



SAN MIGUEL, ECUADOR

No boys allowed

Girls' clubs are giving teens in rural Ecuador the tools they need to continue their studies and tap into sisterly solidarity. This is girl power.

Lucia Yasaca Daquilema held the brown-spotted guinea pig for the first time, feeling its weight and warmth. She had gone through months of training for this very moment, but now doubt was creeping up. How could she, a timid 15-year-old girl without any prior experience, take care of this furry creature whose heartbeat pulsed against her palms? It seemed like her whole future depended on the rodent.

If she and the 14 other girls' club members not only kept these guinea pigs alive but also successfully bred them, they could earn enough money to finance their studies. For Lucia, this was an opportunity to be the first girl in her family to complete high school. Her three elder sisters had been married as teens because her family couldn't afford the cost of school. Their potential had gone untapped and they came to rely on their husbands. Lucia feared she was headed down the same path.

The guinea pigs were her ticket to a high school diploma. And the girls' club of San Miguel offered the necessary leadership skills and coaching to break the status quo in a hypermasculine culture.

For Maria Angela Pacheco, WE Charity program coordinator and girls' club founder, the link between girls' empowerment and education is personal. She grew up in an Indigenous community in Ecuador's highlands and hustled her way through high school, funded by the homemade crafts her mother sold. After graduating at 18, she defied protocol and ran for president of her community, the first woman who had dared to attempt that. She won, she says, not because the men trusted her, but because they wanted to prove that a woman wouldn't be able to handle the position. They voted her in to watch her fail.

Instead, her time as president cemented her will to foster women's empowerment among the girls and women of Santa Anita de Pulingui, her community in the Andes highlands. "Whenever I led a meeting, I saw women listening attentively, as if they wanted to say something but felt they could not," Maria Angela remembers. The women's self-censorship nagged at her.

PILLARS

★ **EDUCATION**

👤 **OPPORTUNITY**

Lucia Yasaca Daquilema: advocate, entrepreneur, role model



After her presidential term ended, she worked odd jobs to put herself through university and graduated with a degree in local development. Upon graduating, she dedicated herself to women's issues in Indigenous communities in Chimborazo, helping female artisans earn a living independent of their husbands and encouraging those who dreamed of an education to return to school.

In 2009, WE Charity was scouting for a leader to work with teenage girls at risk of dropping out of school. Maria Angela applied for the role because she saw an opportunity to provide girls with mentorship that could change the course of their lives. The first community she visited with WE Charity was Lucia's home of San Miguel. WE Charity was already working with the community to construct its first high school. But as it was, very few girls were finishing primary school. To get them to high school, the community needed more than a building.

Maria Angela called a meeting to pitch a radical idea to parents and teachers: a girls-only extracurricular program—no boys allowed—for students 15 and older. She believed a girls' club would provide insulation against threats to their self-esteem and act as an incubator for their potential. It would teach girls to use their voice in school so they wouldn't be afraid to speak up as grown women. Their mothers were part of that same generation who would silence themselves in Maria Angela's community meetings.

At first there was little interest. Parents were skeptical of allowing their daughters to gather with their female friends, fearful that it was an indulgent waste of time. Besides, once finished with primary school, they said, their daughters should be married. Maria Angela had encountered the same cultural hurdles throughout her own life and realized she needed to help parents see the practical value of an education, and of raising confident young women. She needed an incentive.

At the next meeting in San Miguel, Maria Angela explained that WE Charity would train the girls to raise and sell guinea pigs, a high-protein staple in the region, which would provide additional income to families. The girls would also use their time together to make and sell traditional jewelry, another micro-business. Part-time work for their daughters was enticing for parents, but it came with a condition. In order to be eligible to participate, girls had to attend high school, using the proceeds from their business ventures to support their studies.

Lucia's dad attended both meetings. He thought about his youngest daughter. At 13, Lucia was smart and hard-working, but also shy and cautious, rarely making eye contact. He listened when Maria Angela told him that educating girls means a better standard of living for the whole family.

