

WOMEN WHO ARE MAKING A
DIFFERENCE YOU SHOULD KNOW

stories of women who are leading the response during the COVID-19

25 STORIES OF WOMEN WHO ARE LEADING THE RESPONSE DURING COVID-19

This document is part of the campaign **#WomenLeadAgainstCOVID19**.

A collective initiative by the partners of the Inter-American Task Force on Women's Leadership, which counts on the support and cooperation of the Government of Canada.

Pursuant to OAS General Assembly Resolution AG/RES. 2928 (XLVIII-O/18), the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) serves as Technical Secretariat of the Task Force.

Inter-American Task Force on Women's Leadership

womenleadership@oas.org
<http://www.taskforcewomenleadership.org>

@iatfshleads
<https://www.facebook.com/iatfshleads2030>



Copyright ©2020

This work can be reproduced for any non-commercial use, granting the respective recognition to the Inter-American Task Force on Women's Leadership. Derivative works are not allowed.

Acknowledgment

The Task Force partners really appreciate the time women interviewed sharing to tell their stories, as well as people who have supported in the identification, recommendations, and facilitation of contacts with these women who are part of this systematization that brings together a minimum part of thousand of women's stories who, anonymously, are leading the response during the COVID-19 crisis.

The partners of the Inter-American Task Force on Women's Leadership appreciate the Government of Canada for the support to create this inter-institutional alliance addressed to work together to increase the impact and the sustainability of the efforts in order to contribute to improving and strengthening of women's leadership on all of the ambits of decision-making in the Americas and the Caribbean.

WHO WE ARE

During the VIII Summit of the Americas (Peru, April 2018), leaders announced the creation of the Inter-American Task Force on Women's Leadership, an alliance between international and inter-American institutions to promote the empowerment of women through greater cooperation and synergies to accelerate the commitment and actions of all relevant sectors towards greater women's leadership in all areas of power and decision-making.

The Task Force is composed of key inter-American and international organizations, which have recognized expertise and programming related to women's leadership. These include the Organization of American States/ Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) and Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), ParlAmericas, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN Women, the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF), the Ibero-American General Secretariat (SEGIB), International IDEA, the Caribbean Institute for Women in Leadership (CIWiL) and the Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defense of Women's Rights (CLADEM). Likewise, the Inter American Task Force counts with the support of the Government of Canada.

PURPOSE OF THE TASK FORCE

The main objective of the Inter-American Task Force on Women's Leadership is to position the Americas as the leading region in achieving SDG 5.5. We aim to contribute to accelerated commitment and actions across all sectors and advance women's leadership in power and decision-making.



with the support of



AT ALL LEVELS, WOMEN ARE LEADING THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Although the challenges are global and the search for solutions demands, above all responses from leaders and decision-makers, the institutions that make up the Inter-American Task Force on Women's Leadership recognize that women are at the head of numerous processes in response to this crisis.

At different levels of decision-making, with different types of contributions, they are there, contributing their knowledge, experience, time, and commitment in order to manage the pandemic and mitigate the crisis in their communities, and in health, educational, scientific, social, and community institutions, women's organizations, cooperatives, and enterprises, political, union and productive spaces, among others.

Twenty-five years after the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, when most of the

challenges then posed remain current and the COVID-19 pandemic further deepens gender inequalities, we want to make visible the contributions of women in the response to this unprecedented crisis.

In the 25 stories highlighted below, we want to extend our recognition and sincere gratitude to all those women who are working formally or voluntarily, individually or collectively, with or without support, with resources, or only with their creativity, determination, courage, and heart.

Their stories, in addition to inspiring us to strengthen collective commitment at different levels, must challenge us to recognize and integrate women in the decision-making spaces that correspond to them, not only by right but also by their daily actions throughout the region.



LEARN ABOUT SOME OF THE WOMEN WHO ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE THROUGH THEIR LEADERSHIP

CLAUDIA PERANDONES

A SPECIALIST IN MEDICAL GENETICS, CLAUDIA HOLDS A MASTER'S DEGREE IN MOLECULAR BIOLOGY AND GENETIC ENGINEERING, AND IS A DOCTOR IN BIOSTRUCTURAL SCIENCES.

Dr. Perandones is from Argentina and is currently the Technical Scientific Director of the National Institute of Infectious Diseases at the ANLIS (National Administration of Laboratories and Health Institutes) Malbrán. She leads a scientific team of 25 professionals—most of them women—who managed to completely sequence the genome of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in just six days. This was a very important achievement that put Argentina on the global science map in the first days of March thanks to the quality of the

sequencing, helping to ensure the findings could be compared with the genomes identified by a handful of other countries worldwide.

The news led to an immediate visit from the President, Alberto Fernández, a source of pride for the entire ANLIS Institute team, who had never received a presidential visit before. Without a doubt, this was an acknowledgment and encouragement unprecedented in the 104-year history of the institution.

“POWER DOES NOT ALWAYS HAVE TO COME IN MASCULINE PACKAGING

That is something that I had to learn for myself because it seemed natural to think that the directors had to be men because they impart more strength, character, and impetus to the exercise of power. But I think that when you persuade yourself of something, you can lead the rest. And you have to convince other women too. And those of us who have already broken the glass ceiling have the obligation to open the way for girls and young people, to make it easier for them by sharing strength, security, and self-esteem.”



Dr. Perandones says that she had to get along in academic and work environments that were mostly male-dominated and very masculine in character. During her time at the University, most of the professors were men and she noticed how high professional expectations were always placed on them, who were expected to be cardiologists, neurosurgeons, while women were expected to deal with minor medical sciences. She says that even in her family she already felt the gender bias during her childhood. Family expectations were for her brother to become a doctor, while she would be a kindergarten teacher. In fact,

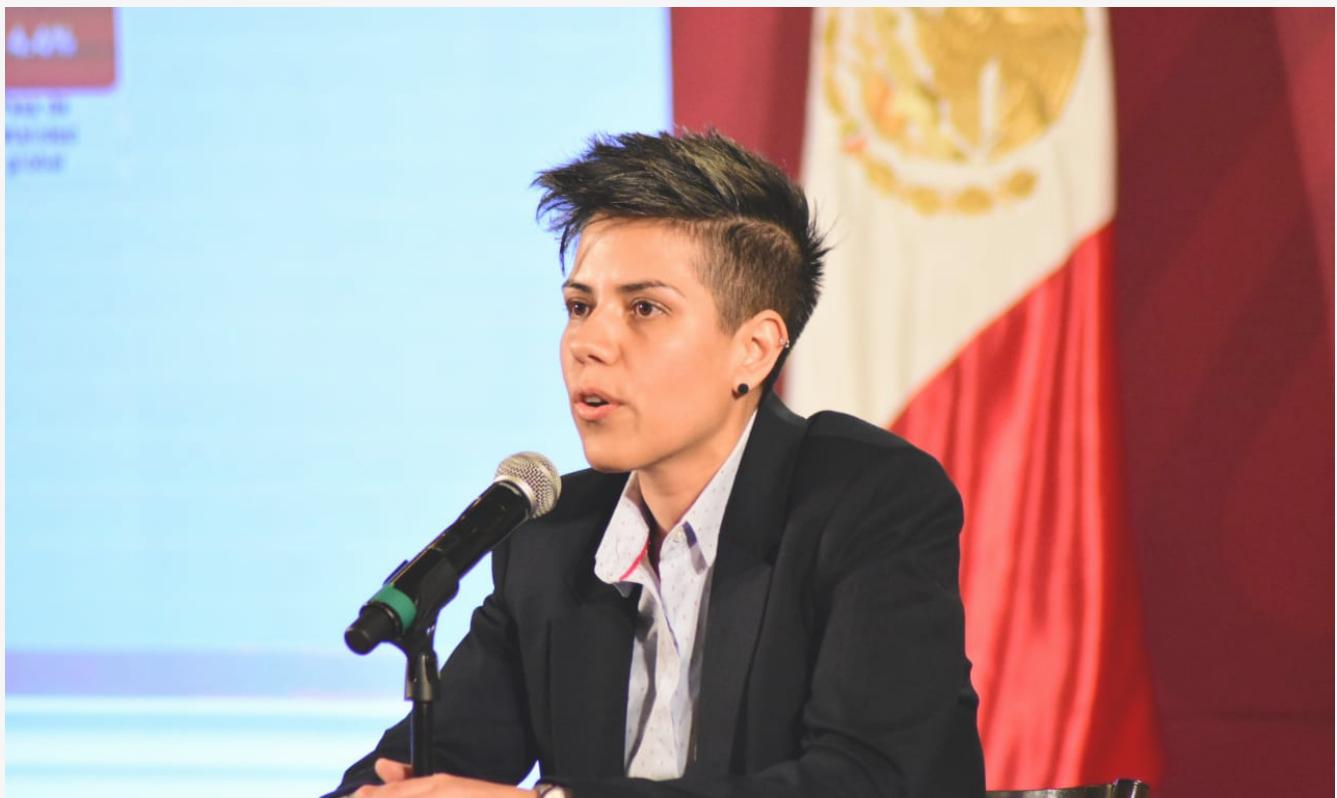
that girl became a geneticist highly skilled in responding to problems such as rare diseases and the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak.

