



Las Mujeres de Pamplona

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*To all the women who fight
for their freedom every day*

PREFACE

Women experience higher rates of poverty than men. Complex historical and socio-economic reasons contribute to why women have not been given the opportunity to access a good education, find formal employment, or own a property.

Most of the women living in the poorly serviced community of Pamplona Alta, on the outskirts of Lima, Peru, have never given the chance to learn, earn, and break the cycle of poverty. Originally settled in the 1950s, Pamplona is part of the San Juan de Miraflores district, one of Lima's poorest. More than 95,000 people live in the Pamplona neighbourhood, most having emigrated to the country's capital to seek better economic opportunities. Despite almost unsurmountable challenges, they carry on with the hope and dream that their children's lives will be better than their own.

Over the course of several months, we sat down with several women from Pamplona Alta and asked to hear their stories. Some were eager to share while others were timid to answer questions they had never been asked before. Often our conversations happened while the women were preparing the lunchtime meal in the community kitchen. Contributing their time without pay to feed their families and their neighbours has allowed this community to ensure its basic needs, particularly during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. But many of these women's obligations to domestic tasks, particularly in traditional Peruvian society, confine them to the conventional roles associated with motherhood. And the ability to break the poverty cycle without being able to generate their own income becomes even more challenging.

Alcoholism and abuse figured in almost all our interviews. These patterns of addiction and physical and emotional harm were often repeated through various generations. With both tears and determination, these women shared how witnessing or being subject to such trauma forced them to often make decisions at a very young age. And for many, this often meant leaving their family home for Peru's capital. For others, economic hardship was the impetus to leave their place of origin, although several questioned if truly their lives in Pamplona Alta are better than if they would have stayed in their hometowns in Peru's highlands.

But at the end of every interview there was always a message of hope and promise for the future. And for all these women, these mothers, it was for their children. They understand their role as mothers, and many as single mothers, to ensure their children's health and psychological wellbeing. They make sure their children have access to education which leads to quality employment. They search out opportunities for themselves to create entrepreneurial ventures and generate additional income. And they are true agents of change as they nurture the aspirations of their children for upward mobility and breaking chains that keep their families in poverty.



VIVIANA

40 years old
Santa Rosa

“You have to be strong. If you’re not, you’ll become depressed.”

Depression is a reality for so many people who live in underprivileged situations. For the women of Pamplona Alta, navigating the everyday challenges of life can often bring a sense of hopelessness. And it was apparent from my interview that Viviana’s inner strength from a very young age pushed her forward to seek better opportunities for herself and eventually for her family.

“My mother couldn’t read or write,” she told me while chopping onions for a meal she was preparing in the community kitchen. “We don’t know her true age, but I think she’s around 80.” Like so many children born in the poorly served mountainous region of Peru, Viviana’s mother’s birth was never registered officially. And like so many women of the region, her mother had fallen into the vicious cycle of early motherhood and domestic abuse. “But she raised us well,” she continued resolutely.

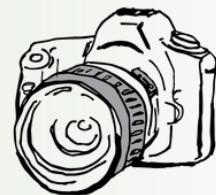
Viviana is one of ten children. “We left the Sierra because we needed to work.” Her elder siblings arrived in Lima first, and Viviana followed in 2000 when she started work as a domestic employee.

I wanted to be a journalist,” she shared. “I would listen to radio programmes as a young girl. I remember I would always listen to the one at 3 p.m.” It was a quiz show, and she recounted happily how she always wanted to participate and win.

Viviana was always at the top of her class at school, and she proudly told me of her competitive spirit while participating in singing or dance competitions or in team sports in her village. “At one time, I dreamed of being a singer.” But dreams of recording studios or live stage performances are seemingly inaccessible for girls from the Sierra of Peru.

It was in her village where she met her now husband. “We fell in love when we were fifteen years old. When I moved to Lima, he followed me.”

