UN Volunteer Marie-Pierre Smets (left), whose four-year assignment was fully funded by the Government of Belgium, during one of the capacity-building sessions she carried out in the Saraguro community about the collective rights of indigenous people. (UNV, 2013)

Promoting gender equality through intercultural communication

**Quito, Ecuador:** In spite of progress made at the political and judicial level, violence against women continues to persist in many parts of the world. We still have a long road ahead of us in our plight to end gender violence, and Ecuador is no exception. In this country, domestic violence is common, and many women endure emotional, psychological, and/or physical abuse. For all of these reasons, during my assignment, I wanted to help raise public awareness about gender relations and violence against women.

I organized various film discussions around the topic, with a youth group in a neighbourhood of Quito, and with various women’s organizations. Within these spaces, my objective was to stimulate thought, share participants’ reactions, and shed light on the issue at hand.
The main conclusion drawn from these activities is that change exists within each and every one of us. Each person has the ability to play a role in the eradication of gender violence, whether it is by supporting victims, providing counselling, demonstrating self-restraint, promoting dialogue and non-violent communication, or disseminating information about women's rights. We have to be conscious of the fact that if men and women come together as a united front, and learn to navigate situations with respect, we can overcome this great challenge.

Another important aspect of my assignment with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) has been support for the Regional Indigenous People's Programme. I worked each day with and for the individual and collective rights of indigenous women, considering that they face triple discrimination on grounds of gender, ethnicity and poverty.

For two years, I had the opportunity to be a part of five projects financed by the Catalan Agency for Development Cooperation with the common objective of empowering indigenous women in the Amazon, who are in general the most neglected in society. I could feel the strength and determination of these women to make their voices heard, to participate in public and community life, and to reclaim their rights.

Throughout this experience, I learned that Amazonian indigenous women have a great deal to teach the world, particularly regarding the value of a life in harmony with nature. Their struggle has a universal dimension to it—the unconditional care of the Earth as the source of life and spirituality.

I feel deeply enriched by this professional and human journey that has made me feel part of a large and diverse community in Ecuador. I finish my assignment with a heart full of lessons and memories, knowing that neither the commitment nor the desire to continue as a volunteer and contribute to the construction of a just world ends here—a just world that both fulfils and respects the human rights of each and every person.
Sustainable Development Goal: **SDG 5: Gender equality**