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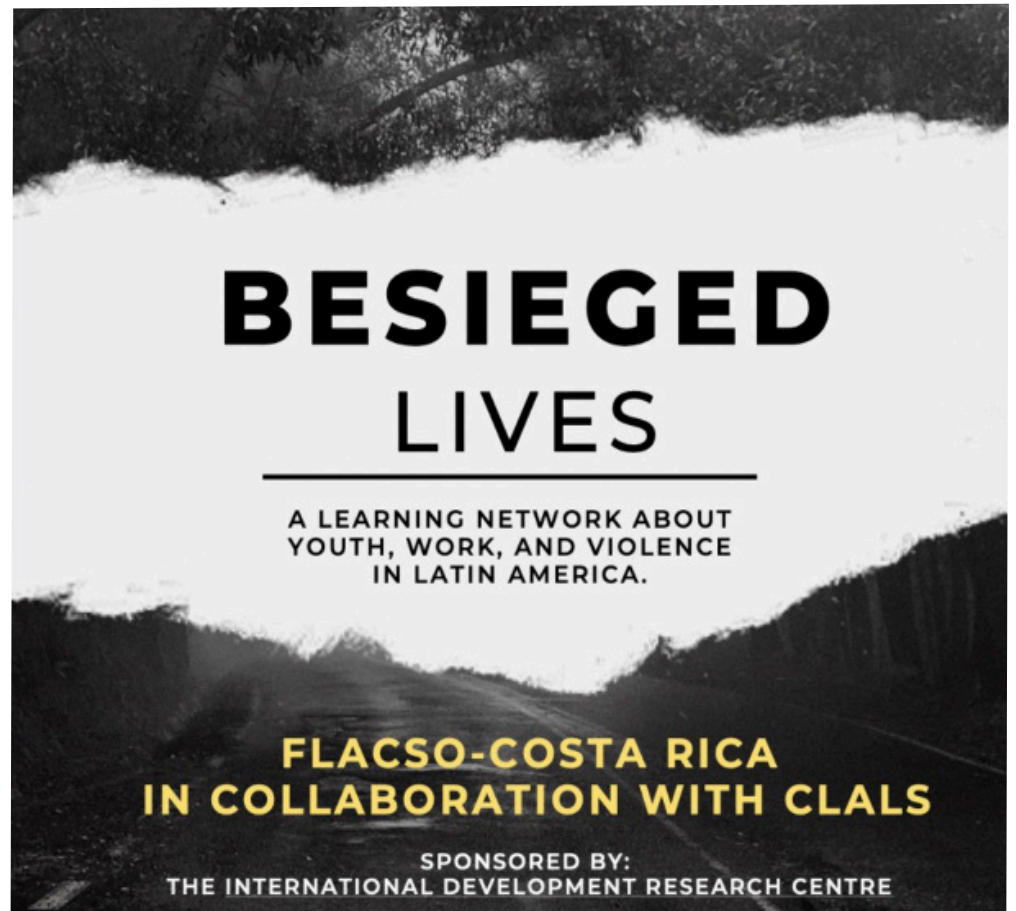
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*Vidas Sitiadas* - Besieged Lives:  
Empowering Young Women in Latin America to  
Overcome Violence, Poverty, and Discrimination

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*By Fulton Armstrong with CLALS Staff*

SEPTEMBER 2022



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## Acknowledgments

This paper synthesizes the findings of Spanish language reports resulting from *Vidas Sitiadas*, a participatory research initiative project overseen by the *Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales* (FLACSO) of Costa Rica and carried out by research and advocacy institutions across multiple countries in Latin America. We appreciate the contributions of the authors of the Spanish language reports to the messages conveyed in this Working Paper at CLALS. Comments on preliminary versions of this Working Paper were provided by Carina Cione and Eric Hershberg, supplemented by helpful feedback from Fidel de Rooy Estrada and Juan Pablo Pérez Sáinz of FLACSO Costa Rica.

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The solutions examined therein are not one-size-fits-all, but are instructive for any society seeking to improve the lives of vulnerable women and girls in Latin American cities.

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## Executive Summary

The initiative focused on the multiple vulnerabilities of young women in the region and lessons learned from an array of policies and programs that have aspired to provide them opportunities to improve their lives. The reports generated under program auspices examine challenges and advances for women in specific communities in five settings – San Salvador (El Salvador), San José (Costa Rica), Cali (Colombia), Buenos Aires (Argentina), and Montevideo (Uruguay). While each community of young women is distinctive in its own way, experiences of violence, poverty, and discrimination are widespread. Together, the cases portray a picture that is representative of systems of violence and marginalization that prevail across Latin America and the Caribbean.