Viviana lives in Pamplona Alta with her husband and two children. And although her demeanour is quiet and her words are few but well chosen, her eyes show an unyielding determination when I ask her about her dreams for her children. “I want my children to study and to have a career,” she says.



MERYS



31 years old
Oxapampa

“We are united thanks to her.”

Merys spoke lovingly about her mother and how she and her five siblings were able to stay together despite their challenges. “My father died when I was young, and my mother did everything in her means to give us a good life,” she tells me. “Other single parents might have entrusted us to an aunt or a cousin, but my mother kept us together and raised us all, even to this day.”

Merys is originally from Oxapampa, a town in central Peru, and moved to Lima when she was five years old. Her dream was to become a kindergarten teacher, but she abandoned the idea of continuing her studies and looked for work and help her family economically. “I have always worked and supported myself, but I never really like studying. I saw my brothers in need of help, so I decided to help them.” And as Merys’ mother had instilled a strong sentiment of family loyalty, she found work and helped her family with her small earnings.

Now she lives in Pamplona with her husband, their three-year-old daughter, four-month old baby, and her father-in-law. Before her baby was born, she decided to stay at home to take care of her daughter, while her partner works as a day labourer for a construction company. In her spare time, she embroiders details on sweaters, a small sun or flower detail, which she earns 3 soles (about \$0.80 USD).

Merys' greatest desire is for her family to remain united and healthy. It is with fervent determination that she tells me she'll continue to work hard for this.



ROSSY

31 years old
Ambo



“If she had never left us, maybe today I wouldn’t have a mother.”

Rossy has lived in Pamplona for the last fifteen years, but as a young child, her parents brought her and her siblings to Lima from Ambo, a town in central Peru. “My parents had jobs as custodians at a university,” she tells me. “We lived at the university. During the day we would be out and about, and when the students left, we returned, and my parents would work cleaning it.

“From that moment, my parents taught us how to earn a living,” she continued. She told me how she used to collect soda cans and bottles and exchange them for breakfast from a woman at a food stall outside the university.

Rossy has one biological sister and three half-brothers from her dad. After living at the university some time, her mother took her and her sister to live with her father’s sister in another district on the outskirts of Lima. One day when she and her sister returned from school a neighbor gave them the news: their mother had left them. “I didn’t understand why she left. We cried and cried. I thought she was angry with us... But when you grow up and become a mother yourself, and you live your life, you understand.” Rossy’s mother had suffered years of physical abuse at her father’s hand. She had had enough.

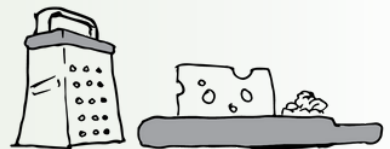
Rossy and her sister didn’t receive much assistance from their aunt nor their father and were often left to fend for themselves. “When my maternal grandmother and aunt found out they came to get us and took us back to Ambo.”

She returned to schooling for some time in Ambo, but at 15 returned once again to Lima where she worked selling CDs. "I liked earning money for myself. I didn't want to study anymore." Several years later she met her partner, a man who was twice her age and had her first daughter. And like her mother before her, she found herself in a physically abusive relationship.

"I went to the police and wanted to file a report of abuse. But the officer there told me to think twice. As we had been together for over two years, my partner would have rights to half of our home." So Rossy returned without filing a report. And shortly after she left, as her mother had done. Her partner told her that if she didn't leave him the house, he would take their daughter back to Ambo. "At least this way I would know where she was," she told me.

Rossy met her current husband almost six months later. They have two daughters together who are 7 and 5, however Rossy has lost contact with her eldest daughter. "Maybe one day she'll understand," she says.

"From the women of my life I learned that we have to value ourselves as individuals. From all my mom's family, from my grandmother, I learned the value of work."



ALEXIS



29 years old
Huancayo

During my interviews, I spoke to the women of Pamplona Alta as they went about their tasks of preparing food for the community kitchen. However, with unabashed curiosity and naturalness, Alexis asked to be interviewed as well as he waited in the community kitchen for his meal. Struck by his spontaneity, I asked him the same questions as the other women.

