

FIGHTING FOR YOUTH RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY AS AN INDIGENOUS TEEN IN ECUADOR



ERIKA /// translated from Spanish by ANA MARÍA LEÓN

Amidst a violent repression and curfew in Ecuador, Indigenous activist Erika (her family name has been kept out per International Plan's demand) describes how, as a child and teenager, she spent the last decade fighting for parity between genders and youth participation in politics.

"THOSE OF US WHO PARTICIPATE IN THE POWER TAKEOVERS ARE ROLE MODELS TO MANY GIRLS WHO WE REPRESENT IN OUR COMMUNITIES AND WE WANT TO DEMONSTRATE TO SOCIETY THAT WE HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT BY THE AUTHORITIES AND THAT IT IS NECESSARY THAT THEY COMMIT THEMSELVES TO BREAK THE BOUNDARIES THAT DO NOT LET ALL OF US PARTICIPATE IN THOSE SPACES."

My name is Erika, I am a young Indigenous Ecuadorian, an architecture student and an activist for gender parity. I am from a community where cattle raising and agriculture are the biggest sources of income for families, and where a girl, in prior times, only expected to grow up and be a good wife. Starting at eight years old, I was sponsored by Plan Internacional Ecuador (International Plan Ecuador) and it is there, when I got involved in their programs, that I acquired the knowledge that allows me and will allow me to reach the objectives I have set for myself. It was they who discovered and allowed me to turn into the person that I am together with my parents, giving me opportunities I perhaps thought were lost. They taught me to conquer obstacles in any realm, to clearly express what I felt, and to have my rights and the rights of many children and teenagers within my community be respected.

In 2015 I was a youth ambassador, I travelled to the United States for an exchange, and upon my return, I implemented a community project. Right now, I am part of the Becas Universitarias (University Scholarships) project, organized by the Consejo Asesor Juvenil (Youth Advising Council) of Plan Internacional, and I am part of the Consejo Consultivo (Consulting Board) of young people in my district. I am part of the group behind Movimiento Por Ser Niña (To Be A Girl Movement) and, also, I am part of the Global Young Influencers Group. The main objective of participating in these organizing spaces is to speak about and promote gender parity to break the stereotypes over being a man or a woman and to recognize that our capacities, opportunities, and duties must go hand in hand in order to build a just and equitable society.

As part of my activism, I have led campaigns, fairs, congresses, workshops, and encounters with groups of boys and girls in the community, the district, and the country, in order to strengthen their knowledges, leadership abilities, and empowerment in creative and constructive ways. In the same way, and in the context of the Day of the Girl,

I participated in the Tomas de Poder (Power Takeovers) in which we demonstrated, as girls, teenagers, and young Indigenous women, that we have the same capacities to assume a high position in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres within our district, province, country, and in the world. Those of us who participate in the power takeovers are role models to many girls who we represent in our communities and we want to demonstrate to society that we have the right to be taken into account by the authorities and that it is necessary that they commit themselves to break the boundaries that do not let all of us participate in those spaces.

I have realized social mobilization actions for gender rights, and above all for gender parity in my community and in nine other communities nearby. These communities belong to a second degree organization made of approximately 300 households led by men and women. This organization implements projects of great scale that benefit all their communities in their production, cattle raising activities, and intellectual endeavors.

I have also been part of projects such as Zones Free from Teenage Pregnancy, Magics, Safe Zones, and Learning Entrepreneurship implemented by Plan [Internacional] and supported by the City Hall, and, most of all, by the community. These projects organize workshops for leadership, childhood protection, gender, self esteem, parity of rights and responsibilities, entrepreneurship and savings initiatives, and above all, in the rescue of cultural values. In these workshops, I have acquired communication and mediation abilities and I have supported [the workshops] by facilitating formative sessions for teenagers in the project "Zones Free from Teenage Pregnancy" which we are developing within my community. This is at the same time an opportunity for teenagers and young men and women to share, learn, talk, practice, and demand our Sexual Rights and Reproductive Rights, so that we have the tools and opportunities to decide over the situations that affect our lives and so that we can be



an empowered youth that decides over their sexuality in accordance to their own life projects. To design our life project, that is, to lay out goals and the road to achieve them, contributes to our personal development and to the development of society.

I am confronted daily with phrases such as these: "You can't!", "It's a man's career!", "Women are afraid!", "It's a man's sport!", "You're crazy!", "Karishina" (which means you look like a man in kichwa), "You're going to get married and be taken care of," "Women solve everything by crying!", "You must be a good housewife!", "You could get pregnant!", "You can't go out at night!", etc., and despite it all I am here demonstrating to the world that I can be the protagonist and the writer of a new story in which my voice and the voice of many girls, teenagers, and young women be truly heard. Here I am breaking myths, rules, and stereotypes that are not part of me because they don't do me any good and they don't do the world any good either.

Girls, boys, teenagers, and young people, we are the future of the world, it is true, but it is also true that we are the present, and that is why we demand that our rights are respected, that we are guaranteed equal opportunities, and that we are all valued regardless of our gender, our age, our ethnicity, or the country we live in. It is not a matter of who is best, it is a matter of mutual respect and support, of rewriting the history of our experiences,

of not making promises that will not be kept, of valuing yourself and valuing who we are.

I know that I can and have done many things to live a dignified life, but I also know that I need everybody's contribution to transform the life of every girl, teenager, and young woman; I need dad and mom to support us at home, I need our sisters and brothers to listen to us, our uncles and aunts and grandparents to value us, I need the authorities that represent us to take into account our demands, and I want everybody to understand that it is our right to have access to education, to nutrition, to not be discriminated against, to be listened to and valued, to be taken into account, to decide, to learn, to prosper. I need for us to treat each other as people who have non-renounceable rights. Tell me, what are you doing for this to happen, for all girls, teenagers, and young women to live a dignified life? ■

Erika was born in 1999 in Chimborazo in southeastern Ecuador. She is currently in the fourth semester of the Architecture degree and is the first woman in his community to go to university. As a child, she participated in several International Plan programs where her leadership skills have been strengthened. Currently, she is the leader of several initiatives so that her voice and the voice of thousands of girls are heard and taken into account locally and worldwide, is part of the Global Young Influencers Group of Plan Internacional.

Photo of Erika for International Plan Ecuador (2019).

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