The *Vidas Sitiadas* project was a three-year research project sponsored by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada and undertaken by FLACSO-Costa Rica with partners across the region. In an effort to foster awareness of the social conditions illuminated through the project, and the potential for innovative policy and action to address them, American University's Center for Latin American and Latino Studies (CLALS) has partnered with FLACSO to convene seminars specifically focused on the *Vidas Sitiadas* initiative. This English-language Working Paper is an additional tool through which CLALS aims to augment the impact of the work on women's empowerment that has been overseen by FLACSO with IDRC support.

Each of the reports generated as part of *Vidas Sitiadas* drew on qualitative methods, such as interviews and direct observations, as well as quantitative data. The analyses consider specific experiences of practical interventions tailored to particular sorts of challenges and opportunities. The solutions examined therein are not one-size-fits-all, but are instructive for any society seeking to improve the lives of vulnerable women and girls in Latin American cities. A common feature is a determination to identify the links between youth, gender, violence, and economic opportunities, and to work with young women in their own to overcome marginalization and improve their lives. Topics addressed in the study include victimization, motherhood, intersectionality, mental health, informal labor markets, pathways to criminality, post-imprisonment reintegration, the affiliation of young women in gangs, and the impact of COVID-19. The project also involved local efforts to construct learning communities that will provide insights for policy makers, development practitioners, academic specialists, and other influential actors in the field.

## THE VIDAS SITIADAS REPORTS

### **San José, Costa Rica**

*The Paniamor Foundation and Girasoles*

Toward the construction of individual and economic agency among adolescent women in urban contexts of exclusion and violence, emphasizing contribution of social policies and programs to build personal, social-productive, and economic wellbeing.

### **San Salvador, El Salvador**

*Glasswing International (Crisálida Internacional)*

Club de Niñas: Opportunities to engage in licit economic activities and build prosocial behavior for young women with experiences in penal institutions in El Salvador, with recommendations for the *Centro de Integración Social Femenino* (CSIF).

### **Buenos Aires (Argentina), Montevideo (Uruguay), and Medellín (Colombia)**

*Espacio Público and the Arbusta Company*

A training program in technical and personal skills for young women to aid them in securing a first formal job, which is a tool for encouraging economic independence and reducing violence against young women.

### **Cali, Colombia**

*Universidad del Valle*

Building social networks and cultivating social capital for women experiencing the impact of violence, poverty, low educational achievement, and racial and gender discrimination in working-class sectors of Cali, Colombia.

### **Buenos Aires, Argentina**

*The Youth Research Program of FLACSO-Argentina and the Secretariat of Education of the Municipalidad de Avellaneda*

Young Mothers Project: An action-research initiative with a network of childcare centers designed to enhance young women's soft skills and abilities to rise above violence and other life challenges in the Municipalidad de Avellaneda.

## **Context and Challenges Facing Young Women Under Siege**

**M**ujeres jóvenes – women between adolescence and their mid-20s – are at the center of the *Vidas Sitiadas* project, which aims to provide a timely perspective of current social conditions and potential future scenarios for Latin American societies. These young women face the expectations of traditional gender roles as mothers and sources of family stability and love, while also experiencing their societies' many ills, most notably poverty, exclusion, racial and ethnic prejudices, gender-based abuse, and systemic violence. Our studies of the problems facing young women and the organizational efforts to empower them yield findings that can fuel pessimism, but that also identify meaningful glimmers

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Source: Universidad del Valle

of hope. The problems in young Latin American women's lives are deeply rooted in historically exclusive social and economic realities. Meanwhile, despite nominal progress in formal recognition of women's rights and the advent of a host of technologies that should enhance their lives, the challenges faced by many women in the region remain intractable. Governments have largely failed to address the needs of young women regarding political and economic inclusion, protection from community violence, and progress in reducing and ending gender-based violence. The COVID-19 pandemic, moreover, has showed that, when societies confront crises, women's lives are most severely impacted.

The *Vidas Sitiadas* studies reveal that the challenges that young women face are intertwined and require multi-faceted solutions. Phenomena such as social and gender violence, poverty and lack of economic opportunity, and social isolation and the stigma of living in neighborhoods tagged for their violence and poverty, all affect young women's social and economic interactions, their families, and their own hearts and minds. Many of these women feel like prisoners in social and cultural constructs that ignore their needs, undermine their sense of self-worth, and deprive them of the self-confidence necessary to engage in the struggles required to build a better life.

Technological precedent is unfortunately of only marginal value to finding solutions. While young women today have access to mobile phones that arguably expand their social reach beyond that of their grandmothers and mothers, violence, crime, and distrust have weakened neighborhoods and the relationships of mutual support that they traditionally have provided. Many women today are afraid to leave their homes, which hinders them economically and psychologically. Rampant gender-based discrimination and violence persist. Women who strive to improve their life chances often cannot afford the necessary education and are held back from pursuing success



because they come from stigmatized neighborhoods, lack basic social services and transportation, and have limited access to employment.