“I was born in Huancayo,” he told me. Eight years ago, he moved to Lima with his father and his brothers. “We left Huancayo because my mother passed away,” he told me. In search of better opportunities for his four sons, Alexis’s father chose to leave behind the highlands of Peru and they arrived in Villa Salvador, an underserved community on the outskirts of Lima.

Alexis now lives in Pamplona Alta with his wife and two young daughters as well as his younger brother. His mother-in-law owned some land in Pamplona Alta, which is why he and his wife chose to raise their family here. He works in a bottling plant, loading and unloading crates and sorting bottles.

His eyes shine when he speaks to me about his mother. “She taught me how to cook when I was eight years old. We would all work together to prepare meals,” he says. “She taught us about equality between men and women.”

Alexis told me he wanted to be a soccer player when he was young, but he doesn’t play much anymore. “I sometimes play with my cousins or uncles, but I don’t have a lot of friends here in Pamplona.” Between his work and his family, he doesn’t have much free time for growing his social circle and playing sports.



ERIKA



46 years old
Lima

“He might not be an astronaut or mathematician, but he can play any melody by ear. He’ll go places in life.”

Like so many of the women in Pamplona Alta, Erika’s early childhood was scarred by abuse. She witnessed her mother in an abusive situation and was a victim herself of sexual violence at a very young age. “You don’t want to live my story,” she told me. But the moment she started to speak about her son, the melancholy in her voice lifted and hope resounded.

The second of three children, Erika was born in Lima, however, her parents had emigrated to Pamplona Alta from Puno on Lake Titicaca in 1974. At the time, internal violence in Peru forced many from the provinces to seek opportunities in the capital city. “My dad was a single father,” she went on to explain. After having an affair when Erika was 10 years old, her mother left the family to fend for themselves.

There were many moments when internal tensions between family members caused all communication to stop. “But after time, I forgive and forget,” she told me. Today, she lives with her mother and her half-sister, along with her partner and 10-year-old son in her sister’s home. Her eldest daughter who is 22, left to live with her boyfriend. “There’s no running water here, so she didn’t want to stay,” Erika explained.

“I’ve worked for so many years, and I have nothing,” she said. Although she studied nursing at a technical college, she stopped her studies when she got pregnant with her daughter. Now she works as a textile machine operator. “I sometimes think of leaving the country and looking for a job as a seamstress. I know they earn good money outside of Peru. In Portugal, schools are free. Schoolbooks are free. The kids learn English, and they can study a technical program. And a diploma from there is worth more here (in Peru).”

Erika’s drive to improve the outcome for herself and her son forces her to move ahead. Gender inequality poses a huge barrier, and when I asked Erika about a female role model in her life, she told me sadly, “the only female figure in my life (my mother) disappointed me.

“Women have little value to society,” she said. “But I’d like to tell all women that they are worth so much more.”



OLIVIA



40 years old
Piura

“My mother doesn’t like it here. Her home is full of plants and animals.”

Lima is the second largest desert city, after Cairo. For Olivia, who is originally from Piura, a city in northern Peru near the border with Ecuador, the dry, overcast landscape is a sharp contrast from her youth in Piura, which has a tropical climate.

She arrived in Lima 13 years ago due to a health condition faced by her husband. “Everyone was very scared, so he came to Lima to have better access to health professionals.” Years of working as a manual labourer had affected his lungs. The dust from his work in construction sites had caused a severe lung infection, but thankfully it healed.

“He found work in Lima and stayed,” she told me. After a year being separated, Olivia arrived in Lima with her eldest child, a boy, and settled in Pamplona. Several years later her daughter was born in Lima. She doesn’t go very often to Piura, or to the “north” as she calls it, but still has family there. She’s the eldest of four children, but still maintains contact with all her family members.

When I asked her about her mother, she told me, “She was the one who worked the most. My dad worked, but it was my mom who did everything. She cooked, cleaned, and made sure we had enough to eat.”

