



"In the face of the pandemic, one is amazed that, in spite of the material deprivation, the precarious situations, [the women] are still committed to acting in community, to caring for one another."

Bárbara Tinero, UN Expert Volunteer

"Restoring the presence of hope is the great motivation for our work, to continue in spite of the adversity."

Solana Simao - UN Expert Volunteer



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The pursuit of two UN Expert Volunteers to restore dignity and hope to vulnerable border communities in Venezuela

Bárbara Tineo Toro and Solana Simao are dedicated to protecting sexual and reproductive health and rights while simultaneously engaging and empowering others to become agents of change in their own communities. The two UN Expert Volunteers epitomize the spirit of volunteerism, demonstrating its power to share and sustain hope and its immense significance in tackling the most pressing issues on global, national and local levels. They serve with the UN Population Fund (UNFPA).

The [shadow pandemic of violence against women and girls](#) is one of these issues. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that about one in three women worldwide have suffered physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lives. The scourge of gender-based violence (GBV), one of the most ubiquitous human rights violations in the world, is exacerbated

during the COVID-19 crisis as traditional prevention and attention mechanisms are inhibited.

Bárbara and Solana serve as Gender-Based Violence Coordinators in the Venezuelan border states of Apure and Bolívar, respectively. Together with their teams, they are committed to protecting the health of adolescents and women in situations of vulnerability and ensuring that the fundamental right to a life free of any form of discrimination or violence is not undermined during the pandemic.

“ Restoring hope is the great motivation for our work to continue despite the adversity. --Solana Simao, UN Expert Volunteer Gender-Based Violence Coordinator with UNFPA

One way in which the volunteers are contributing to this restoration of hope is through the delivery of dignity kits.^[1] As of the end of August, Bárbara and Solana have supported and coordinated the delivery of 2,600 of these in [Apure](#) and [Bolívar](#). The kits have gone to adolescents and women who have returned to Venezuela from other countries and who are completing a quarantine in temporary shelters known as PASI (Puntos de Asistencia y Control Integral). They have also been distributed to survivors of gender-based violence in prioritized communities, women deprived of their liberty at the Police Coordination Centre in Vizcaíno, indigenous women, women who work in the mining sector, and women in highly vulnerable communities.

The protection and guarantee of sexual and reproductive rights, however, is not accomplished by the one-time delivery of a dignity kit. Through workshops and discussions, the UN Volunteers sensitize the recipients on gender-based violence and how to identify abuse and get help. This information is critical to preventing or breaking the cycle of violence, and can instill hope in the women.

"The women value the importance of this information in saving lives and the timely recognition that they are living in a relationship where violence is present," Solana explains.

The quick adaptation of UNFPA Venezuela in the face of the pandemic also

engenders hope. One example of this is the transition to a remote format of their capacity-building programme for public institutions committed to combating gender-based violence. Adjusting strategy and goals is unavoidable, but compromising the greater imperative of ensuring that no one is left behind is not. For this, ingenuity and resilience are called for: "It is not only an effort to do more things, but also an effort to think about how to do things differently," Bárbara says.

Hope manifests itself through a common resolve to provide care and support to the most vulnerable. Both UN Volunteers underscore how institutional advocacy, as well as highly-coordinated responses, are crucial in ensuring expedited interventions and in overcoming unexpected challenges, such as acquiring inputs necessary for executing projects or entering certain communities.

In Apure, UNFPA is collaborating with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as well as non-governmental and international organizations within an inter-agency working group. They convene weekly to review official figures (number of returnees, number of infected people), prioritize actions, and designate a member – based on their competencies – to deliver assistance.

Strategic alliances with the Commission for Human Rights and Citizenship and public institutions such as the Public Defender's Office similarly facilitated UNFPA's access to the Police Coordination Centre in Vizcaíno.

Hope is also embodied by volunteers. In Apure, Bárbara and her team harness the power of volunteerism: they engage volunteers from the Venezuelan Red Cross, Caritas, and the local government in the implementation of gender-based violence prevention and mitigation activities.

In Bolívar, UNFPA has partnerships with non-governmental organizations such as ALINCA and ADRA, who work with volunteers. UNFPA trains these 200+ volunteers, empowering them to organize and conduct sensitization workshops in their own communities.

Volunteers are further contributing to the reinvention of the programme's gender-based violence awareness-raising activities during the pandemic. With regular visits to schools no longer possible, Solana and her team had to change their ways of reaching young people. Together with young Rotaract^[2] volunteers and universities such as Andrés Bello Catholic University and Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho University, they utilize ForoChats^[3] to continue these sensitization efforts.

These volunteers – of all ages, genders, professions and backgrounds – are united by their underlying desire to drive positive change, to help others help themselves.

Yet inspiration in action is not limited to formal volunteerism^[4]. Bárbara recounts an anecdote of a survivor of gender-based violence who had been volunteering in a kitchen in a PASI, distributing food to returning migrants. This woman, unfortunately, contracted Coronavirus and had to go to a temporary shelter. From there, she contacted UNFPA about a pregnant woman at the shelter who was requesting obstetric care, and about children who were at risk of contracting dengue fever, as the rainy season had begun and mosquitos were abundant.

Hope can inevitably be derived from such displays of compassion and unwavering selflessness:

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Bárbara Tineo Toro, UN Expert Volunteer Gender-Based Violence Coordinator with UNFPA

Information can save lives. Solidarity can save lives. And this undoubtedly imbues hope.

This article was prepared with the kind support of [Online Volunteer](#) Kaylin Lang.

^[1] Dignity kits contain hygiene and sanitary items, as well as other items tailored towards the needs of women and girls of reproductive age.

^[2] [Rotary](#) is a global service organization; its 35,000+ clubs work together to: promote peace, fight disease, support education, save mothers and children, grow local economies, and provide clean water, sanitation, and

hygiene.

[3] A ForoChat – which can take place via WhatsApp – is a communication and knowledge transmission platform that allows users to interact and engage via thematic groups, opinion forums, and more.

[4] Formal volunteering: activities within the context of a group, club or organization. Informal volunteering: activities performed outside of an organizational context.



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