An informal review conducted by FLACSO Costa Rica of the five *Vidas Sitiadas* reports summarized the situation of young women in the target communities as “impoverished by the economy, abandoned by the state, forgotten by society.” Frequently inhabiting communities in which gangs maintain a “paralegal order” and in which “non-observance [of that order] can be lethal,” survival becomes the top priority of young women residents. These reports document the threats that face these women and the preliminary, but positive, results of programs intended to aid and empower them.

The reports approach the challenges facing young women in different ways – through survey questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups – to create a common composite image of women from adolescence through their mid-20s whose life circumstances and, in some cases, past behaviors have captured them in a range of similarly distressing circumstances. Most are unemployed and, often in their own estimation, largely unemployable. Some are currently detained or recently emerged from correctional institutions; many live in unstable conditions; and many feel isolated and unsure of how to move forward with their lives.

Many of these vulnerable young women are known colloquially (and negatively) as “*Ni Ni*” – “*ni estudia ni trabaja*” (neither studying nor working) – and are therefore often less visible to government and non-governmental institutions. This contributes to society’s general, if willful, ignorance of their travails and, of course, complicates efforts to marshal political and economic resources to their benefit. The *Vidas Sitiadas* reports make significant contributions to our understanding of young women’s lives, even if many in their societies do not acknowledge their existence.

The underlying causes of their situation, however, are not unknown to decision makers. No government or NGO is unaware of the profound psychological and social damage caused by crime and violence in marginalized neighborhoods. No leader can claim ignorance to the harm caused by gender violence – both in public, where women are harassed, threatened, and physically attacked by men, and in the home, where they often suffer violence and fear in silence. No one is blind to the impact of chronic economic distress, the inability to pay for an education, and the lack of proper health care and access to reproductive health services. No policy-maker is ignorant of the fact – made even clearer during the COVID 19 pandemic – that young women are unequally burdened with household tasks and family care, which massively reduces their economic opportunities.

What societies must not overlook is the devastation and desperation that young women in these circumstances feel. The tendency is to judge them morally for alleged shortcomings – getting pregnant, dropping out of school, failing to find a job, or engaging in crime – rather than understand their essential status as victims

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of circumstances beyond their control. The *Vidas Sitiadas* studies show, for example, that young women involved in crime do not seek that route willingly. Rather, it predictably results from four specific conditions: a family has endured chronic economic need; one or more family members are involved in crime; the family or neighborhood social networks intersect with criminal structures; and young women are expelled from their homes, often through no fault of their own, without any basic physical protection. These factors leave them little alternative but to interact with the criminal forces big and small that dominate the public spaces into which they've been thrust, and the cycle of violence, poverty, and isolation repeats itself.

## VIOLENCE

Although the causes of young women's difficulties are multi-layered and intertwined, the most salient – and omnipresent – is the violence they face in society and, often, within the family unit itself. Violence, more than any other underlying factor, is what causes the sensation of living a *vida sitiada* – a life under siege. The *Vidas Sitiadas* studies home in on violence in all its forms because it stigmatizes entire neighborhoods, makes navigating through them difficult and dangerous, and profoundly erodes young women's sense of security, dignity, and self-confidence.

Research on the Arbusta company's "First Job" project in Buenos Aires, Montevideo, and Medellín, for example, showed that violence is a leading cause of young women's inability to secure employment and break out of their dangerous neighborhoods. The company hypothesized, and later proved, that getting a first job was a woman's best means of reaching a higher level of social and economic inclusion. Indeed, over time the company determined that employment and personal development were the most effective ways that subjects could avoid violence and overcome its pernicious influences over their lives.



Source: La Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Sede Costa Rica

The *Vidas Sitiadas* studies found that young women suffered from three basic types of violence:

1. **Direct and public violence.** Robbery and sexual violence, including harassment, aggressive touching, and rape, in public spaces are frequent phenomena for women. These crimes often force them to avoid certain parts of their own neighborhoods, to forgo essential travel outside the home, and to severely curtail social contact, thus hindering their ability to develop support networks.
  - One *Vidas Sitiadas* study carried out by FLACSO Argentina, looking into the relatively stable lives of young women with children in a system of childcare facilities in Buenos Aires, found that about three out of every ten respondents to a questionnaire, from all socioeconomic classes, reported experiencing some form of gender violence during the pandemic. This included physical or verbal abuse or discrimination. In all of the other social groups examined, the rate was much higher.
2. **Family violence.** Either as victims or witnesses, young women experiencing physical and psychological violence in the home endure great pain and feel held back in their personal and social development. Interviewees said that home-based violence had a “very radical impact” on their daily lives. Many were cared for by mothers or grandmothers who were abused and then, in turn, engaged in physical or psychological abuse of their daughters. Many fathers were absent, and many mothers neglected the girls’ basic needs and protection.
  - The study conducted by Universidad del Valle in Cali, a city with one of the highest femicide rates in the world, found that women, especially those who are young, poor, and Afro-origin, face the threat of violence daily. In relationships, patriarchal structures play important roles as factors that encourage violence against women.
  - Family disintegration also often deprives girls and young women of strong relationships necessary for stability and progress. Many of them are raised by different people because parents leave the country, are killed, or simply disappear, so the children move to different houses often.