On the issue of women's leadership, she remarks: "It seems that women are more sympathetic towards valuing care and wellbeing, before economic factors. In general, when decisions about this pandemic were made by women, the emphasis has gone in that direction. This may reflect the fact that women are better able to put ourselves in the place of another person."



ANA LUCÍA DE LA GARZA

A SPECIALIST IN EPIDEMIOLOGY, ANA LUCIA HOLDS A MASTER'S DEGREE IN PUBLIC HEALTH AND A DOCTORATE IN PUBLIC HEALTH.



Since 2019, she has been the Director of Epidemiological Operations Research of the General Directorate of Epidemiology, part of the Ministry of Health at the Federal Government of Mexico. Together with a team of public health professionals, Dr. De la Garza carries out daily monitoring of risks to public health, which in the current context focuses on the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

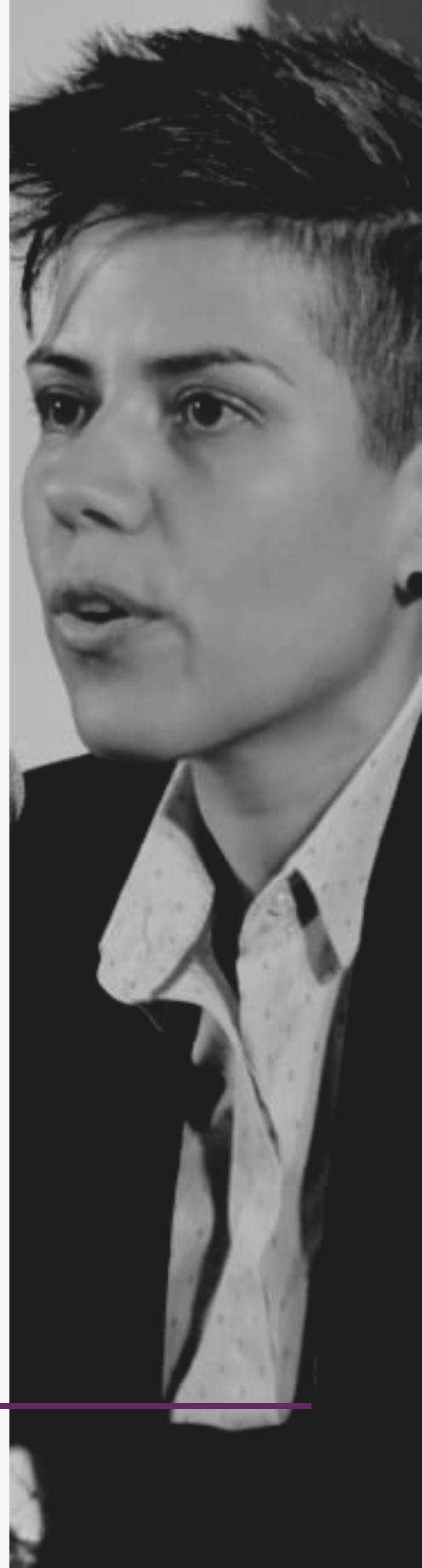
“ACROSS GENERATIONS, WE HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY TO CONTINUE CONTRIBUTING SO THAT EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES ARE POSSIBLE FOR ALL WOMEN.”

Although Dr. De la Garza has become a public figure in the context of this emergency, she points out that the Ministry of Health currently has a multidisciplinary team of talented women whose work should be acknowledged in order to raise awareness of their contribution to different areas of health. As she says:

"The strengthening of the gender perspective, the visibility and inclusion of women in all public policies and in decision-making will generate a positive change that will inspire and continue to neutralize biases."

Likewise, she asserts that for more girls and women to participate in science and specifically in the field of health, there must be constant political effort, commitment, and will. She points out that, although society plays an important role in being able to transform and promote real change leading to greater participation of women in different sectors, political action must also seek to strengthen democracy with equal representation and balanced participation in decision-making roles.

She maintains that all women constitute a key component from the health and social perspective to COVID-19, both in the response and in the care and welfare of people, either in health services or in their own homes. Meanwhile, she underlines the need to promote the recognition of the work of inspiring women leaders and to raise awareness of the value of their contributions at all levels and in all spheres.



SANDRA LÓPEZ VERGÈS

She is a Biologist who holds a Master's in Microbiology, a PhD in Virology and a post-doctorate in Immunology of Infectious Diseases.

Since 2012 she has worked at the Gorgas Memorial Institute for Health Studies in Panama, where she dedicates her time to research on the immune response to viral diseases. In the current situation, her work is focused on research into the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Additionally, Dr. López Vergés is the Head of the Virology and Biotechnology Research Department, which is responsible for COVID-19 molecular diagnosis for the entire country, in addition to coordinating the pandemic response in this field and training other molecular laboratories.

“

TO MOTIVATE GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN TO ENTER SCIENCE, IT IS ESSENTIAL TO HAVE WOMEN SCIENTISTS AS ROLE MODELS IN VERY DIVERSE FIELDS SO THAT THEY CAN SEE EVERYTHING THEY ARE CAPABLE OF BECOMING.”



At the Gorgas Institute, Dr. López Vergés coordinates several research projects related to diseases such as Dengue, Zika, Chikungunya, and currently SARS-CoV-2. She also collaborates on a number of other projects currently underway. These are projects are all part of the Institute's current research and concern the genetics of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the effectiveness of the virus over time, the search for antivirals, research into the interaction of the virus with the placenta (maternal-fetal passage), the genetic characterization of the form of the virus circulating in the country, and epidemiological analysis of the transmission of the virus.

She acknowledges that a large number of women work in the health care sector.

However, the response to the health emergency due to the pandemic has led to an overload of work for women in this sector, since juggling family responsibilities becomes an almost impossible mission in light of the increased workload they have faced due to the intensity and length of the crisis. As she says:

"In Panama, there are quite a few female scientists. The problem is that over time the differences between the situation of men and women are beginning to emerge, which are manifested above all in leadership positions. We need a good analysis by the social sciences of the exact points where women scientists get left behind, in order to find tailored solutions."



Dr. López Vergés dreams of achieving better communication between science and the general population, a two-way and more interactive communication. She would like to see science being more diverse and inclusive, and better at responding to the problems of society. But she also considers that improved scientific education is needed to enable people to understand and recognize scientific thinking, the different steps and length of

time it requires, especially at the present moment when society has become accustomed to obtaining information very quickly, even if it is poor-quality information. She suggests that including wider society in the challenges that science faces could be of great interest, given the increase in knowledge about bioethics, philosophy, equality, and respect for the environment, which undoubtedly enriches scientific advances.



WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING

THEY ARE THE MAJORITY IN THE RESPONSE,

BUT A MINORITY IN THE REPRESENTATION

Women are fighting the pandemic on the front lines: They are the majority of doctors, nurses, and care workers as well as among cleaners in public and private sectors, at home through the care of children, the elderly, and the sick. Women are also leading critical efforts as part of regional and local response; private and social initiatives.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, 9 out of 10 nurses are women, and they represent 57% of doctors (IADB, 2019).

However



25%

OF EXECUTIVE POSITIONS IN HOSPITALS*

22,9%

OF MINISTERS OF HEALTH ARE WOMEN**

*WHO, 2020 // **CIM, 2020

MARIBEL ZEBALLOS OJEDA

Maribel is an Obstetric Nurse. In the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, she supports pregnant women from Llallagua, in Potosí, Bolivia, to whom she offers pre- and postnatal care and check-ups.

Since the pandemic began, pregnant women have stopped attending their regular check-ups to avoid COVID-19

cell phone, for those who use one, while for cases of high obstetric risk she organizes home visits. When the pregnancy has come to term, Maribel attends home deliveries. In most cases, deliveries occur at night, but Maribel is there, even walking several kilometers to reach remote areas of the community. Only in cases with obstetric risks do the women attend hospital for delivery.



infections. As a result, they are unable to access prenatal check-ups and other sexual and reproductive health care services. On the other hand, the remoteness of neighboring communities due to the lack of transportation, the absence of means of communication, and the poverty in which many of the patients live, makes regular health care checks difficult.

