest son to run errands, and the payment he receives is given entirely to his mother, along with what the lady at the store pays him when she asks for help, especially on weekends. This is how they survive.

*"Although in Venezuela I have my parents' house, it would not be easy to return, especially because of the food. Here with two dollars I can give lunch to my children, even if it is just rice and eggs. In addition, the first five go to school, where they are given books and some supplies. They are guaranteed an education,"* she says, pointing out the main reasons she has put down roots on Ecuadorian soil.





She has taken several courses on baking and food handling. With the voucher given to her by Plan International, she made empanadas with cheese, meat, and chicken and sold them to neighbours, and with part of the profit she bought more ingredients to continue with this activity. *"My desire is to have my own business: a cart to sell natural juices, empanadas and tostadas [sandwiches] outside the school on the corner. I have already asked the teachers, and they all offered me their support; now I only need the money*

*to buy the cart. I already have the blender, the kneader and the oven."*

With extreme conviction, Keimbily lists the three concrete things in her life plan: finishing high school, launching her enterprise, and building a house. *"I am taking the first steps: I have already taken and passed the exam to study for the accelerated baccalaureate (one year). I will do it online during the morning while the five children are in school. I am looking for a public daycare centre to leave the youngest one and thus have time to study, work and set up my business. Finally, with the fruits of my labour, I will buy a small piece of land and build my house little by little."*

### **The women's circle is a healing space**

Participating in the women's circle of Plan International's ELLA project is healing Keimbily's heart and giving her the impetus to make the big turnaround in her life that she needs. The circle, she says, is her space; it relieves her stress and helps her forget her problems. She brings her youngest daughter with her – they take care of her there; she plays and gets distracted while her mom lets go of her worries. The other children stay at home in the care of their older brother.

*"I talk with other women. I know I am not alone. We help each other. In the circle I have also learned to control my emotions and to be more patient with my children, to not let myself be carried away by what others say. To love myself as I am."* Meditation with soft music is one of her favourite moments; she feels it is liberating, she likes it very much, and she always thinks, *"Please don't let this ever end!"*

*"When I look in the mirror, I see that physically I am not even a quarter of what I was when I was 15, 18 or 22, but internally I was not even a quarter of what I am now. I see the world in a different way, with optimism, and that is what I try to teach my children. "*

*"This is my story. I don't want my life to be a sad story at the end. I want it to be a story of growth, of resilience, an example of what to do and what not to do in life. From the bottom of my heart, I hope that the story I have lived and am living is so strong that it can drive change in the lives of thousands of teenagers and young people. If it changes yours, believe me, it will be great."*





# Anthoan's Journey to Activism

In an environment of music, festivities and fireworks, Anthoan and his mother arrived in Lima on the night of December 31, 2017.

On a date that for anyone means the beginning of a new year, for them it meant the beginning of a new life.

With their hearts full of hope, they left Trujillo, Venezuela, on

December 26, leaving behind a home and a family. *"The trip was awful. I didn't like it. I was sick for the five days of the trip,"* recalls Anthoan, who tirelessly traveled the roads of Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador with his mother, Marbeana, before reaching their final destination, Lima, Peru.

Upon arrival, the two encountered a roller coaster of challenges and opportunities. Initially, they were welcomed by his grandfather, who offered them a temporary place to live. However, after days and nights of effort, Anthoan, his mother and his now-stepfather were able to achieve their goal of becoming independent.

Their new home also gave rise to one of the most significant events in their lives, their mother's pregnancy.

The arrival of a new brother brought great joy to Anthoan. It motivated him to adapt, to focus on virtual studies, and to face their economic instability and manage the nostalgia for his homeland. "It was a joy for us. I waited 13 years for a younger brother," he says with emotion.

Gael, the baby, became the engine that ignited the family's stability and progress. His mother and stepfather started a business, while Anthoan became deeply involved with activism – a key element in his adaptation process in the country and even in finding his passion in life.