Gender-based violence, including by intimate partners, is painfully common. In one study, 16 percent of respondents reported “frequent” psychological violence by a partner or other male figure in the family. Also, women report risky sexual practices as an important form of violence because it makes them feel unsafe and not in control during sexual relations. The use of contraceptives to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases is infrequent, further increasing their sense of danger and insecurity.

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- Even women with the resources and confidence to assert themselves face threats. Several vignettes in the studies show that women are beaten or even killed by current or past partners for assuming roles outside what the men accept culturally.

**3. Symbolic violence.** The discrimination that young women feel, due in part to the stigma surrounding their neighborhoods, has a major impact on them far beyond the immediate threats of violence. Women from neighborhoods plagued with poverty, crime, and gang control are often viewed as flawed and vulnerable – as prey – which limits not only their economic opportunities but also their self-image and personal dignity.

- The perception of insecurity caused by robbery and sexual predation in the neighborhoods of Cali is powerful. While 43.3 percent of young women interviewed say their neighborhoods are neither peaceful nor violent, some 12.6 percent call them “very violent,” and 27.6 percent believe they are “moderately violent.” About half feel that violence increased during the pandemic.

The *Vidas Sitiadas* studies clearly reveal the deep impact of all three kinds of violence on young women’s lives. By undermining their sense of security, dignity, and ability to find work, these forms of violence wear them down as women, mothers, daughters, and human beings who seek to improve themselves and their situations.

As noted above, violence is also a major factor, inevitably, in some young women’s pivot toward involvement in crime.

- The Glasswing International report on El Salvador, for example, found that many women serving criminal sentences suffered repeated episodes of violence beginning in childhood – neglect, abuse, sexual violence, exposure to community violence, parental alcohol abuse, and parental fighting. Witnessing violence against their mothers (or grandmothers filling that role) by male kin leaves profound scars on girls and, in many cases, reflects a pattern in which they often fall victim themselves when older.
- Their communities and schools are victimized by gangs. These youths threaten teachers and students and promote the use of illicit drugs, transforming a place that should be safe into a zone of terror. Other projects associated with *Vidas Sitiadas* have uncovered an astounding number of cases – almost half in some areas – of one parent being assassinated, placing the youths in what researchers called the “scenario of death” that has traumatic implications for their lives.

Participation in criminality is but one result of the impact of violence on young women’s lives. The state of “siege” in which they live is also characterized isolation, discrimination, and the resulting sense of hopelessness and low self-worth that deny

these women the futures that, as residents of nominally democratic and liberal societies, should be theirs.

## ECONOMIC EXCLUSION AND LOW EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

The multiple disadvantages caused by family poverty set girls off to a weak start as children and, in most cases, seriously hinder their ability to obtain the education and jobs they need to escape from impoverished, violence-ridden communities as young adults. They and their communities become effectively “excluded” from national economic life. Participation in the formal economy is severely reduced, and even the informal economy, which is subject to high levels of insecurity and uncertainty, often lies beyond young women’s reaches.

- Half of the women who responded to one of the Cali surveys (between September and November 2020) reported being outside the labor markets. Many are *Ni Ni*’s forced by family to do household work – gender-stereotyped tasks such as cleaning and childcare – without any pay. The young women complain about feeling like prisoners in their own homes. The surveys show, moreover, that girls and young women who dedicate their time to caring for young siblings often, ironically, become adolescent mothers themselves. Being stuck at home takes them out of school at young ages and deprives them of the ability to take advantage of any job opportunities they may have.

The report on the *Girasoles* program coordinated by the Paniamor Foundation in Costa Rica examines these phenomena as well as the impact of gender violence and social exclusion on adolescent women. Paniamor discovered that for these women, most of whom are *Ni Ni*’s, relationships based on social responsibility and ties within the community are essential to fulfilling their wish to develop a direction for themselves, to have agency over their lives, and achieve economic independence.

- Exclusion from the labor market has a profound economic, social, and psychological impact on young women. They do not develop the contacts, technical and personal skills, and even social awareness necessary to support themselves. Interviews show that, over time, they increasingly doubt their self-worth and their confidence plummets.
- Paniamor’s report echoes other *Vidas Sitiadas* studies in concluding that the resulting economic dependence on men – caused by their inability to support themselves and make even simple financial decisions – further undermines their ambitions. It is also an underlying cause of gender violence.
- The researchers also unveiled that women who manage to secure jobs often work in limited sectors and at lower wages than their male counterparts. This often relegates them to the informal sector with low income in vulnerable jobs, where

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they have reduced access to social security benefits, financial services, physical protection, and steady income.