Faced with this situation, Maribel takes charge of monitoring pregnant women by

“ ALL THE SACRIFICE IS FOR THE GOOD OF THE WOMAN AND THE NEWBORN. NO MATTER THE TIME OF DAY, WHEN THE PATIENT CALLS ME I GO IMMEDIATELY TO ATTEND THE DELIVERY, NO MATTER HOW FAR AWAY THE COMMUNITY IS.”

WALESKA LÓPEZ CANÚ

PROUDLY MAYA KAQCHIKEL. DOCTOR OF MEDICINE AND MEDICAL DIRECTOR OF WUQU' KAWOQ / MAYA HEALTH ALLIANCE

Wuqu' Kawoq / Maya Health Alliance is an international organization that works in the most impoverished communities in Guatemala, finding solutions to their health care needs, seeking to overcome barriers to health, and uniting medicine, culture, and indigenous language.

Currently, in the context of the pandemic, Dr. López Canú is in charge of planning

and coordinating multiple activities. These include offering care through "distance medicine" for children with chronic and acute malnutrition, women with sexual and reproductive health needs, and patients with complex and chronic diseases. In addition, the organization has already distributed food aid to more than 900 families.



“THE CRISIS DUE TO THE PANDEMIC HAS MADE VISIBLE OUR STARK REALITY, WHICH HAS HISTORICALLY BEEN NEGLECTED.

Indigenous women are gradually becoming aware of our true role in the family and in society. We have a lot to contribute, based on our life experiences and the knowledge of what we are and want, as well as our knowledge of the real needs of the community itself.”



Wuqu' Kawoq has also been providing personal protective equipment to students in the final year of their medical studies who provide services in rural areas. Likewise, they are offering advice and online training to medical professionals, while coordinating a WhatsApp group with more than 180 members from more than 100 social organizations where they provide information on the management of COVID-19 prevention measures in the communities.

Dr. López Canú highlights that language is another important barrier to communication for the prevention of the virus. For this reason, Wuqu' Kawoq, together with partner institutions, created a series of videos, audios, radio programs and other actions to be broadcast in seven Mayan languages as well as in Spanish, with a reach and access suited to the rural and indigenous context.

“ THE CALL TO STAY AT HOME, ADDED TO THE LACK OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT AND THE MEASURES TO RESTRICT MOVEMENT AND CURFEWS, AS WELL AS THE TYPE OF PRODUCTIVE ACTIVITIES THAT OUR POPULATION ENGAGES IN, HAS MEANT A DEADLY INCREASE TO THE EXISTING POVERTY IN OUR TOWNS. IN THE CASE OF WOMEN, IT IS EVEN HARSHER, SINCE THEY ARE THE ONES WHO ARE TRADITIONALLY IN CHARGE OF PROVIDING FOOD FOR AND TAKING CARE OF THE FAMILY.”

ANA BELÉN ARAUZ

A SPECIALIST IN INTERNAL MEDICINE AND INFECTIOUS DISEASES, ANA HOLDS A MASTER'S IN EPIDEMIOLOGY.

Dr. Arauz currently coordinates the Committee for the Prevention and Control of Infections Associated with Health Care in Panama. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, she also became Deputy Medical Director of the Santo Tomás Hospital.

She affirms that during these times of crisis and uncertainty, occupying positions where rapid decision-making is required is a daily challenge. She is on the first line of care for people infected by the SARS-CoV-2

outbreak and knows how difficult it is to make daily decisions in hospital management while managing her own fears of a disease whose contagiousness and mortality are still unknown.

Likewise, she acknowledges that, although women have made great advances at the professional level, and especially within the practice of medicine, it cannot be denied that there are still differences and there are greater pressures that mean women have to make a double effort to win recognition and be taken into account.



“ One of the lessons that this pandemic is teaching us in real time is that the countries where the response has been led by women have shown greater success to date. Women can contribute with a more intuitive approach, as we have soft skills that, if well channeled, help team members feel that they can be heard and their contributions can be taken into account. In my personal experience, the biggest challenge during this pandemic has been communicating with all levels of operations.”

MARCELA AQUINO

Doctor with a specialty in Family Medicine and Executive Secretary of the Paraguay Chapter of the Latin American Association of Social Medicine - ALAMES Paraguay.

In Asunción, Marcela belongs to a women's organization that was established in Bañado Sur, a historically excluded region, where the community organizes to support itself in the absence of access to basic rights such as housing, water, quality education, health, work, among others. One of the outstanding initiatives of this women's organization in the face of the pandemic is the "Ollas Populares" or Community Kitchens that are provided in different neighborhoods and feed around 2,000 people daily. This work is supported by the voluntary efforts of women from each neighborhood and donations from civil society.

In the context of the pandemic, Dr. Aquino warns that in addition to preventing the spread of the virus, the main challenge in Bañado Sur is to meet the most immediate and real need, which is hunger. In this extremely challenging situation, she works with the leaders of the Community Kitchens to circulate information to the population about this new virus, the prevention measures required, and the impacts it could have on the daily life of the community. To achieve this, they prepare explanatory videos and brochures, as well as training workshops focused on the measures recommended by the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, but adapted to the situation of the Bañado del Sur community.



“ I HAVE NO DOUBT THAT UNITY AMONG WOMEN MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN ANY SYSTEM AND IN ANY SITUATION, INCLUDING IN THIS PANDEMIC. IT IS WOMEN WHO TAKE CARE OF THE FAMILY AND THEIR NEIGHBORHOODS, IT IS ALSO WOMEN WHO ARE MOST CONCERNED ABOUT THE CARE REQUIRED. IT IS WOMEN WHO ARE ON THE FRONT LINES OF THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19 AND HUNGER IN COMMUNITIES. THESE WOMEN KNOW IN THEIR BODIES THE MEANING OF THE STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.”

SACHENKA ARDILES

Sachenka is a Psychologist and lives in Lima, Peru. When the pandemic hit, Sachenka felt that she could not be indifferent to everything that was happening outside. Watching the news about the impact of the health and economic crisis, seeing how many people organized to collect and deliver food, even when facing personal difficulties, led her to think about what she could offer. And she realized that the best thing she could offer was her profession: the thing she knows most about and loves doing.

She decided to launch a psychological support campaign, taking advantage of digital media to offer consultations. To her surprise, she had more demand than she imagined, so she decided that of her five working days a week, three would be devoted to a free consultation.

Although the campaign was open to all, Sachenka says that more women have sought help, and especially mothers. Among her new patients, she had to attend cases of panic, anxiety, and depression, some of which were long-standing but had worsened during the pandemic. Women with high emotional and economic dependence, and low self-esteem. She was struck by the number of single mothers and young mothers with many children who attended her sessions. Mothers without experience, without information, and who generally lacked support. It was precisely for this reason that Sachenka was mobilized to extend a free follow-up for young expectant mothers with cases of anxiety, some of them with tragic stories that they had borne since childhood, as a result of situations of violence and abuse.



“

It is important to break down the barrier of what mental health means. It is difficult for people to recognize that we are not well, that something is wrong, that we do not feel good or have negative thoughts. There is a lot of shame, and a fear of being judged for that. There are many sociocultural issues that prevent people from asking for psychological help.”

Other frequent cases were women who felt overwhelmed by the increase in care work as a result of lockdown measures and the closure of schools. Still, others were cases of women economically dependent on their husbands, who had lost their jobs due to the pandemic. Domestic conflicts became more severe in this situation of 24/7 coexistence.

But there was a constant factor among the women she attended: "Women always have to show that they can multitask: be good mothers, good professionals, good daughters, good wives, and good housewives. As a result, being a multitasker is a fundamental source of stress that is often not recognized. Women have to do many things at the same time but don't always take care of the most important thing, which is taking care of themselves," she says.

To her constant words of appreciation and encouragement to her patients, one of them once told her: "No one had ever told me before that I was important. They always taught me that the most important thing for a mother is her children; and when I was a child, they taught me that the parents are the most important thing." She saw the change in many women when at the end of the consultation they said "OK, I'm going to believe in myself, and I have to do things for myself."

Although more than eighty people were treated for free, Sachenka feels that in the case of her female patients the help may be replicated further, since she believes that those who are mothers will take a positive impact on their families.