## Next stop: sexual and reproductive rights

*"I started [in activism] because of my mom. She is a caring person who takes care of people. She was involved in different organizations; she took me to participate in programs for adolescents,"* says Anthoan, recalling his participation with multiple human rights organizations. During this time, he became aware of the limited access adolescents and young people have to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights, a prevalent problem in his community.

*"The truth is that not much is known about the subject, and I want to emphasize that,"* he says. *"In my community, there is still not much knowledge about reporting mechanisms. They think that reporting [violence] is useless".*



*"They are also unclear about how to access health services and how to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights," says Anthoan, who, in his search for information, came to the training sessions of the My Paths of Transformation program, part of the ELLA project. This program seeks to strengthen the capacities of youth leaders on issues such as the prevention of all forms of violence, access to sexual and reproductive health and rights and protection of adolescent rights.*

Anthoan was surprised to find that he still had more to learn regarding violence prevention and sexual and reproductive health. *"I remember we talked about the male and female reproductive systems, and that's when I realized that I didn't really know everything. I was perplexed. I asked myself: how could I not know? So I started to investigate,"* he says.



### Destination: education as a multiplier effect

During his reflections, Anthoan learned that to achieve significant change, training himself was not enough. He began to carry out research projects on this topic in school, promoting comprehensive sexual education among his classmates: *"At school they did not teach me about sexually transmitted diseases, or that early pregnancies can be prevented if condoms are used. It was here that I started to talk more about these issues in my educational institution, in my environment and with the classmates I was getting to know."*

The continuous learning exchange among adolescents and young people in his community has been significant for Anthoan, who has noticed an evolution in himself. His autonomy

and independence have increased. His connection with the development of young people in Peru has been strengthened and his purpose of promoting safe environments for refugees and migrants has been reaffirmed.

In addition, he sees the results of his efforts through the progress of his peers: *"I like that they are interested in the issues and do research. And not only about comprehensive sexual health issues, but also about other topics such as gender-based violence and feminism. They have researched and already know what to do to report a case of violence; they know who to go to,"* he says.

*"That is an achievement, even if it is just a little. For me it is a great achievement that they know what to do in a moment of panic, of violence. I am very happy about that. They replicate what they know, they share it, and that's the best thing,"* says Anthoan proudly.

Anthoan knows that access to information is fundamental to becoming knowledgeable adolescents and young people who can make key decisions for their future. However, he is also aware that they still face social conventions that hinder this: *"I know that in schools or among parents there are taboos and social stereotypes that do not allow us to know about our bodies, our sexual and reproductive health and well-being. But, if there is no interest on the part of others, it is enough that you have it. Do your research, find out what you don't know and study as much as you can."*

### ACTIVITY SEX-ED PROJECT





# Yes you can

Hello, my name is Lisbeth. I am 22 years old, and this is my story.

Since I was a little girl, I was in charge of taking care of my two younger brothers, because my mother had to work to provide economic stability to the family; therefore, I assumed the role of their mom. Since I was a little girl I cooked, did the housework, and took care of the household.

When I was 14 years old, I left my studies and went to live with my father, but he went to work in another city, leaving me with my stepmother.

My relationship with her was not good, so much so that I endured hunger living in her house.

At that time, I went to live with my husband, he was older than me, and at the age of 15 I became pregnant with my first daughter. Since I was brought up to be in charge of the housework, I thought that was my job, because ever since I was a child, I saw that my grandmother and my mother did it that way. It was complicated to be a mother at 16 – at that age my friends went out to see the world.

After having my second child, I realized that I not only wanted to take care of them, but I also wanted to make my dreams come true. I wanted to start something. So little by little, I was looking for what caught my attention, and I discovered sewing and embroidery as my great passions.

Sewing has been a family tradition in my house. I learned it from my mother and she, in turn, from my grandmother. Since I was a little girl, I would grab clothes and start cutting them to make the moulds. As I grew up, I remembered what I had learned as a child and began to practice. The first thing I made was some pants for one of my daughters – which, by the way, looked great on her. This first experience encouraged me to continue cutting and making garments that my daughters continued to wear.