Olivia had dreams to study systems engineering in Piura but enrolled in a technical pharmaceutical programme. When she was about to finish her studies, her parents separated. Her father brought her youngest sister to Lima, and they stayed in the city. Shortly after her mother put her sister in a private school in Lima, and Olivia was told that there weren't enough funds to pay for her studies. She was only three months away from completing her course but left her studies to allow her sister to complete her high school education.

Her son is now 18 years old and wants to study engineering at university. Olivia tells me how expensive the tuition is, but she sees in her son the same drive she had to study when she was his age.



YOVANA



43 years old
Ayacucho

"I was very ashamed to be at home. My parents drank a lot."

Poverty is the result of a complex mix of many different interrelated factors. And for many, alcohol is an element that often fuels this vicious cycle. For Yovana, originally from Ayacucho, a city in south-central Peru, alcoholism was part of her daily reality as she witnessed both of her parents succumb to alcohol.

"I asked my older sister to bring me to Lima," she tells me. She was 17 years old at the time and was ready to embark on her own and leave the daily reality addiction. She now is a single mother of five children, two of whom are adults and live on their own. She's in contact with her children's father, mostly regarding the schooling of her younger children or special events.

Yovana lives in Pamplona Alta along with her father. Her mother died 18 years ago. Even though her relationship with her mother was tense when she left home, she retains fond memories of her when she was very young, before alcohol was a reality. “She taught us good values that I retain to this day,” she says.

Yovana works as a domestic employee cleaning homes in Surco, a middle-class area close to Pamplona Alta. She had dreams of studying nursing but was never able to attend studies as she had to find work upon arriving in Lima as a teen. Becoming a nurse remains one of her dreams, but the reality of raising children on her own in a vulnerable context has made it next to impossible to achieve.



WENDY



44 years old
Cusco

“I want to defend women, to be their advocate, and to help them when faced with the things I faced.”

“I came to Lima when I was 15 years old with great expectations,” says Wendy, who is originally from Cusco. Like many of her neighbours in Pamplona Alta, she chose to leave to seek better opportunities for education and work. “But I was faced with a cruel reality. My life in Lima was even more difficult than the one I had left behind.”

When Wendy first arrived in Lima, her aunt received her, but the circumstances were dire. She had no room and was told to find some space in a hallway to sleep. She attended secondary school and then started a programme at a post-secondary college. But her relationship with her aunt was complicated, and one day after her aunt had a heated discussion with Wendy’s parents in Cusco, Wendy ran out of the house in tears.

“I sat in the park crying, and a man came up to me. He asked me if I was OK.” Local gossip reached her aunt saying I had a boyfriend, and Wendy’s aunt threw her out of the house. “I had nothing and nowhere to go.”

Wendy always liked reading the newspaper and had seen an article about the land invasion in Pamplona. “I was twenty years old when I arrived here, and I had nothing,” she told me. A young man told Wendy to go to the area in Pamplona higher up on the mountain side, which had fewer people and would be safer for a single woman. “He sold me his woven mat and cardboard boxes for 50 soles. That is where I slept for a long time. It was difficult.”

Wendy fell ill shortly afterward with acute gastritis. “I was very stressed with my situation, and the resentment I carried within.” She tells me that when she left Cusco her mother never told her to stay in touch and visit often. She was simply told to never come back. Coupled with the unhealthy relationship with her aunt, Wendy’s body and mind could no longer cope. But the original settlers in Pamplona Alta provided Wendy with the support she needed. She slowly gained back her strength.

“Some people in Pamplona Alta wanted to kick me out. I didn’t have a husband. I didn’t have children. But I couldn’t bear the thought of returning to live with my aunt.”

Wendy continues to live in Pamplona Alta with her father and two sons. Her parents separated and her mother is in Cusco with a different partner. When I ask her what she would wish for if given one wish, her answer is clear: a career in law. “Not because I like the law,” she tells me. “I want to defend women, to be their advocate, and to help them when faced with the things I faced. I never felt that I had any rights as a woman in the judicial system.”