FRANCISCA PEGUERO

Nurse and Lawyer. She is President of the National Nursing Association of the Dominican Republic. A union organization with more than 6,000 nurses and nursing assistants across the country.

Faced with the pandemic, Francisca recognizes that, at first, ignorance about the magnitude of this new disease sowed uncertainty among health personnel: they weren't sure of how to deal with it, how to halt its spread in the course of their work, and they also lacked adequate protective equipment.

A government regulation was passed to exempt health personnel over 60 years of age from working during the pandemic, but despite this, Francisca, who has more than 37 years of service, decided to help her colleagues who were providing care on the front line of the pandemic.

This is how the Association organized both face-to-face and virtual presentations and workshops to provide guidance to the nursing staff, including practices on how to remove PPE. They also obtained donations of PPE and mobilized lobbying actions, achieving an increase in the recruitment of almost 2,000 health care professionals for the pandemic response, together with a bonus that, according to Francisca, is not enough in view of the critical situation.

Conditions such as insufficient PPE, shortage of personnel, as well as stress, fear, difficulties moving around in the face of the lockdown, job uncertainty, and contracting the disease in the course of work, have affected and caused concern among the nursing staff since, "despite the public praise and recognition, it has not translated into improvements in their working conditions," she says. Francisca points out that some nurses were even victims of robberies and rapes on the way to work.

Now they are promoting a campaign aimed at the general population, with recommendations to encourage prevention efforts and raise awareness about the work of health sector personnel and the importance of staying healthy in order to respond to this pandemic.



“THE SERVICE VOCATION OF THE NURSING STAFF IS ALMOST INFINITE DURING THIS PANDEMIC.”

ALICIA BOLÍVAR

She lives in the canton of Cañas, in Costa Rica. Alicia belongs to the Community Emergency Committee, the Community Integral Development Association, the Canton Health Board, and the Costa Rican Women's Alliance. She is a community leader who is constantly looking out for the development and well-being of her neighbors.

Alicia emphasizes that one of the serious problems they face in Cañas is the water supply. Ten years ago it was discovered that the water sources are contaminated with levels of arsenic in concentrations higher than those recommended for human health, which caused numerous cases of people affected with chronic kidney diseases. For this reason, in 2011 the well that supplied water to the population of Cañas was closed, and since then they have fought tirelessly to re-establish access to drinking water. Meanwhile, the solution they have arrived at is the provision of tanks at strategic points that are filled with water three times a week, from where the neighbors can collect water in containers.

However, the pandemic has proved a great challenge for the population of Cañas, since the lack of drinking water makes it increasingly difficult to comply with the periodic hygiene recommendations required to prevent contagion. Therefore, in this context, her work has incorporated COVID-19 prevention tasks by coordinating the distribution of information brochures with recommendations to prevent contagion, as well as a campaign to deliver alcohol, containers for transferring water from tanks, as well as the distribution of food to families who are quarantining.

But the water supply is not the only problem in Cañas, which is also an area at risk from natural disasters. The most recurrent problem is the flooding of the Cañas River. Recently, in the middle of the pandemic, the river flooded once again and the Community Committee had to coordinate the emergency response, providing shelter for families affected by the flood, one more aspect of Alicia's work in her community.

“

It is a great advance for women to be able to exercise the rights of citizen participation in spaces that have always been led by men. When women empower ourselves, the situation becomes more critical, but not impossible. We begin to win respect for our demands and needs, and no one can trample us.”



MICHELE IRVING

Coordinator of the Productive Organization for Women in Action (POWA). Founded in 2003, POWA is a community organization focused on empowering and improving the well-being of women and girls throughout Belize.

Michele sees her mission at POWA as “closing the gaps.” This commitment has been key to ensuring that women and girls can access health and social care services despite the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even with funding cuts to welfare and education programs, POWA has ensured that its beneficiaries continue to receive sexual and reproductive health support. This has included the provision of contraceptives and ensuring that women can continue to access clinical services in health institutions.

Guiding applicants through unemployment and food assistance programs is another role that POWA took on during the pandemic. Despite the limitations, Michele and her team at POWA have also continued to coordinate and work closely with public and private donors and other community members to set up supply channels for communities and individuals who are vulnerable during the pandemic.

Since 2013, POWA has also managed the Dangriga Cares Center, a safe place for community members to interact, share experiences, and learn new skills. The center offers access to stimulation classes for early childhood and for parents. It also offers workshops on gender and relationships, personal development for young people, awareness sessions on supporting survivors of GBV, and people living with HIV and AIDS.



“

POWA remains committed to the development and facilitation of community networks in Belize, ensuring that vulnerable groups receive the support they need to navigate a world drastically changed by the pandemic.”

ALICIA PERESSUTTI

Alicia is a Teacher, Writer, and Specialist in Gender Violence. She is also the Ombudswoman of the City of Villa María, in Córdoba, Argentina.

More than 25 years ago Alicia founded "Vínculos en Red" of which she is the current president. It is a non-governmental organization that aims to support and assist people who are victims of prostitution, sexual exploitation, and trafficking, who are mostly women, girls, and transgender people.

Since 2017 Vínculos en Red has provided a shelter for victims seeking help. Since then, they have welcomed more than 100 victims along with their children. Through services with specialized teams and psychology and psychiatry professionals, serious problems that affect many of the victims are addressed, such as suicide attempts, violence, schizophrenia, psychosis, and neurosis with psychopathy.

However, the crisis derived from the pandemic has led to the exacerbation of certain pathologies, causing relapses

among the victims, especially in terms of addictions and attempts to return to prostitution. Likewise, the confinement measures have led to an increase in demand for the shelter, one that is "impossible to meet in our limited capacity," regrets Alicia.

Vínculos en Red also engages in extensive prevention, awareness-raising, and advocacy work, taking an active role in the context of legislative and regulatory processes on these issues, and also securing support and contributions for its cause.

Alicia has received numerous recognitions and awards, but she has also suffered threats and attacks of violence for her continued denunciation of the system that supports the networks of exploitation and trafficking in persons. However, her commitment is much stronger and she is eager to demonstrate that she will continue working to help the victims, with some of whom she shares bonds of affection.

“

What we do is very hard. It is very difficult. The damage that mafia organizations cause to the victims is so severe that it takes a long time to unravel the exploitation of human beings.”



