A two-sentence summary of the goals of your project
The main purpose of “Lxs niñxs también importan” was to empower children from rural areas in Ecuador to defend their rights and stop gender violence in their communities. Initially, the project was intended to reach just children but due to the pandemic, its main focus shifted to reach people in rural areas, regardless of their age, and help them to build a path that contributes to eradicating gender violence in these places.

Did other fund-raising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?
No funds from external sources were contributed to the project. However, I am grateful to the Municipio de Urcuquí and its community leaders for providing transportation to places with difficult accessibility.

How did you come up with the idea for your project?
I came up with this idea after writing my thesis about violence against women in Ecuador. When doing my research, I found out that more than 60% of women in the country reported having experienced some kind of violence. These statistics are terrifying, but the most worrisome issue is that unfortunately, society has assimilated gender violence in their lives, and people, especially in rural areas, think it’s normal. So, after writing my thesis, I realized that I didn’t just want to put this information and data out there, but also do something about it and help to change this harsh reality.

Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?
Gender-based violence is an issue in most parts of the world. Social norms and stereotypes that “define” how men and women are and how they should act have historically built an environment of violence. These norms are changing throughout the world, however, in Ecuador, they mostly remain the same, particularly in rural places, where access to education is very difficult. In these areas, it is very common to see men hitting their female partners in public spaces or in their homes, for women to be touched or harassed by strangers in the street, or to hear people blaming women if they were raped. I believed that had to change.

Why did you choose your host site to work in?
I worked in various provinces in Ecuador because I wanted to reach different kinds of people from rural communities where I knew access to sex education —and education in general— was very difficult, and where I knew, based on investigations, that gender violence indexes were very high. Then, I chose some communities based on the contacts I was able to make with community leaders and activists before going there because I knew I needed a support group to promote this kind of project. On the coast, I went to Ayampe and Atacames, small towns where locals do not always have access to education, stable jobs, or even basic services, and indexes of gender violence are known to be high. In the Andes, I went to San José de Minas, Urcuquí (where I met people from Santa Rosa, Cangahua, Tumbabiro, San Blas, Pablo Arenas, and Buenos Aires), Cayambe and Cahuasqui, — small communities with a high percentage of indigenous population— where sex education is taboo and gender violence is very normalized and hidden. And finally, in the Amazon, I went to the capital of Pastaza, Puyo, to work with teenagers.

What was it like to work in your host site?
It was very challenging but also exciting. It was challenging because many of the places I went to were very poor and it was hard to witness those levels of poverty in my own country. Coming from the capital city I was blind to this reality. In the highlands of Cahuasquí, Buenos Aires, Puyo, and Ayampe, there were families who did not even have access to running water in their homes, some did not have electricity, and some did not even live in houses per se, but in small cottages that they had built from cane and wood. So it was hard to have workshops without being able to connect the projector or in places where it felt like I was invading their personal space because they were so small. However, it was great too. Being able to meet people from so many different backgrounds and cultures was very fulfilling and exciting.

Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways?
Yes. When I started talking to community leaders about the project, many of them told me that I was not going to be able to work with children as I initially thought I would because of the pandemic. They said that parents were very scared to let their children go out, let alone go out to be with a stranger that was coming from a city where covid cases were so high all the time. So, I thought I was not going to be able to make the project work. However, I changed the focus of the project and invited youth and adults instead of just children, so parents feel safe to bring their children along with them when they could. So as it was a choice and not an obligation, that was what allowed the project to continue and ultimately succeed.

What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people?
The main challenge was talking to people in words that they could understand. I went to many communities where there were some indigenous people whose mother language is not Spanish. Most of them, especially the older ones are more familiar with kichwa than with Spanish. So, coming from a place of privilege, my Spanish is usually very academic, and at the beginning, it was hard for me to explain some things without using complex words, such as eradicate. Moreover, since access to education is also very difficult, I could not just give them a statistic and expect that they understood. I had to use examples, bring apples, draw things on the board, and things like that to communicate some of the data I wanted to tell them about. But with time and practice, I finally was able to talk and show what was important in a simple language and in a didactic way.

How do you define peace?
Peace for me is living with no fear. Being able to live without the fear of being hit by your partner, harassed in the street, or abused by someone you know.

