

Lxs niñxs también importan: Fostering gender equality in children from rural areas in Ecuador

• June - August 2020 • Doménica Montaña Moncayo • Bennington College '20

Background and relevance:

In 2019, only between January and November, Ecuador registered at least one femicide every 71 hours and 5,700 sexual abuse cases. In addition to this, everyday, women are victims of sexual harassment in public buses, schools, offices, and the streets. However, even though it is established in the law, many people do not even know what sexual harassment is, so it is not reported, and others, who do know what it is, prefer not to say anything because they do not trust the system. Data regarding sexual harassment is insufficient; however, according to the national statistic institute, almost 7 out of every 10 women in Ecuador have experienced some form of gender violence— psychological, sexual, and physical. Unfortunately, society has assimilated this in their lives. It is very common to see men hitting their female partners in public spaces, to be touched by strangers in public buses, or to hear people blaming women if they were raped. Not only is violence normalized, but also, Ecuadorian society is very conservative, so it is even harder to achieve some kind of equality. In September last year, for example, due to the pressure of the church and a very conservative Congress, a law that decriminalized abortion in rape cases was denied. Ecuador has one of the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy in Latin America, 85% of those pregnancies are the result of rape (Observatorio Social del Ecuador, 2019), however, only one out of every four rapists is convicted.

Last year, I was conducting research about gender violence in Ecuador and had the opportunity to talk to the Attorney General, María Paula Romo, about it. She is the third Attorney General in the history of Ecuador and has been known as a feminist and advocate of human rights. She said that the “State’s reaction is insufficient. There are no effective ways to protect women in this country.” In 2017, there were 153 femicides in the country, the deadliest year for women since 2010. To change this reality, that same year, the President declared the eradication of gender violence as a national priority. However, due to economic reforms in the country, there was not enough budget to comply with this law. In the meeting with the Attorney General, I asked her what could be done for the future, and her short answer was “education.” She was not the only person who answered that throughout my research.

Sexual education in schools is required by the law, yet, many do not follow it, and the ones who do, do not do it right—classes are similar to biology classes about the body and the hormonal changes in adolescence. There is no basic information in the curriculum regarding STDs, human rights, gender violence, contraception, or gender equality, and there is also no budget to execute projects to educate children about it, especially in rural towns. Rural towns in Ecuador have difficulties accessing quality education in general, let alone quality sexual education. I believe that eradicating gender violence requires good sexual education, particularly for children, however, there are very few initiatives to do so, and most of them concentrate in the three largest cities in the country: Quito, Cuenca, and Guayaquil. Therefore, there is a need for someone to go beyond the borders of these 3 cities to rural places and educate children, teachers, and parents about gender equality and human rights. Only then will Ecuador become a less violent country towards women and join the global movement that pursues a more egalitarian world.

Project Summary:

To achieve this project, I will collaborate with Surkuna, an organization that supports women who survived gender violence, and Universidad San Francisco de Quito, a liberal arts university that is well-known for their projects advocating for women’s rights. They will train me and my friend Gabriel Beccach, a psychologist with a background in gender studies, to give workshops and lectures about sexual education and the most important facts regarding gender equality. Gabriel executed a similar project, on a smaller scale in schools in Quito, when he was still a student with support from his college, and I have given workshops about the normalization of violence in schools in Quito as well, hence, I feel confident taking this approach. For this project, Gabriel and I will travel to the three main regions in Ecuador— the Amazon, the Andes, and the Coast— and visit some small rural towns. We determined these towns based on data showing the largest indexes of gender violence per province and chose to visit: Muisne in Esmeraldas, Pedernales in Manabí, Colimes in Guayas, Colta in Tungurahua, Chunchi in Chimborazo, Cuyabeno in Sucumbíos and Santo Domingo. The main objectives of this project are: to educate at least 700 children from 6-8 and 9-11 years old about gender violence in Ecuador and how to prevent it; to promote what are the best practices to achieve gender equality; to encourage conversations regarding women’s rights at school and home, and to introduce a more in-depth sexual education program. To achieve this, Gabriel and I will attend workshops by Surkuna on the best ways to approach gender discourses in rural Ecuador, and we will also prepare presentations under the supervision of

professors from the Universidad San Francisco de Quito. Considering that many of the places that we are going to may not have electricity, we will prepare supplemental materials to keep the children engaged during the lecture. But if there is electricity, we will rely on digital slides. Regardless of the format, there will be three lectures, one on Monday, one on Wednesday and one on Thursday, and they will not last more than 30 minutes because we recognize that it is difficult to keep children engaged. Once the lecture is over, we will give the children some refreshments. In addition to this, Gabriel and I will host an optional workshop for parents and teachers on Tuesday night to address sexual education topics and the importance of talking about gender. Moreover, before starting the workshops with the children on Monday, on Sunday, Gabriel and I will give a small 15-minute talk to parents to tell them what their children will be doing during the week with us. We wanted to approach these communities through community leaders such as mayors and local priests because they are people the community trust, therefore it will secure an audience and the community will trust us as well. Gabriel and I have already contacted mayors and priests in these towns and have already gotten their support to implement the project. Moreover, to ensure our safety we have also connected with local police stations, thus, through every workshop, we will have at least two police officers with us. Before starting the project, I will also work with a printing house to reproduce some copies of a gender equality handbook for children that I wrote during my junior year in college, so that I can give them to children to take home after the lectures.

Timeline:

Weeks	Content
May 1 - June 7	Production of gender equality handbook for children at a printing house in Quito, Ecuador
June 8 - 14	Attend workshops by professionals from Surkuna. Preparation of presentation and supplemental materials.
June 15 - 28	Presentations revisions by professors from Universidad San Francisco de Quito
June 29 - July 5	Project execution in Muisne, Esmeraldas
July 6 - 12	Project execution in Pedernales, Manabí
July 13 - 19	Project execution in Colimes, Guayas
July 20 - 26	Project execution in Santo Domingo
July 27 - August 2	Project execution in Colta, Tungurahua
August 3 - 9	Project execution in Chunchi, Chimborazo
August 10 - 16	Project execution in Cuyabeno, Sucumbíos

Qualification and personal drive:

As an Ecuadorian woman, I have experienced first-hand what it feels to be hurt by a society that does not know how to respect women. Violence was so normalized in my life that I could not recognize it until I got to the United States and learned it at college. I want both boys and girls to learn about gender equality and their rights from a young age so that in the future, they can spare the trauma that gender violence brings with it.

Outcomes and sustainability:

Through this project, I aspire to empower young boys and girls in Ecuador to defend their rights regardless of their gender, so that they can stop gender violence in their communities. I believe that being open about gender equality and having adequate sexual education will help children to recognize violence and question it instead of consenting to it, enable them to report violent actions towards them and others, and encourage them to change the community they live in. This project is different because we want to reach communities that are oftentimes isolated and we want to educate them instead of blaming them for their high violence indexes. I want this project to be sustainable and a resource that I can leave to Surkuna and Universidad San Francisco, so that they continue with it every year even if Gabriel and I cannot be there. In order to achieve this, I would like to give a series of workshops to teach Surkuna's volunteers and college students interested in this project how to implement it. The workshops will mostly focus on how to tackle gender issues with children and their parents in small communities where gender violence is a common practice. However, I will also address topics such as what are the best ways to approach the communities, what supplemental materials could be used to better engage children and their parents (I will leave the handbook we use as a resource), how to partner with other institutions, how to get grants to fund the project costs and how to keep the project sustainable.