BEATRIZ QUINTERO

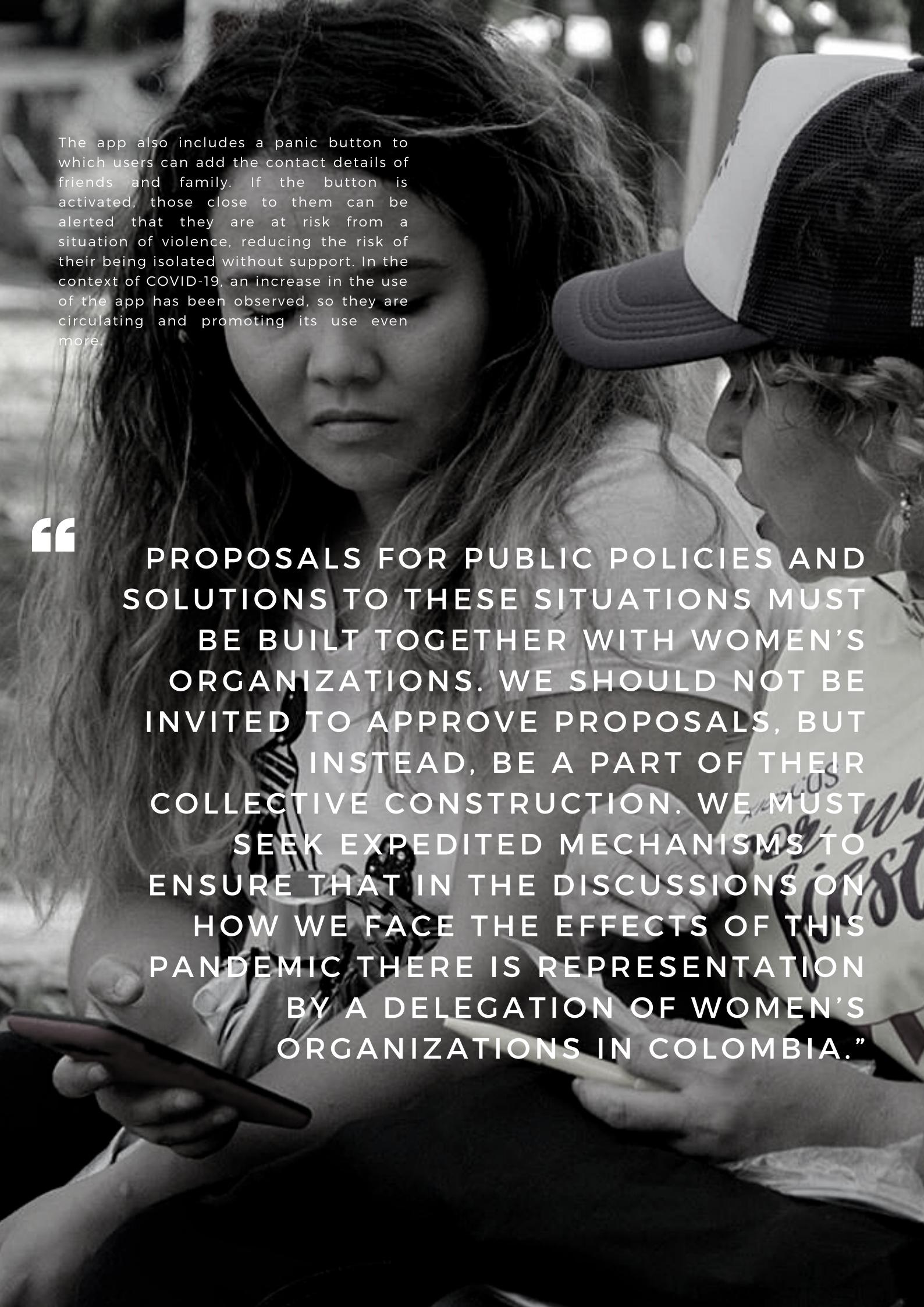


Beatriz Quintero coordinates the National Network of Women of Colombia. A feminist network made up of women and women's social organizations that has been working to defend women's rights in different regions of the country for more than 30 years.

In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, the Network warned that violence against women would deepen, and in response, they decided to expand their initiatives and efforts to help victims of violence.

Before the current situation, the Network created the mobile application "ELLAS free from violence," whose main objective is to inform women about the existing laws in Colombia in relation to gender-based violence, as well as to provide guidance on the available support routes that victims should seek out. These routes are georeferenced with the public services available, so they indicate either a hospital, a prosecutor's office, or a police station depending on the location of the victim.

"Before the pandemic, it was already documented that in Colombia the home was the most unsafe place for women, and that Sunday was the worst day of the week. The isolation measures made every day of the week a Sunday. In Bogotá alone, calls to the 'purple line' have increased 230% since the confinement measures began."



The app also includes a panic button to which users can add the contact details of friends and family. If the button is activated, those close to them can be alerted that they are at risk from a situation of violence, reducing the risk of their being isolated without support. In the context of COVID-19, an increase in the use of the app has been observed, so they are circulating and promoting its use even more.

“

PROPOSALS FOR PUBLIC POLICIES AND SOLUTIONS TO THESE SITUATIONS MUST BE BUILT TOGETHER WITH WOMEN’S ORGANIZATIONS. WE SHOULD NOT BE INVITED TO APPROVE PROPOSALS, BUT INSTEAD, BE A PART OF THEIR COLLECTIVE CONSTRUCTION. WE MUST SEEK EXPEDITED MECHANISMS TO ENSURE THAT IN THE DISCUSSIONS ON HOW WE FACE THE EFFECTS OF THIS PANDEMIC THERE IS REPRESENTATION BY A DELEGATION OF WOMEN’S ORGANIZATIONS IN COLOMBIA.”

CINTIA SANT'ANNA

Cintia is an actress and social entrepreneur, founder and Executive Director of the "Entre o Céu ea Favela" Institute, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. At 20, Cintia had the opportunity to enter the world of theater and discover something rare and vital: self-esteem. "I discovered myself as a woman, my rights, I understood that my body on the street was political and that I had rights like anyone from anywhere and from any social class." Cintia began teaching drama classes to children in the Morro da Providência favela, and understood that if they had access to self-esteem from an early age, their life trajectories could be different.

This is how, in 2011, Cintia created the "Entre o Céu ea Favela" Institute which works to enhance the role of children, young people, and women through socio-cultural actions that promote inclusion and social transformation such as theater, music, and sports.

Cintia points out that in Rio de Janeiro, 22% of the population lives in impoverished neighborhoods, widely known as favelas. That is, more than 1.4 million people. Within the favelas, housing conditions are marked by unsanitary conditions, hunger, lack of water and sewerage, etc.



“

My dream is that in a few years there will be no more social inequality, but above all that we never stop fighting against social injustices. Being able to dream cannot just be a privilege for those who have access, it has to be for everyone.”



In the context of the pandemic, conditions worsened with the social distancing measures, as many people lost their jobs and found themselves with nothing to eat, and no way to pay their bills and survive.

In the favelas there are numerous single mothers with young children. Many are out of work and trying to survive the chaos. Others are working and trying to juggle it with childcare in the face of the suspension of schooling. On the other hand, violence against women has been aggravated by the isolation measures, all of which deepen the inequalities that women face every day.

With the beginning of the social isolation recommendations, the Instituto Entre o Céu e a Favela launched a campaign to help local people affected by the pandemic. The mobilization began by demanding a water supply in the

community of Pedra Lisa, since at the beginning of the pandemic it was not receiving drinking water, making it impossible for the community to follow the hygiene recommendations for the prevention of COVID-19.

Then, they began collecting donations and distributing basic baskets of goods, hygiene, and protection kits, including masks and food vouchers. Later, the scope of the action was expanded to reach more than 3,000 families in the port region. In addition, they have provided cell phones to boys and girls who had not been able to study and training to access educational apps, which offer cultural and educational activities without the need for an Internet connection.

Cintia emphasizes that it is only thanks to private donations that they are able to carry out this solidarity work.

KATHERINE MARTÍNEZ

LAWYER AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER.

Katherine is the Director of "Prepara Familia," an NGO based in Venezuela whose objective is to defend the rights of hospitalized children and adolescents, as well as to accompany and defend the rights of caregivers, who in most cases are mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and sisters, and who face a particular burden of care work that is unpaid, unprotected and exacerbated by suffering from diseases.

Since 2008, Prepara Familia has focused its work on the J.M. de los Ríos Hospital, a point of reference in Venezuela that cares especially for children, and is also known as "the Children's Hospital."

For caregivers, it launched the "At the Foot of the Bed" program which trains female caregivers in a simple trade (precious-metal craftwork, jewelry making, bows, makeup, hairdressing, cell phone repair, etc.). In this it has the support of private companies that sponsor the fees of the facilitators and the workshop materials, after which women can start an enterprise in the hospital context in which they operate, having created a label called "Mothers del J.M." so that they can sell their creations in the market to benefit a charitable cause.

“

WHAT IS HAPPENING IS
VERY SERIOUS

The COVID-19 emergency has deepened the precarious situation of hospitalized children and caregivers. Given the isolation and quarantine restrictions during the pandemic, we have had to change our support strategies and we have been succeeding thanks to the network that has been developed with the committees of women caregivers and health personnel. But this aid is merely a sticking plaster, and it is not in our hands to meet the responsibilities of the state.”



Part of its work is also the development of prevention and awareness workshops on gender violence and women's human rights, since 85% of caregivers come from situations of domestic violence, and also face institutional violence. Parental co-responsibility is another of the charity's concerns. Katherine points out that many mothers do not even know that they are entitled to receive monetary help from the father or assistance on a day-to-day basis. Parents are not usually in charge of care and cannot spend the night in the hospital due to internal regulations that prohibit it, excluding them from care work which, in this case, is complex and exhausting.

Katherine remarks that the country's crisis deepened the pre-existing deficiencies. The shortage of medicines and supplies, together with the inadequacy and suspension of key protocols for the detection and treatment of chronic diseases, threatens the dignity and lives of sick children on a daily basis. In fact, in 2017 there was an outbreak of infection in the Nephrology service due to insufficient maintenance of dialysis services, which caused the death of twelve children. It was as a result of this terrible event that the mothers went from being caregivers to activists, joining the Prepara Familia cause to denounce the events and demand better conditions in the hospital.

Following a hearing before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) where they denounced the situation of children in Venezuela, they obtained protective measures for the survivors in 2018, and an extension to children and adolescents who are patients of thirteen other services in 2019. However, due to her activism, Katherine has received threats, intimidation, and acts of harassment, which has led the IACHR to extend the protective measures to her, considering that she is in a situation of risk due to her work as a human rights defender.