This search also helped me realize that I am skilled at making crafts. For example, I know how to do manicures, sewing, special hairstyles. I have always been an active woman who likes to learn, undertake and create. However, the social stigma for being a young mother is very strong. Many

people assume that I have no skills, or that I cannot continue fighting for my dreams because I have to take care of my daughters.

Also, many people discouraged me by telling me that I was not capable, that if I started something I would most likely not finish it. But in Plan, I found that voice of encouragement that told me that as a woman, of course I could get ahead, that I am very valuable and a fighter. Thanks to that enthusiasm, I began to believe that I could achieve the goals I had dreamed of. My dreams should not be curtailed just because I am a mother, because I can also succeed in my undertakings.

The ELLA project came to my neighbourhood to organize workshops on sexual and reproductive rights. Before I learned everything they taught us there, I believed that women should stay at home, that we could not get ahead, that when you have children life is more difficult. But during the talks, they explained to me about my rights, that despite the barriers we have as women and mothers, we can get ahead.



Learning about my sexual and reproductive rights was very important, because I was not thinking about having more daughters or sons, but the father of my girls told me that he wanted to have another baby. If the ELLA project had not appeared in my life, I surely would have agreed, because I thought it was my duty as a housewife. With Plan I learned about my rights and how to decide what I wanted. The ELLA project was the help I needed to empower myself and to be able to tell him that I did not want to have any more children.

Now, with that decision made, I want to continue with my business, so that my daughters find in their mother an example of struggle and persistence, and that they understand that girls also have rights.

I learned to embroider when a friend asked me to be her son's godmother. I wanted to give the boy a special gift, something I could make with my own hands, so she recommended that I make some quilts embroidered with his name. So, I set myself to the task. Initially I researched on the internet how they were made, and then I went on to make the design. The quilt was beautiful; however, I lacked technique, so I kept researching, learning more and more, until I ended up creating what would be my new business idea: embroidered keychains.

Although this was a venture that excited me, I still didn't have enough money to start. That's when the ELLA project appeared again, and thanks to the financial support they gave me,

I bought all the materials I needed to start my business, and that's how I got started. So far, I have it running for three months. I have done very well, and because it is an innovative product, people liked it a lot; besides, I am passionate about embroidery.

My business is called Maanli, which is the combination of the names of my two daughters and mine, Ma (María Salomé), An (Ana Sofía), Li (Lisbeth). By the way, it was not easy to find it. I spent several afternoons joining our names until I found one that I liked and that caught my attention.

Many people like my work. They have bought and admired the embroidered keychains. Those gestures of encouragement keep me going; moreover, the people who encourage

me also challenge me by proposing new designs, and I always look for ways to elaborate on them. I love to tell myself that I can do it, because it pushes me not to give up until I achieve it.

I think that women have had many obstacles to achieving our goals. There are many voices that tell us that we can not, that we must conform. However, I do not believe this. I think that we can achieve whatever we propose; we just need that helping hand to help us and guide us in our rights. That is why embroidery is so important to me, because it is a home-based business that allows me to get ahead and take care of my daughters.

Another goal I set out to achieve was to

finish high school. To graduate, I had to work with my uncle on a farm to earn enough money to pay for my degree. Although my desire is to continue studying and to learn more, I have not yet been able to access technical education to learn and become certified on these topics, because my schedule is not flexible enough for me to accommodate the care and upbringing of my daughters.

For now, I will continue to improve my embroidery technique. I want my brand to be more recognized and innovate new products. That's why I tell women that we can do it – that there are many barriers, and many people will want to overshadow us. They will tell us that we are already moms, that we are useless. Of course we can do it, of course we are useful, of course we are capable, and that is what we must show as women – that we are empowered, that we can fight for our dreams and for the rights of our daughters.





# Madelein: A Better Present and a Promising Future for Herself and Her Family in Ecuador.

On a weekday, shortly before 10 a.m., 15-year-old Madelein dances to the sound of a song in English in the small living/dining room of her apartment in northern Quito. She takes advantage of the absence of her father, who is working, her mother, who went out to buy materials for her business, and her brothers, who are in the park.