Exclusion renders women practically invisible and, by reducing their visibility in public venues, hinders efforts by governmental and non-governmental organizations trying to improve their lives. Experts in Cali cite significant evidence that the exclusion of women from the labor market is especially damaging because they “disappear” from the statistics of economically active people kept by government offices, such as Colombia's *Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística* (DANE). This makes it easy for political decision makers to ignore their plight.

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- Surveys in Cali provide texture to experts' understandings of the girls' travails. The reasons for not continuing in school include lack of money (36 percent); early motherhood (11 percent); family obligations, especially childcare (11 percent); and a choice to work over study (3 percent). The report reveals that the “dark presence of unpaid work” in the home included routine chores, elderly care, and rearing of younger siblings or one's own children.

Experts agree that failure to continue their studies is a major factor in young women's inability to pursue qualifications and improve their job and life prospects. Dropping out reduces their autonomy and, because they lack economic resources, leads them to greater dependency on men who, as noted above, can be psychologically and physically aggressive.

Education is not a panacea. It alone does not protect workers effectively from losing their jobs in the same way that age, being a head of household, or having effective social networks does. But the level of protection it provides only increases with higher levels of education.

- Some interviewees display cynicism about education. One young woman said, “Advancement in education, achieved through so much effort, doesn't have the

desired effect and adds an additional layer to the inequality and frustration.” But the surveys show that the women most likely to fall out of the labor force are those with incomplete levels of education (and those who have children earlier). Once they leave the work force, returning gets steadily harder with time.

## ISOLATION

The spatial segregation and territorial stigma of life in marginalized neighborhoods contribute to systematic exclusion. Stigmatized neighborhoods often lack markets, transportation, and other services essential for economically viable lives. If buses and vans enter these troubled territories, residents still have to endure harassment and danger trying to use them. Plus, service is slow. A third of the participants in the Arbusta project in Santiago, for example, face travel times of 60-90 minutes each way – a long time especially in a vehicle in which passengers do not feel safe. Another third spends 30-60 minutes each way.

Economic exclusion inevitably deepens social exclusion as well, denying young women access to information and support that could empower them to overcome short-term, immediate problems and to improve their lives over the long run. The interview data and survey responses of many of the *Vidas Sitiadas* subjects reveal that they depend on very small groups of contacts with very limited resources.

- The *Vidas Sitiadas* studies show that women’s social networks are relatively closed – limited mostly to family members and women in the same neighborhood. That means they gain relatively little new information with which they can build social capital, including links to organizations that provide assistance. About 77 percent of the women in the Cali project, for example, said they learned about jobs mostly from their own family members.

Social capital is also essential to building confidence and a sense of solidarity that women need to survive and thrive, but analyses of women’s immediate social networks and their low social capital indicates they live in relatively closed social circles.

- Young women generally have the technology to communicate if the opportunity to expand networks presents itself. Very high percentages (in the high 90s) of women have access to mobile phones, which allows them to use WhatsApp (an estimated 98 percent) and Facebook (71 percent). Fewer than 34 percent also have access to a computer.
- In surveys, about two-thirds of the women say they either have at least some confidence (“low” or “high”) that “some neighbor could do me a favor” or that “most neighbors are disposed to help others if necessary.” On the other hand, large numbers also admit to being skeptical of neighbors who ask for financial assistance, such as to borrow money, thus suggesting their optimism that neighbors will help them in a bind is overstated. The surveys show, furthermore, that

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the COVID-19 pandemic did not lead to an increase in cooperation among neighbors. One survey shows that only 15 percent worked with neighbors for something of benefit to the community as a whole.

Dependence on the family for contact with the outside world is fraught with risks beyond the narrow information loop it represents. *Vulnerabilidad relacional* – when victims are buffeted by the vulnerabilities of those around them – often explains the fate of young women related to violent, absent, or abusive men; neglectful or violent mothers; and family members or friends with ties to gangs.

- In the El Salvador inquiry, for instance, more than half of the young women interviewed had long-term partners who were involved in criminal organizations, which significantly increased their own involvement in crime. Frequently, it was in this context that the subjects of that study had been arrested and incarcerated.
- In contrast, women have an advantage when they have access to people beyond their immediate family and neighbors. For example, the vast majority of women with children in childcare centers run by the *Municipalidad de Avellaneda* in Buenos Aires – which gives priority to women who already have ties with local government offices or programs – say they have someone with whom they talk about problems or ask for help. (About 91 percent of them are from the *segmento bajo* [low segment] of society, and 97.5 percent from the *segmento medio* [middle segment].) These young women also registered high levels of employment (72.6 percent from *bajo* and 86.7 percent from *medio*), internet connectivity (more than 90 percent), and possession of mobile phones (more than 96 percent).