One of the specific actions carried out by Prepara Familia in the framework of the pandemic has been the provision of biosafety protocols and equipment for front-line personnel and hospitalized people, whose exposure to contagion is exponentially higher, aggravated both by the lack of supplies and by the daily irregularities in the water supply that hampers minimal hygiene and basic needs. Likewise, Katherine points out that hospital food is lacking both in quantity and quality, while the equipment no longer receives the necessary corrective and preventive maintenance, putting the adequate care of patients at risk.

Faced with the humanitarian crisis, Prepara Familia has mobilized significant support from the Venezuelan diaspora, obtaining donations of food, diapers, toys, nutritional supplements, and infant formula, which are enough to supply only the J.M. de los Ríos Hospital and three further pediatric units.

In order to adapt to the context of the pandemic, they have deployed a telephone monitoring system with female caregivers and have secured donations to move children from the interior of the country to the capital so that they can continue with their outpatient treatments (chemotherapy, dialysis, etc.). Through the committees of caregivers and the health personnel who collaborate in the initiative, they have been able to ensure that the food and donations that families receive continue to arrive despite the restrictions on access to the hospital. Even considering the pandemic, she comments that they have been able to continue accompanying the families, including support so that the caregivers can celebrate the children's birthdays as well as the necessary support in the grieving processes.

MARÍA VICTORIA PALACIOS

Founder and Director of the "Latidos Chocó" Foundation, Colombia.

The Foundation undertakes a wide range of care actions aimed at the LGBTI population, boys and girls, the elderly, single-mother families and victims of gender-based violence. In particular, it works to influence public policies and development plans, as well as support services for transitioning transgender people. Meanwhile, the Foundation promotes connections with the Ombudsman's Office and Family Commissioners aimed at the eradication of gender-based violence and advocating for the rights of LGBTI people.

In the context of the current pandemic, the measures taken by most governments are impacting all dimensions of the economy. However, María Victoria points out that the halt to retail operations is especially affecting small businesses and enterprises.

For the LGBTI community, the temporary closure of beauty salons has impacted on their earning and employability capabilities, as a vast majority worked in this sector.

With the help of the municipality of Quibdó, and in alliance with other social organizations, the Foundation managed to assist the affected LGBTI population with almost 100 food aid kits. Now, the next challenge is to secure support to offer biosecurity kits for the LGBTI population who work making home deliveries.

Likewise, the Foundation provides legal advice and psychological assistance for LGBTI people, especially transgender people, since the health emergency has led, among other things, to the postponement of endocrinology treatments and the suspension of their hormonal treatments.



“

DURING THIS CRISIS, I BELIEVE THAT IT IS NECESSARY AND URGENT THAT THESE DIVERSE VOICES CAN ALSO BE HEARD. VOICES THAT HAVE HISTORICALLY BEEN SILENCED AND MADE INVISIBLE. VOICES THAT HAVE NOT HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPRESS THE SPECIFIC DIFFICULTIES THEY HAVE HAD TO SUFFER AND THAT, DURING THIS PANDEMIC, ARE SILENCED ONCE MORE. THEREFORE, FOR WOMEN LEADERS AND HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS, IT IS VITALLY IMPORTANT TO REPRESENT AND RAISE THOSE VOICES.”

ALEXANDRINA WONG

Nurse and Executive Director of Women Against Rape (WAR). Established in 2008, WAR is a non-governmental organization working in Antigua and Barbuda focused on providing support, counseling, and referral services to survivors of sexual and physical violence.

The call to “stay home” along with other lockdown measures implemented to control the spread of the pandemic has led to increased violence towards women within the home during the COVID-19 pandemic. This threat is of great concern to Alexandrina as restrictions on mobility have made it even more critical that organizations like WAR can help survivors of gender-based violence and their families.

Throughout the pandemic, WAR has been working with the community and faith-based organizations as well as regional entities such as the Coalition of Vulnerable Communities to help women and their families access much-needed services and support. This has included access to private short-stay homes for people who suffer violence, as well as links to food banks, clothing, and stipends to buy basic necessities for those in situations of greater vulnerability. The organization also successfully collaborates with law enforcement agencies to provide continuity in the response to reported cases of gender violence.

Likewise, WAR has adapted its operations by establishing a 24/7 mobile helpline and WhatsApp groups. This development has permitted continuity of services in the form of psychosocial support. In addition, it has allowed expansion to reach more WAR beneficiaries as well as volunteers while minimizing the risk of exposure to COVID-19.



“

COVID-19 has shown that approaches to service delivery can be adapted and modified to continue to serve the people we work with. The integration of mobile technology into WAR service delivery processes has ensured continuity of care despite lockdown measures.”

CARMEN HUALLANCA Y RITA LAVIO

Carmen is a Social Worker and Rita is an Anthropologist. They work in the community of Cancha Cancha, a peasant community of 600 inhabitants located in Ayacucho, Peru.

In this community, most of the homes in situations of poverty and extreme poverty do not have a television, radio, smartphones, or Internet to enable them to access the virtual platform "Aprendo en Casa" ("I learn at home") created by the

government to give continuity to children's education during the health emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given these connection difficulties, and without any other options for the families, Carmen and Rita observed that the children spent their time supporting their families in daily activities in the fields, such as grazing cattle and harvesting. In light of this situation, they decided to help.



This is how they decided to lead the "Aprendo en Campo" ("I learn in the field") initiative, giving classes to children from impoverished families without connections in the community.

They also support children in vulnerable situations (orphans, with disabilities, and those whose parents do not use Spanish). During the pandemic, they have been supporting 35 children in different grades.



Carmen Huallanca



Rita Ladio

Classes are planned and take place from Monday to Friday in an outdoor setting where they can comply with the health protocols about social distancing. To do this, Carmen and Rita select locations that are a 10- or 20-minute walk from the town. In contact with nature, children enjoy learning in a safe environment. They always make sure that the boys and girls wear masks and wash their hands with soap and water before and after school and at snack times.

At the beginning, Carmen and Rita personally covered the expenses for essential materials: a small blackboard, markers, note pads, pens, pencils, and others. They also carry soap and water for washing the students' hands during classes. After a news website published the story of these two community leaders, they received support from individuals and organizations, enabling them to supplement the materials they need so that the children of Cancha Cancha don't fall behind in their educational development during the pandemic.

"The work we do is voluntary because we don't expect to receive anything in return. The best payment we receive is the gratitude of the families and the smiles of the children. We are contributing our grain of sand to the educational development of our community. I believe that education is like a vaccine against poverty since it will help the children, and especially the girls, to escape their unfavorable socioeconomic conditions while generating personal and community development," says Carmen Huallanca.

BLANCA PACHECO LUPERCIO

Blanca is the Executive Director of the María Amor Foundation. This is an organization located in Cuenca, Ecuador, which has helped to save the lives of many women over more than 15 years.

The Foundation operates through a comprehensive care program with four components:

- A women's support hotline that operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.
- A shelter for women who have had to leave their homes fleeing situations of violence. In this shelter, care is offered in five modalities: psychology, social work, legal, children and young people, and healthy spaces, both for the women victims and for their children.

- "Successful women" is the other component of the work. This involves a process of education and training to strengthen the skills of women survivors of violence and enable them to expand their employment opportunities. To achieve this, three productive enterprises have been set up through which the women who participate can generate resources and begin their process of securing financial independence.
- For women survivors of violence who leave the shelter, they also offer supported apartments. These are temporary and accessible housing spaces aimed at generating support networks.



“

We believe that it is possible to contribute to the transformation and healing processes of women if we understand that the effects of violence are multiple and therefore require different responses and alternatives.”

Blanca points out that 204 women received support during the lockdown, of whom 66 women (along with their children) had to flee their homes due to the risk situation. However, they are concerned about the impossibility of receiving new victims given the limited space in the shelter, as well as the paralysis affecting productive enterprises, which cut off support for the women's autonomy. On the other hand, they fear the situation of women survivors of violence who have already left the shelter, many of whom have lost their jobs, while others are on the point of losing their homes.

Faced with this situation, the Foundation began a process to deliver food parcels, cleaning supplies, and school materials so that children can complete their studies, providing support to 42 women and around 87 children and adolescents.

"Women in situations of violence present very high levels of anguish and fear, both of losing their life due to COVID-19 as well as losing it at the hands of the aggressor with whom they are still forced to live," she says.



Nina Huasi means "House of Light." It is the name of the shelter that the María Amor Foundation makes available to women victims of gender violence. It has a notably ecological character since it includes solar energy systems, composters, dry toilets while incorporating healing processes through contact with the earth.