She records a TikTok video with spontaneous choreography, the kind that just comes to her as soon as she starts to enjoy the music, joyfully, with a touching smile that expresses how comfortable and happy she feels. The unexpected visitor doesn't bother her – in fact, she likes to have a new audience to tell her honestly if her dancing is good or not. (It is good! She has so much rhythm and you can feel the passion she puts into it!)



Madelein sees herself in the future as a dance instructor for girls around the world. *"Better if it is Switzerland, Spain, or Argentina,"* she says, because she dreams that someone will discover her potential through social media and invite her to travel the world, perfecting and spreading this art. Medical school is also among her options, but right now, because she is young and energetic, dance is what most attracts her attention.

*"I like dancing. In Venezuela I practiced from Monday to Friday, and on Sunday I performed with my group in the neighbourhood church. We danced until we were tired and that made me very happy,"* says Madelein. Joining a dance academy is one of her priorities;

now the task is to find a place to take classes in the morning, because she goes to school in the afternoon. School vacations, she believes, are a good time to start.

The prospect of dance classes, attending a school where she feels welcome and has many friends, belonging to an adolescent club with girls and boys from various sectors in the north of the city, the economic stability her family has achieved, and, above all, the dignity they have regained by moving away from those who humiliated them in their own country due to their economic situation are the powerful reasons that lead Madelein to say, *"I am super, super happy in Ecuador."*





## The migration process

When her family decided to leave Venezuela, they only told her maternal grandparents, to escape envy and bad wishes, says the teenager.

*“Four years have passed, I have grown up and matured and, something very important, I have recovered my tranquility, my peace of mind, as they say. It is strange, and sad too, that in another country I have come to feel better than in my own land and with my people. I would only go back to Venezuela to visit my grandmother; my grandfather has passed away with us far away from him.”*

Madelein arrived in Ecuador on August 19, 2019, with her mother, two brothers and sister – now 18, 10, and 7 years old – after a long and hard journey that took seven days from Maturin, in the state of Monagas, in northern Venezuela.

*“The trip was difficult. We went down a dirt road, full of rocks and shifting sticks; it was the worst thing in my life. They kept telling us that if we fell into the river, the current would carry us away and we would drown. That filled us with fear, almost terror, but my mother encouraged us to keep going.”*

The mere crossing of the Colombian-Ecuadorian border, in Madelein's words, gave them back their soul. They received help and shelter, because in Tulcán, the first Ecuadorian city in the north of the country, it is so cold (7-11°C) that it chills to the bone, especially for those who come from a land with a humid tropical climate (21-32°C). From there they took a bus to Quito for the last five hours of the trip.

The hope that things would get better did not abandon them during the journey to meet their father, who, with the support of a relative, had migrated a year earlier to look for work, build a house, send money to Venezuela to support them and save enough to pay for the trip to Ecuador for the rest of the family.

And indeed, once they settled in, things improved for them. Gone were the days when only one meal a day fed the family. Now her father's steady job and her mother's made-to-order handicrafts, which she promotes on Facebook, allow them to eat three meals a day, go to school, buy school supplies, pay the rent and buy new clothes. *“The hard process of migration – which, if we knew about it before, I don't think we would have done it that way – was worth it,”* says the teenager.

*“Sometimes I talk to my mom about the difficult past, the present and the promising future, and I thank her for how brave she was to risk travelling alone with two girls and two boys. She is the best example of determination and strength we have.”* Madelein, her mother and her sister are among the 236,000 Venezuelan girls and women in Ecuador, out of a total of 502,514 migrants from that country<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup>R4V: Regional Interagency Coordination Platform for Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants, led jointly with UNHCR and IOM in Ecuador.



## Adaptation

During the first year the children did not go to school. Their mother had a hard time getting four openings in the same school, and it was very important for her that they took care of and accompanied each other. Finally she succeeded, and they are in a relatively small public school, close to home.