CARMEN



40 years old
Cusco

"I don't gain anything in feeling resentful towards my parents. My mother made mistakes and my father made mistakes. But I'm grateful to them for brining me into this world."

And so began Carmen, an energetically driven 40-year-old woman originally from Cusco. She arrived in Lima more than 20 years ago in the back of a construction truck along with some cousins, her older brother, and other labourers. "I came to look for my 15-year-old sister," she tells me.

Carmen's early childhood like so many others in impoverished communities in the Andes was punctuated by alcoholism. "My mother drank," she told me. "I wanted her to change, but it didn't happen." Her farther had abandoned his wife and six children, so Carmen and her siblings we often forced to fend for themselves.

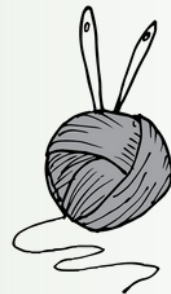
"My grandmother was the one who took care of us, who dressed us, who fed us," she tells me with teary eyes. Carmen attributes her strong work ethic and determination to her grandmother's conviction on how to build a good life. "She taught me how to have respect for myself."

San Juan de Miraflores on the outskirts of Lima was a destination for many poor migrants from the interior of the country 20 years ago. And for Carmen it was a place where she could build a future. So with determination, she was able to secure a small loan and purchase a piece of land and build her home.

Carmen now lives in the community of San Juan de Vista Alegre in San Juan de Miraflores with her husband, who is often away as he works in the mines in the interior of the country, and their two boys. "I want them to be able to study, to become professionals."

She went on to tell me how she used to be a top student and loved maths. She had even earned a scholarship and wanted to study accounting, but never attended post-secondary education because she could never afford the registration fees. But that didn't stop her from searching out affordable opportunities. She took courses in computer science and English when she was younger and recently has become a budding entrepreneur.

Carmen is part of a collective of women who sew and embroider clothing and accessories called Teje Mamá. She has a keen eye for quality yarns and is a master with a crochet hook. She offers sewing classes and was able to obtain a sewing machine. "I would like to have my own business and sell my own knitted clothing and crafts."



JULIA



40 years old
Arequipa

“We might not have everything we need, but my family is united.”

Originally from Arequipa, a colonial city in central Peru, Julia lives with her partner of twenty years and their two adolescent children in Pamplona Alta. “We have a simple life. Sometimes problems arise, but that’s what family is for.”

Julia arrived in Lima when she was 17. “My uncle convinced me to come here,” she told me. The third of seven children, she felt the need to go out on her own as her parents couldn’t afford to maintain the family.

Like many unskilled workers from outside the capital, Julia found work as a domestic employee. She lived with a family and cooked, cleaned, and looked after their daughter. It was there that she met her now partner when she was 23 years old. “The family was remodelling the house, and he helped with everything: windows, painting, electricity.”

Shortly thereafter Julia found out she was pregnant, and she and her partner decided to leave their work and live together. He had a plot of land in Pamplona Alta; the same plot where Julia lives today with her family.

Julia had always sent whatever money she could to help her parents, but when she stopped due to her pregnancy, an aunt reached out to her. “One of my sisters got pregnant at 15,” she says, “and it affected my parents a lot.” Julia was afraid to tell her parents about her personal situation, but her aunt convinced her to visit her parents and tell them about her situation.

After reuniting with her parents and siblings, Julia’s parents wanted to visit her home in Lima. “I want to meet your partner,” my mother told me. “I was embarrassed to show them where I lived. There wasn’t any electricity. It was dark and all we had were flashlights.” But when they arrived her mother told Julia’s partner how happy her daughter was, “and from that moment, they accepted him,” Julia tells me.

Julia’s entrepreneurial spirit shows when she talks about her dream to open a small food stall selling local Peruvian dishes. “I’d like to have a proper patio with tables and chairs.”



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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Tupananchiskama