Isolation, weak social networks, and low social capital contribute to low self-esteem and confidence among young women. One study shows that, when facing systematic difficulties in securing jobs and education, the women conclude they lack capability – without blaming their families and society – and become more shy, lose confidence in themselves, and further reduce their expectations. For people living amid so many external challenges, this lack of self-esteem is not surprising, but adds further stress to their situations.

## PROGRAMS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Each of the research teams working on the *Vidas Sitiadas* project examined programs that aim to provide young women chances to overcome barriers to safety and success. The programs have been in place only for several years, so their long-term impact is difficult to gauge, but the studies reveal that the programs are based on sound and ethical methodological reasoning and practices. Not only have they resulted in valuable analyses of the causes of young women's difficulties, but they also point to practical, sustainable potential solutions.





Source: Paniamor

One of the programs examined – *Jardines Maternales* run by the Buenos Aires Municipalidad de Avellaneda – demonstrates the value of childcare to young women who are already gainfully employed, receiving assistance, or otherwise engaged in positive social interaction. By regulation, the facilities give priority to certain categories of families, including municipal employees and other “responsible adults who work.” That guarantees, as noted above, that these mothers’ and their children’s rankings on most indicators are going to be high. The program can plausibly take credit for keeping these families in a favorable space. It enables young women to work and develop important social capital, which also positions their children for greater stability and progress.

Other programs that *Vidas Sitiadas* examined are extending a hand to young women who can benefit from greater collaboration – those living in more difficult family and neighborhood situations; with less access to jobs (formal or informal) and to economic resources; and more isolated from persons and social institutions that can provide access to opportunities. These programs focus on the underlying causes of women’s problems, which has already proved wise, even if their measurable and sustained progress is not yet clear.

## FIRST JOB INITIATIVE

The Arbusta company’s *Primer Trabajo* (“First Job”) initiative has demonstrated that young women given jobs and skills are able improve their lives. In cooperation with *Espacio Público* in Santiago de Chile, the company launched a program in 2020 with the express purpose of

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studying the impact of “a first job as a way to reduce the violence and discrimination” experienced by young women in Buenos Aires, Montevideo, and Medellín. Arbusta is a social company specializing in information technology, providing quality control for software and data for large and medium companies and government offices. Building on its networks in urban neighborhoods, Arbusta has reached out to the “most excluded of the excluded.” Its goal is to help participants overcome obstacles and break with previous experiences of maltreatment, discrimination, and stigmatization.

The *Primer Trabajo* study identified several steps that Arbusta took that have significantly enhanced the program’s positive impact for young women. The underlying philosophy of its approach is to enable the creation of new narratives about their lives. The objective of the “Redemption” phase is to help them overcome life events marked by psychosocial problems and family vulnerability, which Arbusta encourages them to leave behind as they turn toward independence. The “Consolidation” phase intends to reduce the gamut of systemic violence young women experience – including general and sexual violence as well as exclusion and the sense of desperation and frustration caused by an unequal system – as they struggle to find a new trajectory that allows them to build a more positive life for themselves. Together, these efforts encourage young women to raise their expectations and motivate them to achieve their goals.

- The company gives workers traditional training prior to work assignments; offers a formal contract based on an apprenticeship model (“learning while working”); and provides additional support for the development of personal skills, including personal communications and relationship management.
- The company emphasizes creating opportunities for growth, and – within a *cultura de compañerismo* and collective learning – stresses creating a true team culture in which everyone helps everyone else under the slogan, “Demand [personal] growth; share knowledge.”
- The company believes that psycho-social skills (in addition to technical skills) foster independence as women take charge of their lives and endeavor to get ahead. Listening and verbal expression are valued as means to creating a true “family” environment. The *cultura de compañerismo* the company fosters also increases self-confidence in public spaces.

Arbusta also focuses on interventions against direct violence. Voluntary open conversations about the problems of gender violence provide participants with useful knowledge to develop appropriate protocols for intervention when suffering harassment or direct violence of any kind. Should techniques for avoiding situations fail, the women also learn a *protocolo de acompañamiento* – with explicit help from other participants – in situations of violence.

## Early Results

Early results appear to validate the program's hypothesis – that it can help young women break out of the vicious cycle of poverty, violence, low academic achievement, and low preparedness for the workplace by giving them jobs and skill training. After completing the program, participants demonstrated greater senses of dignity and confidence in themselves. They developed problem-solving skills that they can apply in other areas of their lives. Their improved oral expression skills instilled new confidence to express themselves and defend their interests.

The preliminary results also validate the company's view that overcoming socio-spatial exclusion – the non-availability of employment or transportation to jobs – is key. Employees' performances show that the discrimination they suffered in the work and education marketplaces was not based on individual skills or potential. Arbusta participants say that they experience reduced fear and a reduced sense of impostor syndrome – that is, they felt an enhanced feeling that, yes, they deserve a better life.

Arbusta interviews reveal that jobs enabled some of the young women to change homes; change relationships (drop old or acquire new); and change themselves. For many of them, it is the first time in their lives that they feel independent and in control.