How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long-term?
I believe my project has both a short-term and a long-term impact in contributing to a peaceful society. All the people who attended the workshops learned about women’s rights, stereotypes, and gender violence, so I hope that they have helped to denormalize violence towards women. Moreover, I am sure people now know how violence can manifest in various forms, so they recognize it before it is too late to do something about it. But in the long term, I am also hopeful that the project will help to reduce the high percentage of gender violence in the communities I reached. I believe the parents, teachers, and community leaders that attended the workshops will continue to talk about this issue so the future generations are not so violent as the current ones.

Please describe changes created by the project during the summer.
Women in rural communities now know that they have rights, that violence is not okay—even if it comes from a partner—and there are places they can go to, such as the local gender violence commissions, centers and foundations in their areas, and people like community leaders, pro bono lawyers, and other advocates they can reach out to if they are experiencing some kind of violence.

Please describe anticipated changes that will continue in the future as a result of the project
Some of the teachers who attended the workshops are excited to talk more openly about women’s rights and how to prevent gender-based violence. Some of them, for example, even asked for advice on how to change their syllabus and plans to incorporate what they learned in my workshops into their classes. Moreover, teachers and community leaders said they are also willing to work together to organize other workshops about gender-based violence in places where I could not go. And I believe that this change in education and leadership will also change the high incidence of gender violence in rural communities in Ecuador.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you?
Before I started this project, I understood that there are a lot of women who experience gender violence in their daily life. But by going to these rural communities and listening to women talking about how hard it is to liberate from a violence cycle, I really understood that ending gender violence is not easy, and it is not going to change overnight. Many women, especially in the rurality, are isolated to stay home; they are not allowed to work, they are perceived as people whose only job is to have children and take care of them, and most of them have never even gone to school to learn how to make a living on their own. So, leaving a partner, who is literally the person you depend on, is hard. And now I know that, and know that I want to
continue doing this job of helping and educating people. I have a job as journalist now, but in my free time, I want to continue giving my time, and continue being an agent of change to help people break the cycles of violence they live in, so hopefully they have a better future. However, not only I learned that, this project has helped me to be more present in the world and listen to others and their needs. Also, now I am more aware of my privilege, my knowledge, and my position, and I am willing to use that to be a better person.

Was your project impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic? If yes, please describe any impacts you and/or community members engaged in your experienced.
Yes, I had to change my target audience because parents were scared of having their children interact with someone who was visiting from the city with the largest register of covid cases. Hence, I had to re-design the project to reach youth, teachers, parents, and community leaders, instead of just children. However, it was a positive change because the project reached more people than I initially expected. I also had to change some of the places I was going to go to at the beginning because there was a high risk of getting covid there. But I was able to connect with leaders in communities where despite the lack of basic services, it was safe to go.

How did you advance your projects goals despite these challenges?
My biggest challenge was changing the target audience and therefore the places I was going to go to. So I had to change a lot of things. First of all, I had to do new research about places where covid-19 cases were not very high, and where it was safe for me to go, both in terms of my physical health and security. Then, I had to contact new community leaders again, explain why this project was important, what I was planning to do, and how we could ally in favor of the community members with this proposal. Then, because the audience changed, I also had to re-design the slides and I also made 3 options of presentations because I could not know who was going to attend until I got there. So I made one for children and youth, one for young adults, and one for adults. Also, the content was different for all of them. The slides for children, for example, focused on expressions and actions that reinforce violence and how we can change that and be more loving and accepting of our differences. The one for young adults was about how to recognize signs of gender violence that we often ignore, and what we can do about them. And the one for adults focused on types of gender violence, how to tackle it, and the resources available for them if they were experiencing or knew that someone was experiencing gender violence. So it definitely was a lot more work than I initially expected, but it was a lot more fulfilling in the end because I was able to reach a lot more people.

What advice would you give to future PfP grantees given the pandemic-related challenges you experienced?
My advice would be to not give up. There is always more than one way to do something, and I know it can seem time-consuming and even tedious to have to re-design everything. However, in the end, when the project is over and you see its impact on others, it is so fulfilling that you do not even remember that you had to put in extra work to make it happen.

If you were able to implement your project remotely, speak to the highlights and challenges of a conducting a remote project
N/A

“One day after a workshop, a teenager came to me and said, ‘I thought it was okay that my dad hit my mom, and I was going to let my boyfriend hit me too; but now I know that isn’t right, so thank you’. In my mind, that was what I wanted the project to do: to change people’s mentality, so hearing it from a woman so young and with so much life ahead felt amazing; for the first time in life, I felt that I was changing the world and that has been the most heart-warming feeling I have ever experienced.”- Doménica Montaño Moncayo