



## BELLAVISTA, ECUADOR

# When the ordinary is extraordinary

*Life looks different in Bellavista, where a group of women artisans overcame resistance, waited for a full moon and conquered self-doubt to become as strong as possible.*

Like the thatched roof that covers the artisan *choza* built by their own hands, the changes in Bellavista's women since they formed an all-female group are textured, layered and long-lasting.

Olga Shiguango is a founding member of the women's group, located in a community accessed only by canoe or a bone-shaking dirt road that cuts through the rainforest jungle. Employment opportunities are scarce. Olga's income came from farming plantain, corn, coffee and cacao, but she had a small plot of land and unreliable access to market. In 2014, WE Charity—already building new classrooms for the community's local school—established the group to help women earn an income through traditional weaving practices and to support female leaders determined to make a change in their community.

Building the *choza* was the group's first act of independence. The women desired a place they could call their own, to fulfill orders, host workshops and gather together. Olga and her comrades insisted on being the core construction crew, and they reversed gender roles by recruiting their husbands as help. Many of those men initially resisted their wives' joining an all-women collective, but once they saw the financial impact of the program, they offered their support and their muscle.

The women wove the *choza* roof out of the Amazon's *paja toquilla*, palm leaves that folklore dictates should be cut only under a full moon if they are to remain durable. The women walked miles into the jungle at night to harvest the supply. After threading the leaves into roofing sheets, they passed them up to their husbands to secure in place.

For Olga, as for her neighbors living in this small community on the shores of the Napo River, the personal impact of belonging to the group has transformed even the smallest details of daily life. "I have peace of mind, and I don't worry anymore about how to feed my family," says Olga, who sits on a bench in the shade of the open-air artisan workspace she helped build. "When my daughter comes home from school and wants a snack, I can tell her to go to the local shop and get one. I tell her, 'Put it on my credit. I have money. I can pay for that.'"

## PILLAR

### 👤 OPPORTUNITY



*Olga Shiguango is a founding member of Sumak Warmi, a name selected by the artisans group—and Kichwa for "beautiful women."*

*Lidia Tapuy creates string from the fibers of the Amazon pita leaf.*



*TOP: Priscila Andy, group vice president, leads a discussion. Beyond making artisan jewelry, group members also participate in financial literacy and leadership workshops.*

*ABOVE: Leaves harvested under moonlight were used for the choza's thatched roof; they promise strength and durability.*

A few times a week, Olga joins more than a dozen artisans in the space to weave bracelets out of fibers torn from long pita leaves that grow in the Amazon rainforest. The women chat and laugh as they work, their movements second nature. They also sew wallets and purses out of recycled wrappers and plastic bags. These handicrafts are sold at ME to WE's Minga Lodge to visitors, who also meet with the women to learn about their culture and way of life.

Olga explains that her husband, Saul, unlike many of the other men, has been her biggest supporter. Although she has become a skilled artisan, the journey was filled with trepidation. "At first I didn't know if I could do it," she confesses. Though a high school graduate, she had no previous experience with weaving, aside from the training provided by WE Charity. She worried she was too slow and would never make a bracelet properly. She almost gave up. "My husband told me, 'I think you can do it. You just have to work hard and show others what you can do.'"

Group members who didn't receive support at home found it in each other. Priscila Andy, the group's vice president, explains that women whose sole focus was household chores and who rarely spoke in public became more ambitious, independent and self-assured. "Now we can speak our minds and we support each other with our ideas," she says.



*The pita leaf is separated from top to bottom to extract hidden fibers, then it is dried, dyed and woven into jewelry.*





*Behind every piece of jewelry from the Bellavista women's group is the story of the woman who wove it—artisans, farmers and mothers who are committed to creating a better life for themselves and their families.*

**TOP ROW:** Marlene Shiguango, Violeta Grefa, Graciela Shiguango, Olga Shiguango, Rita Grefa, Lucia Andy

**BOTTOM ROW:** Zoila Andy, Solange Shiguango, Flora Grefa, Ana Tapuy, Priscila Andy

WE Charity has also run financial literacy, small business management and leadership workshops. Olga's confidence grew and she was elected the group's treasurer, putting her high school diploma to good use. The financial management training she received not only helped her keep the group's books in order, it also improved her household budgeting.

The first time Olga completed an order for 100 bracelets, she finally believed she could make a living as an artisan. She's put her pay packages toward food, clothes, school supplies and medicines. After the essentials were covered, she made her first large purchase: a fridge. She's also set aside savings for her children's education.

When Olga weaves at home, her daughter, Dayana, often joins her, fashioning her own creations out of string and beads. Olga watches with the quiet pride of a working mom.

WANDA O'BRIEN



**TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT:** ME to WE finds market access for the group's handmade jewelry; Olga oversees her daughter studying.  
**ABOVE:** Olga with her niece Clara (far left, holding her nephew Claudio), daughter Dayana and son Jair.

*A special thank you to Peter Cordy for his vision, stunning photography and financial support in bringing this book to life.*

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ISBN: 978-1-9991540-1-1

Cataloguing in publication information available upon request

**WE CHARITY**

339 Queen Street East  
Toronto ON M5A 1S9  
Canada

Learn more at [WE.org](http://WE.org)

Distributed by WE Charity

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens

Design by Counterpunch Inc. / Linda Gustafson

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