*"I wanted to end up in the same school. Though they are strict: we can't wear piercings or dye our hair, we can't use our cell phones either, and that's okay – we go there to study, and to spend time with our friends. Just like at home, rules are necessary; they make us respectful of spaces and people."*

Madelein has already finished tenth grade and will continue to the first year of high school; however, she says that when she entered eighth grade she was *"somewhat antisocial"* and that *the first ones to approach her were other Venezuelan students. But now she is more open, and her best friend is Ecuadorian. "I hope that for next year everyone returns, and that they don't put us in separate classrooms. In any case, we will always have recess to get together."*

## Nueva Juventud, her teen club

Through the ELLA project, Plan International promotes nine adolescent clubs in the cities of Quito, Loja, and Manta. Madelein is part of one of these spaces that operates in a neighborhood far north of the city.

*"It feels like a safe place to speak freely, give my opinion, participate and share."*

She has met 22 teenagers, and she generally gets along better with boys. *"Surely this affinity is because I have a very close relationship with my older brother,"* she says. She tells him about important things and asks his advice when she wants to go out with a boy. *"I trust my mom, of course, but I feel more comfortable with my brother. He is 100% me, mom is my half,"* she confesses, smiling a little nervously when she sees her mother arrive and join the conversation.

*"In the adolescent club, we all participate. That's what a club is for, to integrate, to help each other, to work as a team."* Something important, she adds, is that in this space she learned to be more sociable and to speak in public.

She now knows about human rights, sexual and reproductive rights, contraceptive methods, xenophobia, self-esteem and other topics, and she thinks they are lessons for life.

*"I want the club to never end so that my little sister and brother can also join and learn how to act, where to go, where to call if they need protection, ask for help or assert their rights – though they have me, and I learned the lesson very well,"* she ends with a laugh.



# Gloriannys and Her Path to a Violence-free Life

If traveling alone can be confusing, complicated, and even frightening for an adult... what can be in store for a child? What can a child expect?

Like the 7.13 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants who have left their country<sup>9</sup>, Gloriannys, 14, left her native Portuguesa, Venezuela, in early 2021 in the hope of finding better opportunities in Peru. Her path was different and, unbeknownst to her, she would have a transformational journey.

*"I arrived in Peru on March 21, 2021. I left Venezuela on March 15, when I was 12 years old, I came alone with someone my mother paid to bring me,"* says Gloriannys, who traveled to reunite with her father and mother, who left Venezuela in 2018 and 2019, respectively.

The trip was not easy. She describes it as "curious and fearful": *"Since I was alone, I had no one to take refuge in, no one to say to, 'Hey, I'm afraid,' because*

*there were so many strangers. I asked God to give me strength and willpower. And that's it, I just got here."*

However, the hope of a family reunion and the illusion of a new life gave her a reason to face the obstacles along the way.

## Arrival in Peru: first encounter with xenophobia

Her arrival in Peru meant facing challenges she had never faced before: *"Another country, another region, other people, another culture. I was afraid, but I told myself: I trust myself, I know I am brave and I am strong enough to face this situation,"* says Gloriannys.

The emotional reunion with her parents was the main reason for her to start her life in Peru with a bang. Thanks to her mother, she was able to enroll in school only three weeks after her arrival. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the first year of studies were virtual. After the restrictions were lifted, she resumed her classes in-person.

For the first time, Gloriannys would meet students in her class and experience a regular education, just like any other girl her age. However, at first, returning to the classroom was not what she expected.

<sup>9</sup> R4V: Regional Interagency Coordination Platform for Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants, led jointly with UNHCR and IOM in Peru.



### Making your goal a reality: getting to know ELLA

*"There was a group of girls who picked on me. They said things to me because I was Venezuelan," she says, but her determined personality and intent to adapt to the country was more important. "I didn't pay attention to them. Little by little, I gained the affection of my classmates and teachers. I even made friends from other grades and other sections."*

Although it was the first time she had encountered this situation, Gloriannys was aware of the xenophobic attitudes experienced by the majority of Venezuelan migrants and refugees. This awakened in her the desire to support more girls and adolescents to live free of discrimination and to create safe spaces for everyone.