## CLUB DE NIÑAS

The *Club de Niñas* – “Girls’ Club” – program was launched by *Crisálida Internacional* (Glasswing International) in El Salvador to assist vulnerable girls and then was expanded to include young women who were serving time in detention facilities. The overarching goal of its efforts, examined by *Vidas Sitiadas*, is to work with the latter group so they may break out of the conditions and mindsets that led them to criminality.

The program focuses on the roots of their criminal behavior, which are poverty, exclusion, gender discrimination, and lack of opportunity. Key elements of the formal program are:

- Strengthening young women's plans to seek employment by giving them workshops on job skills and entrepreneurship;
- Improving their abilities to protect themselves from gender-specific threats by giving them training on sexual violence prevention and reproductive health;
- Providing opportunities to build friendships and networks with new people – i.e., not with violent persons they had relations with in the past; and
- Building their positive self-images and pride in the wake of gender violence by granting them a sympathetic ear, advice, and *acompañamiento* in difficult situations.

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Early results appear to validate the program's hypothesis – that it can help young women break out of the vicious cycle of poverty, violence, low academic achievement, and low preparedness for the workplace by giving them jobs and skill training.

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*Club de Niñas* invests time in encouraging young women to address the logical anxieties they face – particularly how to reduce their economic dependency on the very same people who influenced their past errors. Having an income will empower them to stay away from violent persons of the past and not depend on abusive men. They also learn where to find housing and how to build a viable support network. Prison time often weakens the links with family and friends who can help (as well as with those who will be bad influences), so developing the ability to build new networks is especially crucial.

Another key goal is to give the women a feeling of protection in a safe space – difficult to achieve in prison but essential for the participants to feel comfortable enough to change. Creating a supportive community, which they didn't have on the outside, is a significant challenge that the program seeks to meet by ensuring the women feel heard, respected, and dignified.

- Most of the young women have difficulty identifying and expressing their emotions – identifying them most often as “sadness” – so the program gives them information and tools to develop emotional intelligence skills.

### ***Early Results***

For young women who lack self-confidence, money, education, and a job, these are all daunting challenges – and concrete metrics of success will take time to emerge. Reversing life-long challenges is not simply a matter of participation in *Club de Niñas*, but also a steadfast commitment to the principles and practices that the *Club* encourages. As an expert at FLACSO Costa Rica pointed out, social reinsertion for these young women implies a return to the world of marginalization.

- Upon leaving detention, participants in the *Club de Niñas* face the immediate and enduring challenges of finding a job, overcoming the stigma of having been in prison, and compensating for the absence of a positive family support network. (Young women who grow to appreciate the importance of education and complete high school in detention often are reluctant to show the diploma to a potential employer because it was issued by the facility's *Centro de integración*.) Moreover, most of them return to communities with high levels of violence, immediately testing their newly learned emotional intelligence skills – which, in turn, makes it more difficult to overcome material barriers.

The *Vidas Sitiadas* analysis indicates, however, that the *Club de Niñas* is based on an accurate interpretation of its beneficiaries' problems and needs.

- The interviews show that participants are embarking on a process of looking for new prosocial identities, reflecting a new or renewed desire to engage in positive relationships, and trying to break with past attitudes of rebellion. Those who are mothers disclose that they want to be better for their children.

To encourage further growth, *Crisálida Internacional* (Glasswing International) recommends additional steps to keep the focus on young women before and after their release.

- The participants require more resources and contacts to find, create, or take advantage of opportunities. Glasswing notes, for example, the need for seed capital for them to become small entrepreneurs; families usually don't have anything to offer. Young women will also benefit from meeting potential role models – professionals, athletes, artists, and others – whose personal journeys will convince them that they, too, can overcome adversity.
- More individualized and structured activities will help young women deal with adverse gender-related experiences, including victimization, abusive relationships, and other gaps in their upbringing.
- Glasswing also recommends more training for young women to learn about expressing their feelings and emotions. These skills facilitate better understanding of their predicaments, identify possible solutions, and seek alliances with individuals who can provide comfort and advice.

## GIRASOLES

The *Girasoles* program designed and implemented by the Paniamor Foundation in Costa Rica focuses on similar ways of empowering young women with an emphasis on close collaboration among civil society and government at the national and municipal levels. Located in the San José *Municipalidad de Desamparados*, the initiative is supported by Paniamor, the Ministry of Justice and Peace, the semi-autonomous National Institute for Learning (INA), and the “Civic Centers for Peace” of the *municipalidad*.

The over-arching goals of *Girasoles* – named for the sunflower's ability to follow the sun – are for young women to develop the ability to confront gender violence and overcome social exclusion.