He approached Maria Angela to ask if an exception could be made for Lucia, who was below the age requirement to join the club. Maria Angela suggested that Lucia give a speech about why she wanted to join the girls-only group, as an opportunity for the teen to start to exercise her own agency.



ABOVE: Handwoven jewelry and traditional hair pieces called cintas are sold locally.

FACING PAGE: Lucia was inspired by women's rights advocate Maria Angela Pacheco, the founder of the girls' club program.



ABOVE: Guinea pigs provide a reliable source of income so club members can fund their high school education. Veronica Yasaca and Lucia learned how to care for their herds from a veterinarian, built a guinea pig shed, and received training in accounting to make their own small businesses a success.

FACING PAGE: Laura Sanay, a member of Shuid's girls' club, holds one of her 45 guinea pigs.

Facing her audience—Maria Angela and the club members—Lucia took a deep breath, just like her dad had told her to, and began to speak. She explained that she knew she would be the youngest member of the club, but promised to work just as hard as the older girls to fight for her education. She told them it was her dream to graduate high school.

Lucia became the youngest founding member. She had seen the value of using her voice.

The girls' club started meeting weekly, three hours after class every Thursday. Maria Angela shared her own story with the members, of how she broke with tradition to make history. "I told them, 'No one can come and take your rights.'"

Together, they learned about women's rights in Ecuador, about leadership skills and business management. They started training with a veterinarian to gear up for the arrival of their guinea pig, which they would receive in the third year of the program.

Lucia got to work, building a guinea pig shelter beside her house. A healthy guinea pig would sell for up to US\$10, a significant contribution to her school fund. To start, each member was responsible for ten females and two males. Lucia put her fear aside once again and tentatively brought her herd home.





Maria Angela (back row, center) with the inaugural San Miguel girls' club. Although members have graduated from high school, they continue to be each other's core support system.

The girls took on all aspects of care, keeping the pens clean, collecting food in the fields for feedings, and learning to make official records of sales. They shared their progress at meetings and gained a feeling for business and economics, as well as a confidence boost.

Lucia became a star performer, just as she'd promised in her speech. She meticulously followed the instructions of the veterinarian, slowly increased the population of her herd, and then started selling to people in her community and the surrounding area, often getting the full \$10. Soon she had more than 70 guinea pigs.

As the herd grew, so did Lucia. She was in high school, speaking up in class and committed to graduating.

"When I started in the girls' club, everything was difficult for me," Lucia says. "I only went to school, did what the teacher said, and I was afraid of everything. With the help of the club I learned to lose my fear, to be able to speak in public and to ask questions with confidence."

Her newfound confidence would soon be put to the ultimate test.

In her last year of high school, Lucia's family accepted a proposal for her to be married. Everything she had worked so hard to attain went out of focus. Would she be able to graduate? Would her new husband let her continue with her business? Early marriage and teen pregnancy had stopped her sisters' potential. Now her diploma was in jeopardy.



Club members show off their latest creations.

Mustering her courage, Lucia told her parents she didn't want to marry the young man, but instead wanted to finish high school. If she had stayed silent, she doesn't know what would have happened. Both she and Maria Angela think she would have been married and may not have finished school. But she spoke up, and her parents listened. In July 2018, Lucia graduated from San Miguel High School.

The former girls' club members continue to meet regularly, some bringing their babies on their backs. They are both breadwinners and mothers, married but still independent.

Lucia did marry, but only after graduating. Her husband supports her work. She credits her life's diverted path to Maria Angela. "She taught me to say that nothing is impossible, despite being a woman. She taught me to be brave."

Maria Angela shares her pride in Lucia's progress. "Lucia has always been a strong, motivated girl. She is very intelligent. She will use her story to motivate others." Lucia has already encouraged her younger nieces and other girls in the community to stay in school.

Maria Angela, meanwhile, has started more girls' clubs in Chimborazo province, where San Miguel is located, and farther afield, in the Amazon rainforest. But the first club members will always stay with her. "I carry them in my heart," she says. "They are my inspiration."

WANDA O'BRIEN

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