In November 2022, Gloriannys first heard about Plan International and the ELLA project. *"They had told us about ELLA, that they were going to give us talks every Wednesday. So, I was interested in signing up, in being able to get in."* However, due to a scheduled trip to visit her family in Venezuela, she decided not to participate as part of the training program. During the second quarter of 2023, the ELLA project returned to her school to start a second cohort. Then, her classroom tutor again presented her with the opportunity to enroll. Gloriannys decided to investigate to learn more about the activities.



*"Out of curiosity I went on Facebook and found out what the trainings were like. I could see some pictures, some things, and I was curious, I was quite interested in the project."* But, for this opportunity, she decided not only to sign up, but to invite seven more peers. *"On the first day of the training program, there were only three; on the second day, there were five; and now there are seven from my class and they are all very interested in the project,"* she says excitedly. Due to the instances of discrimination and xenophobia that Gloriannys experienced at school, one of the issues she considers most important to deal with when adapting to a new country is managing emotions, *"We have talked about emotions and how to regulate them. I have realized that it is very important to be able to control ourselves, to be able to regulate how we feel and to know how we are going to react to a situation. To be able to think and know*

*what's going to happen after that, what's going to happen after the anger goes away and what consequences it could bring you."*

*"What we have seen about the management of emotions, the REPER<sup>10</sup>, the traffic light, has helped me a lot, I have been able to put it into practice. Above all, the breathing methods. They have been quite effective, and I have been able to integrate them into my life in a good way. They have been very effective, especially in difficult situations,"* she explains.

In the sessions she also managed to internalize the importance of reporting. *"We have been taught that we always have to tell anyone we know who can help us, to any authority. That we should not remain silent, because we are simply encouraging more violence. We have the SíseVe<sup>11</sup>, we have assistants, tutors, directors, we have the police station, we have our parents.*

*We have several authorities to whom we can turn to in any situation of violence",* she says. Through these lessons, Gloriannys affirms that the creation of safe environments and training in protection routes are essential for a dignified life, in which their rights are respected. *"I would like them [training spaces] to be promoted in other schools, so that little by little we all become informed about these important and necessary topics that we should know about,"* she shares, proving that girls and adolescents like her are leading the way towards a future free of discrimination.

<sup>10</sup> REPER is a Spanish acronym for a technique to regulate, manage and express emotions to help manage intense emotions, to help reduce conflicts.

<sup>11</sup> SíseVe is an app where one can report violence in schools (physical, psychological, bullying, etc.) allowing educational authorities be aware and respond.





# The heart reveals its true beauty, beyond appearances.



My name is Daniela, and I am 19 years old. My life has always been very complicated, even before I migrated. When I was 15, my father passed away, and since then, I decided to look for a new place to live, either with my grandmother, my mother-in-law (since I started dating my partner) or wherever possible.

The situation has always been very difficult, because sometimes there was nothing to eat. I even had to scramble to feed my siblings, because my mother could not get a job.

Day-to-day life was very hard in Venezuela. I spent two years without a fixed home, until, at 17, I decided to come to Colombia. To get here, my boyfriend and I undertook a three-day hitchhiking trip, getting into the car of whoever wanted to take us. Sometimes we shared the journey with other migrants, sleeping on the sidewalks until we finally reached our destination.

Our goal was to get to Ocaña or Medellín, but here in Ocaña my boyfriend had a friend who could help us for a few days. So, once we arrived in this city, I got a job, even though I was a minor, and we started to pay for a room to sleep in.

In my homeland I left a part of my heart, because my brothers and my mother are there. I also miss the food and the warmth of the people, because you are used to your country and my family was quite close, which makes me feel very lonely here.

In Caracas, I enjoyed carnivals and Christmas very much. December was especially very nice, because the whole family would get together and cook for everyone.



It was in those family gatherings, where we shared knowledge and experiences, that I developed my passion for cosmetology, like doing nails and eyebrows. It became my source of income today. My mother did this type of work in her neighbourhood for neighbours and relatives, who paid her for the service provided. In that sense, she passed on to me the knowledge of this trade.