DELORES ROBINSON

OF JAMAICAN ORIGIN, SHE HAS LIVED IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FOR MORE THAN 34 YEARS WHERE SHE CURRENTLY DIRECTS GROOTS TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO.



Foto: UNAIDS

Delores heads up GROOTS Trinidad and Tobago, a civil society organization that provides care and counseling for the empowerment of women victims of gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health, mental health awareness, and HIV/AIDS.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, containment measures together with the closure of non-essential businesses have deepened the conditions of vulnerability of these people whose specific needs are often difficult to fully meet.

While the government is offering support to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis, such as wage relief, housing support grants, and nutritional support, GROOTS T&T helps people navigate the government system to obtain these benefits since, in addition to being complicated procedures, many people do not have access to the Internet.

Delores also remarks that, although people with HIV have continued access to medication or treatments, their nutrition or protection needs are not being considered, such as the masks recommended to prevent infection.



Foto: UNAIDS

Through her organization, and relying only on private support and contributions, Delores prepares food for 30 families and personally distributes them among the communities with the least resources. Among other families that GROOTS T&T helps are seven children between the ages of 3 and 18 from a single-mother home, whose HIV-positive mother died of cancer during the pandemic. Her concern now is for these orphaned children and their situation of vulnerability. Two days before the mother's death, Delores was able to arrange for the preparation of grief counseling for five of the children, while she continues to work and hopes to unite efforts for the reconstruction of this family's house, as they desperately need better living conditions.

She also visits displaced people living in the parks on a weekly basis and, in addition to food, brings them soap, sanitary napkins, hand towels, and disinfectant, while offering them awareness and prevention talks.

“

WE THINK WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER, BUT THERE ARE MANY PEOPLE WHO DO NOT HAVE THE THINGS WE TAKE FOR GRANTED—A SAFE HOME, HEALTHY FOOD, AND THE ABILITY TO SPEAK OUT. IT'S TIRING WORK BUT IT'S NEEDED NOW MORE THAN EVER.

ANA PECOVA

Executive Director of "EQUIS Justicia," a feminist organization that since 2011 seeks to transform institutions, laws, and public policies in Mexico to improve access to justice for women.

Ana points out that violence against women is the second most reported crime in Mexico. She warns that in view of the measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19, many victims are not being attended to or properly assisted in accessing justice.



“

The added value of these organizations is that each of them knows their work perfectly, they know the communities, they know how to reach each of their audiences. And it is great to see the results of these collective efforts, which not only enhance the work of institutions but also broadens access and improves the impact of what we do, for the benefit of women.”



EQUIS Justicia has launched the "You are not alone" initiative, through which they have managed to develop a network of diverse organizations with the purpose of coordinating assistance to women victims of violence during the health emergency.

This network is coordinating the virtual and face-to-face distribution of brochures offering information, guidance, and telephone numbers of organizations that can accompany victims in connecting with victim support routes such as the National Network of Refugees.

Furthermore, with the aim of addressing cultural diversity, indigenous women's organizations joined in to ensure this communication is adapted to each community. Thanks to this the material has been translated into seven different indigenous languages, and is available in audio format to broadcast on radio or via WhatsApp.

They have also formed alliances with companies such as Uber, from whom they have obtained a free travel code for women victims of violence who need transport to a shelter.

LUZ HARO GUANGA

SHE IS 71 YEARS OLD AND PROUDLY DEFINES HERSELF AS A RURAL WOMAN. SHE LIVES IN PASTAZA, ECUADOR, FROM WHERE SHE WORKS TIARELESSLY TO DIGNIFY THE LIFE AND WORK OF RURAL WOMEN BOTH IN HER COUNTRY AND THROUGHOUT LATIN AMERICA.

At the age of 14, she left home after refusing forced marriage with a 50-year-old man. At that time, she had barely reached the 4th grade of primary school: "In those days it seems that neither the State nor the family had any obligation to ensure that rural girls even finish primary school in my country."

She worked hard so that her children could go to college and become professionals. When her children finished their studies, Luz decided to start hers, and graduated in Educational Sciences at the

age of 58, and obtained a Master's degree ten years later.

Luz Haro has a long history of social commitment. She was Founder of the Association of Women of Rural Parish Boards of Ecuador (AMJUPRE), which she used to promote the "School of Rural Women Leaders." As a public official, she put herself forward and became a Counselor of the National Electoral Council of Ecuador. She is currently Executive Secretary of the Latin American and Caribbean Network of Rural Women (RED-LAC).



“

RURAL WOMEN GIVE AND SUSTAIN LIFE THROUGH THE FOOD WE PROVIDE TO THE WORLD, SILENTLY WORKING THE LAND WITH OUR CALLUSED HANDS.

Now, the pandemic should serve as a turning point to dignify our work, our rights, and deepen our autonomy and economic empowerment, which are key to achieving equal opportunities after this global crisis.”

Faced with the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the AMJUPRE Núcleo Los Ríos and the RED-LAC, with the support of the Observatory of the Law of Nonviolence, launched the School of Women Political Leaders, which they called "From Lockdown to Empowerment," of which Luz is Technical Coordinator and Facilitator. This is a virtual training initiative in which 85 women from Ecuador, Chile, and Panama have participated, and up to 40 further participants on an intermittent basis, due to the Internet connection difficulties typical of rural areas.

The issues addressed are aimed at strengthening the capacities of rural women in land and water management, work and business, climate change, rights

and violence, citizenship, political participation, as well as issues of personal empowerment related to self-esteem, leadership, identity, and protocol.

Based on the need to support rural women in the midst of this crisis, for the development of the training program, they have relied on voluntary collaborations from women friends and allies, experts in each of these topics, who have contributed their knowledge and experience. The commitment the beneficiaries make is to replicate what they have learned in their communities and social organizations.

Given this success, RED-LAC is preparing the launch of a version of this training program for all of Latin America and the Caribbean.

NATALIA DÍAZ ENRÍQUEZ

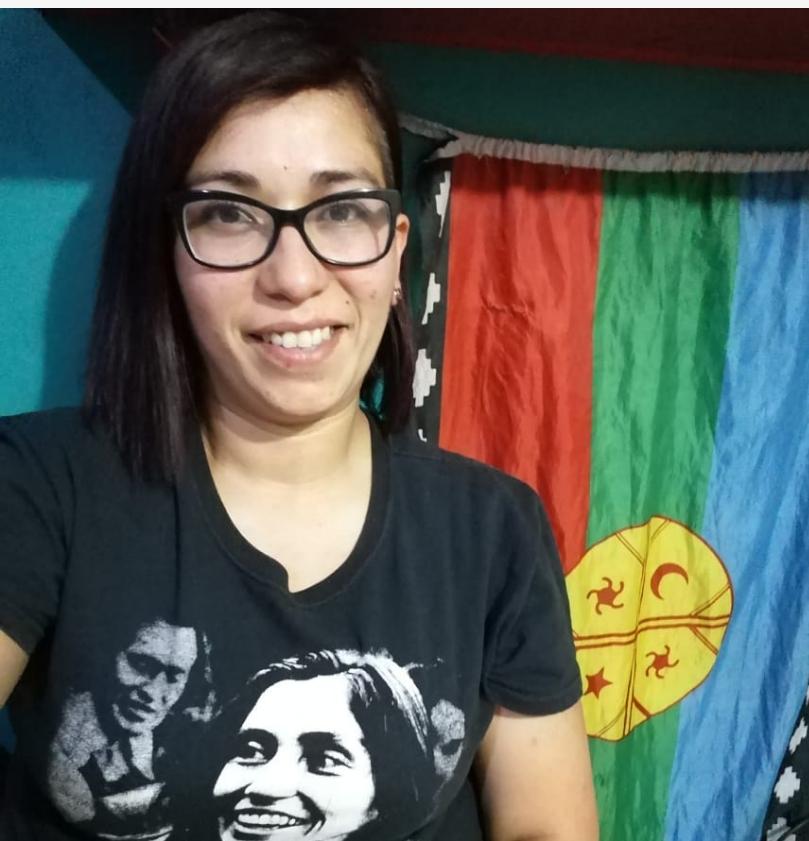
Natalia is a single mother and currently, in addition to her work, she studies and wants to become a human resources technician. Natalia is also a social activist. She lives in the Commune of Quinta Normal, in Santiago, Chile. The Commune is located a few meters from the banks of the Mapocho River, where homeless people and families live in extremely precarious conditions.