- The program is premised upon the active, willing participation of young women who want to overcome life obstacles. *Girasoles* works with young women to overcome their sense of vulnerability through developing their skills, rethinking their identities, and rebuilding relationships in ways that contribute to positive personal development.
- *Girasoles* is supported by a multisectoral combination of national and local government institutions in alliance with private-sector entities committed to social responsibility initiatives. This partnership functions as an “ecosystem” of resources and other support for participants.

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Source: Paniamor

### ***Early Results***

*Girasoles* and the Paniamor Foundation have demonstrated the value of the private-public partnership in designing, launching, and implementing the program. As with the other programs studied by *Vidas Sitiadas*, however, the long-term impact will take time to evaluate.

- The *Vidas Sitiadas* reports already validate the program's underlying philosophy that young women in difficult security, social, and economic circumstances benefit from exposure to the empowering concepts of human rights, gender equality, community security, and positive relationships. Preliminary assessments indicate that participants stand a better chance of developing a systematic experience that will create the conditions for them to have effective agency in their lives.

## **ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES**

The “Economic Opportunities” study was carried out by the Universidad del Valle with young women who live in high-violence neighborhoods in Cali. This component of the *Vidas Sitiadas* project did not evaluate specific programs, but it contained two important recommendations that, it argued, would contribute to freeing women from the traps of inequality and exclusion.

- Because a university, graduate, or technical degree can offer better protection from losing a job, one recommendation is for the national government to guarantee free education at those levels for all who have finished their secondary

education and commit to further education. Higher-education institutions build knowledge and skills, of course, but also offer broader social contacts and increase the probability of linking students with potential employers, improving their access to information about job vacancies, and instilling in them good work habits, such as time management.

- To enable young women to work full-time, the government should guarantee free early-childhood care and education.

These policies, if adopted, would almost certainly reduce the levels of segregation and exclusion from which young women currently suffer not only in Cali, but in all of the communities covered by the *Vidas Sitiadas* project and beyond.

## OBSERVATIONS

Understanding the challenges facing young women in Latin America – and, crucially, the underlying causes of those challenges – is an important step toward devising policies and programs to reduce obstacles to their wellbeing. The *Vidas Sitiadas* reports look at different communities in different countries, but they identify a strikingly similar set of factors and assessments of the human costs of countries’ failure to address them.

A premise of the project has been that the problems of young women are the problems of all of society – economic, security, political, cultural – and that governments ignore them at their own peril. Arming girls and young women with tools to navigate unequal and struggling economies, systemic violence on numerous levels,



Source: La Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Sede Argentina

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and suffocating gender roles is important and over time will certainly help those who manage to wend their way out of repressive families and communities and eke out a modest living.

Vulnerable boys and men are, of course, key actors in the social breakdown of communities afflicted by violence and anomie, which also victimize the vulnerable girls and women in the studies. Any long-term strategy should include boys and men and offer solutions to their complex problems and destructive behaviors. Expecting girls and women to unilaterally break the vicious cycles of which they are victims, without also ameliorating the troubles that boys and men around them experience, is not a comprehensive strategy. Broad social engagement and resources are required.

By some measures, today's young women have advantages over their mothers and grandmothers. Mobile phones enable them to communicate with persons outside the home. Remittances from family and friends abroad represent a new source of funds for some of them. But experts agree that the level of violence laying siege to their lives has massively increased feelings of isolation and tensions in neighborhoods since the COVID-19 pandemic. Residual cultural problems with destructive gender roles, exacerbated by economic stresses and men's own sense of disconnection, bring violence into the home itself.

These problems are decades in the making, and so the solutions may be too. The programs examined by *Vidas Sitiadas* are built upon professional analysis of empirical data, and they reflect thoughtful, multi-disciplinary approaches – applying techniques to encourage women overcome the barriers to progress in their own minds, families, and communities. This project's preliminary review underscores their promise. For people and societies enduring such pain, even incremental progress is important.

*Vidas Sitiadas* has provided the proof of concept and identified the steps that – until political, economic, and cultural elites in each country undertake reforms addressing systemic problems – can contribute to alleviation of the suffering of young women. They want education in safe schools. They dream of eradicating public violence, finding safe spaces for themselves, ending abusive relationships, and creating new connections that build their social capital. They seek better opportunities to prepare for and find jobs. They need gender-specific health and reproductive care. They want to view themselves differently, positively, and kindly – and to develop the skills that help empower them to build dignity, self-worth, and confidence.

The *Vidas Sitiadas* papers do not over-promise; they don't assert that there's any single magic solution to the vulnerabilities experienced by young women across much of Latin America. But they do point the way ahead for how women living *vidas sitiadas* can begin the process, starting with their own circumstances, of making their societies safe, inclusive, optimistic, and more prosperous. The trick will be in rallying the powerful in their countries to match their resolve and support this



noble mission. Governments, whose policies and inattention to women's needs have aggravated their challenges, can and must play a role in empowering young women, and the advocacy organizations that engage them, to pursue their goals and create safe spaces for themselves and their families.

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