I was able to finish school at the age of 16 and always wanted to study Forensic Science, but I was still a minor and did not have the money to take the training courses. Also, there was a lack of money at home. My mother had no way to support us, and after my father's death, one of my brothers

started to misbehave and the other one was very sad. So, I decided to become independent to survive and I came here [to Colombia] with the intention of helping my family.

To survive in Colombia, I have had all kinds of jobs, like working in a clothing boutique, in a fried chicken restaurant, cleaning houses, taking care of children – wherever I was called, I would work. Even though I don't have a job right now, migrating has helped me earn money, set goals – in short, mature as a person. Before, I only worried about partying, because I had someone to help me, but here I must fend for myself. That made me settle down and focus on life.



In Colombia my support group is mainly my partner and sometimes also my boyfriend's friend and his wife. We cook together, sharing food when someone doesn't have any, and we lend each other money as well.

My dream when I migrated was to be self-sufficient, to have a job, to help my family, and to have my own space, without having to constantly go from one place to another to have a roof to sleep under.

During my migration process, I had to get by, and I dealt with xenophobic behavior and comments in the workplace. Many times, I was the only foreigner.

So, when someone explained to me or told me what certain things are called here, they did it in a derogatory way, without understanding that the names change from country to country.

Also, one supervisor fired me from a job because I could not work due to my immigration status in Colombia. This caused great difficulties for me since there was a significant drop in income at home. My partner was just starting to work as a barber, and he did not have many clients yet.



To overcome xenophobia, the only alternative is to realize that we are all sisters and brothers. Just as there are people here from Venezuela, there are also Colombians in Venezuela. It is not because we are from different cultures that there are bad people. I know that there are people who have come to do harm, but we are not all like that. We shouldn't all have to pay for what some people have done.

The ELLA project came into my life at a time when I didn't have a job and I was going through several problems with my partner. Since I did not have an income of my own, the economic burden was unbalanced and that affected our relationship.

Joining the ELLA project helped me to share things about my life and my problems with more people. I was too embarrassed to talk about my problems. It also made me mature in the interpersonal relationships I had with other people. There they explained to me how xenophobia was, the mistreatment of women. They taught me to identify these situations and not to normalize them, because before, when they mistreated me, I saw it as normal.

It even helped my partner, because he came to attend some workshops and, from there, we changed the harmful dynamics that existed in our relationship, because before we fought about everything; we even hit each other. But after the workshops, we treated each other with more respect, without being rude. We talked about the things that caused us conflict. We supported each other in a healthy way.



In the workshops, Venezuelan and Colombian people also got closer, which was very nice. We felt like family, we got to know each other, we wanted to get along well, despite having different opinions because our life stories were different. But we went through hard situations, which united us and put us in a position to help each other.

The ELLA project united me with more Colombian women, because before I didn't like them. I was more distrustful of them, as several had mistreated me. Now I have good local friends. We exchange culinary traditions. For example, a girl from Ocaña who attends the same workshop gives me

food that I had never tasted before, such as guava with salt and lemon or chocolate with cheese. Meanwhile I give her food to try from my country that is not common in her city. This is how we interact. She has also opened the doors of her family to me, and I am able to spend time with her daughters, who ask me how life is in my world [in Venezuela].

In the future, I would like to have a beauty salon business, have my own space to share with my partner and form a family (daughters and sons), return to Venezuela to visit my relatives and I hope they can come to know Colombia, because they have never been able to leave Venezuela.

These aspirations help me keep hope alive, give me the strength to overcome the trials and difficulties that appear in my life, because, otherwise, in the face of scarcity, one would always prefer to go hungry in one's country, with one's family. But it is the expectation of having a better tomorrow that helps me persist, despite the difficulties, and forces me to focus on my goals.

Like me, many people have struggled during their migration experience. So, I invite people in Colombia to not get carried away by the first impressions of those who come from Venezuela. It is nice to sit down and get to know the other person, because often, the heart is much more beautiful than what can be seen on the outside.





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