As a result of the social crisis that Chile experienced at the end of 2019, and together with the global crisis caused by the pandemic, many people found themselves in serious economic difficulties and putting food on the table became a daily challenge for many families. That is why, together with a group of local residents, Natalia set about organizing the "Solidario Siempre" Community Kitchen.

For four months, the Community Kitchen catered mainly to the neediest people, especially those living on the streets, the

elderly, and immigrants in vulnerable situations. During the first weeks, they served 50 portions of food daily, but then the demand began to increase, and they delivered as many as 200 portions of lunch on Saturdays.

To supply the initiative, they relied on donations of food by social groups, contributions from local residents, and occasionally the support of some business people and municipal authorities. They also received the support of young people who are dedicated to recycling unsold vegetables in the market, who supplied the community kitchen daily. They also organized non-perishable food collection drives, which made it possible to deliver food parcels to the people in greatest need. Meanwhile, they carried out sanitizations in more than 400 homes, in exchange for which the families provided non-perishable food that supplied the Kitchen.



“

WE MAY NOT HAVE MONEY, BUT IF THE WILLINGNESS, CARE, AND CHANNELS EXIST TO BE ABLE TO HELP THOSE PEOPLE WHO ARE LIVING IN DIFFERENT SITUATIONS, WE MUST DO IT. IF I CAN HELP, I AM HAPPY TO DO SO.”

Natalia says that the women in her community are very entrepreneurial. They are single women, heads of households, workers, fighters, and entrepreneurs. And despite the difficulties each of them faces, it is mainly women who voluntarily support the organization of the Community Kitchen.

Looking to the future, Natalia wants to continue helping her community through activities aimed at children, especially in the context of the upcoming Christmas holidays.

"We work throughout the winter, and even in the rain, we go out to help because we know that it is in those moments when people want and need to receive warmth the most. And it is very gratifying when you arrive with a plate of hot food, some dry shoes, or a coat, and people smile at you and thank you for being there," she says.



ELIZABETH ANDÚJAR

SURVIVOR OF GENDER VIOLENCE. ELIZABETH IS AN ACTIVIST, BUSINESSWOMAN, AND NEURO COACH WHO, FROM SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO, OFFERS ACCOMPANIMENT AND SUPPORT TO WOMEN VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE FROM ALL OVER THE COUNTRY.

Based on her own life experience, Elizabeth understood that, once the critical path of violence was overcome, it was her mission to help other women to escape violence. She wrote "The pages of my history," a book where she recounts her experience in a violent relationship and how she managed to get out and overcome. As a result of this book, she also created a platform for action to raise awareness about this scourge and reach out to other female victims. She delivers workshops, mentoring, and lectures from a

neurocoaching perspective based on her personal experience.

Likewise, she promotes the economic empowerment of women, especially those living in rural areas. From her own experience, and from listening to the other victims, she realized that there are gaps that need to be closed to help women get out of violent relationships. And she understood that economic empowerment and the formation of networks of solidarity between women were key.



“

EXPERIENCE TELLS ME THAT TO STRENGTHEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP AMONG WOMEN IT IS NECESSARY THAT THEY RECOGNIZE THEMSELVES AS MAKERS OF THEIR OWN PATHS.”

This is how "Emprende Mujer" ("Women Entrepreneurs") was established, a community micro-enterprise that runs in one of the shelters Elizabeth supports, and that is made up exclusively of women survivors of gender violence. This micro-enterprise, of which Elizabeth is Director, is dedicated to pastry making and seeks to develop skills among women survivors so that they can generate their own income and minimize the risk of returning to their aggressors. "My goal is to be able to take them from vulnerability to empowerment," she says.

More than 90 female victims have participated in this enterprise with their children, many of whom began to generate their own income, thereby strengthening their financial independence and their reintegration into the community upon leaving the shelter. Elizabeth emphasizes that skills are also developed to strengthen their entrepreneurship capacities while reinforcing their individual emotional and intellectual capital. Now, the goal for 2021 is to be able to place their products in supermarkets and large chains.

But Elizabeth also has a broader commitment to solidarity through Puerto Rico's "Network for Children and Youth Rights" founded and directed by her son Marcos, who has also become a recognized advocate and activist. Together with Marcos, and given the conversion of schools to online teaching during the pandemic, they promoted the creation of the "Las Negras" Educational Room, located in the Los Juncos area, which provides broadband Internet, technological equipment, educational resources, food, support for parents and emotional support services for children from vulnerable communities, thereby seeking to reduce the digital divide for children with limited resources during school days in the pandemic.

Together with other community alliances, Elizabeth has also been collaborating on the distribution of food to elderly people and families living in vulnerable situations in rural areas.



TATIANA VASCONCELOS

Tatiana is Venezuelan, although she currently resides in Uruguay where she works as a Technical Consultant for the Alliance of Organizations for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Alianza de Organizaciones por los Derechos de las Personas con Discapacidad, PCD). A Sociology graduate, she has a congenital visual disability.

The Alliance has been working with other civil society organizations and United Nations agencies to make visible the impacts that this pandemic is having on

the lives of people with disabilities, the importance of having accessible information available in different formats (sign language, audio description, pictograms, and simple language). It also contributes to making visible how these effects vary according to the type of disability and offers potential solutions for developing inclusive response policies with a gender perspective capable of comprehensively addressing the consequences of this pandemic.

“

Faced with exceptional health emergency situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it is a sine qua non condition that all decisions made include consultation with and direct participation of people with disabilities, so that the provisions or measures adopted reflect both the needs and interests of this group as well as a gender perspective capable of comprehensively addressing the consequences arising from this context.”



Tatiana warns how the pandemic has magnified and highlighted the great inequalities that people with disabilities face on a daily basis. The impact of the confinement and/or social distancing measures imposed by the pandemic takes on different forms and dimensions depending on the type of disability a person has. For example, it points out that the two-meter social distancing rule is practically impossible for blind people to comply with since the vast majority of the information they need to function in their surroundings is obtained through direct contact with their surroundings. For deaf people, the use of conventional masks is a serious barrier to communication and interaction with other people as they cannot make use of lip-reading. Frequent hand washing represents a problem for people with physical disabilities, especially if they cannot wash their hands by themselves, or if washrooms are not accessible to users in wheelchairs. The restrictions on moving around in public spaces substantially alter the routines established for children and adolescents with an autism spectrum disorder, generating anxiety, and leading to crises.

Meanwhile, the technical language used to provide information about the virus, how to prevent it, and protect against it is not always easy to understand for people with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities.

Likewise, Tatiana emphasizes that most virtual education platforms do not offer universal learning design, and educational materials are not accessible to the assistive technologies used by people with disabilities. Nor are apps and platforms for health consultations accessible to screen readers used by blind people, and almost none have a virtual sign language interpreter. These barriers are repeated in the new remote working environment.

In the case of women with disabilities, she points out that they are four times more likely to suffer gender-based violence compared to women without disabilities and, during the health emergency, fewer resources are available to provide help in situations of violence.

In short, the pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on the lives of all people with disabilities, exacerbating and magnifying situations of discrimination, exclusion, and violence that were already present prior to the appearance of COVID-19. For this reason, the voices of people like Tatiana are essential when making decisions and designing mitigation policies.

DELIVERY, PASSION, AND COMMITMENT

Much has been said in recent months about the effective management of the COVID-19 pandemic by some female world leaders.

The truth is that we must recognize that leadership is also being shown by women who, anonymously and in challenging contexts, are leading critical responses to mitigate the health, economic, and social crisis.

Thousands of women working at the forefront of social and feminist organizations, as well as neighborhood leaders, are directing and mobilizing the response throughout our region. In most cases, they are doing so without resources and seeking help in locations where the state does not reach.

The stories summarized here offer an account of labor that transcends vocation. In each interview to learn more about their activities and contributions, each one of them has conveyed a passion for what they do, fueled by a social commitment that seems to have no limits.

Neither the lack of resources, the difficulties, the exhaustion, nor even the pandemic itself has stopped these women mobilizing responses to the current crisis, with a constant dedication to help those who need it most.

These women, without question, show commendable leadership too. Innovative, feminist, and, of course, transformative leadership.



**THANK YOU TO ALL THE WOMEN LEADERS,
WHEREVER YOU ARE.**

INTER-AMERICAN
taskFORCE
On Women's Leadership

INTER-AMERICAN
taskFORCE
On Women's Leadership

<http://www.taskforcewomenleadership.org>

✉ womenleadership@oas.org

🐦 @iatfsheleads

פייסבוק <https://www.facebook.com/iatfsheleads2030>

ଓଡିସ୍ୟ അନୁମତି ପାଇଁ