

Foreword

Thank you very much for taking your time to read my portfolio. I will share some deeply personal stories of young women I met in Bolivia, with names changed for privacy. These experiences reflect difficult realities, including sexual violence, but they don't reflect all of Bolivian society, of course.

During my time there, I co-developed a scholarship project. In the portfolio, the process and goal will be explained. However, we are only a small group of people managing the project in our spare time, which is why a formal evaluation hasn't been done yet. But I am planning to do so in the future. I am extremely grateful for the support of the Johana foundation, which not only finances the girl's shelter but helps significantly with the scholarship project (<https://stiftungjohana.de/startseite.html>). In addition, the BKH (Bolivian child aid organisation) supports us with their expertise too. Lastly, in the portfolio I will cite from a letter written by one of the scholars. The full letter can be found at the end of the portfolio.

Portfolio:

“FOR STUDENTS IN VULNERABLE CIRCUMSTANCES, IT [ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION] IS A PASSPORT TO ECONOMIC SECURITY AND A STABLE FUTURE.” (UNESCO, 2023)

2339 words

Introduction

I spent six months in 2023 working in a shelter for girls in Bolivia. The girls have experienced sexual violence mostly by family members. Some cases resulted in pregnancies. During my stay, 11 girls aged 10 to 17, three being mothers, lived there. They are cared for by an amazing team of Bolivian women: a lawyer, psychologist, social worker and educator.

While preparing my application to study in Sweden, my opportunities as a European woman stood in sharp contrast to the dreams and realities of the girls in Bolivia: dreams of attending university, vocational training and independence. However, without any financial means and family support their dreams seemed unattainable.

In this portfolio, I reflect on how this motivated me to initiate a scholarship program as tertiary education is a “passport to economic security and a stable future” (UNESCO, 2023). I will reflect on the intercultural, ethical and personal dimensions of this journey and analyse how the experience changed my understanding of global responsibility.

Motivation

My application to study in Sweden started in October 2023. Around that time, Gloria, a girl in the shelter asked me, about studying at a university as a woman in Europe. We realised our life chances differed greatly. Many of the other girls asked similar questions. Often, they made me feel uncomfortable, as our chances contrasted heavily. I had a passport, more opportunities and could fall back on studying in Germany if the application failed. On the other hand, there were the girls for whom it would be almost unlikely to attend university for a variety of reasons, let alone financially.

Since I was close to Gloria, I asked her if she had a dream for her own future. She told me that she wanted to become a lawyer, inspired by the shelter’s lawyer, fighting for women’s rights and to support her own mother and sister. Later, she told me about her own experiences with sexual violence. A male relative had regularly raped her. But the worst thing for her, she said, was when she saw her mother being raped by the same perpetrator. That morning, however, she told me nothing about it. Instead, Gloria mentioned that she wanted to become a lawyer because a few months earlier, a woman showed up at her school. She tried to convince Gloria to withdraw the charges against her relative. Gloria refused and was then attacked by the woman. In this moment, I learnt where the scar on Gloria's arm came from. The conversation was tough, the first among many hard stories that followed. But it also encouraged me to ask the others about their dreams. I learnt they were dreaming of becoming a teacher, physiotherapist, nurse and so much more.

This was the point at which I decided to develop a scholarship program for the girls. Over the coming months the planning period began. One could say I was a bit blue-eyed, not fully compensating the responsibility that would come with this idea. However, I also knew that poverty and violence are some of the most significant factors influencing if a young woman can continue and complete her studies (World Bank, 2022). The girls in the shelter were affected by both. Together with the team I co-developed the project. After a while we started to cooperate with another Bolivian German organisation, for additional study support.

The close collaboration and friendship with the team in Bolivia is of immense importance to me. They know the local needs, culture and context better than I ever could. Especially because

even with the best intentions, humanitarian aid and development work is closely linked to postcolonial power relations (Dunne, Kurki and Smith, 2021, p.221). I am deeply aware of my own position and privileges as a European person setting up an educational project. Therefore, I support in the background. The team and girls make the choices relevant to their lives and dreams.

Another motivation is the 5th SDG of gender equality. Without education access “gender segregation” increases and stereotypes intensify (Rana, 2022). This even influences the youngest members of societies as gender roles are formed early in life (ibid). Gloria’s story shows that many women in the girls’ families have suffered from similar crimes. Therefore, I hoped that the program could also benefit the little girls in the shelter. While this idea might have partially failed, which I will be analysing later, I am hopeful that if the girls are choosing to become mothers, their children will experience more equality and safety.

This strikes me particularly because Sweden is known for gender equality. 39% of Swedish women hold a bachelor’s degree, compared to 18.3% of women in Bolivia (World Bank Gender Data Portal, 2025). However, university attendance in Latin America has increased significantly (UNESCO, 2024a, p.3). Over the past decades, higher education’s importance for a country’s economic and societal benefit has become increasingly recognised, which led to global campaigns for higher enrolment (UNESCO, 2024b). In the past 40 years, the number of women in higher education rose significantly. They now make up most of the tertiary students in many countries. Women’s participation changes societies, for instance, family structures and fertility rates shift, labour market access improves, and salaries increase, guaranteeing more independence (Parvazian, Gill and Chiera, 2017, p. 1-3). Societies and individuals benefit from women in higher education (World Bank, 2022).

But maybe the most significant point, especially for these Bolivian girls, is that access to higher education is the safest way for women to escape poverty (World Bank, 2022).

Studying abroad

The number of people studying abroad has also significantly increased from 2.1 percent to 2.6 percent between 2000 and 2021 (UNESCO, 2024a). Over nine million students are studying outside their home country (UNESCO, 2023). I can thankfully say that I am one of them.

However, my prerequisites as a young European are among the best in the world to choose this path. Most students studying abroad come from and travel to Western Europe and North America: 11.6/ 46.0% (UNESCO, 2024a).

Only about 3-4% of students in Latin America study abroad (ibid). From what I noticed in Bolivia, wealthier families may send their students to other Latin countries. The ability to study abroad is more connected to wealth than in Europe, making higher education access very unequal. While I value international mobility and its benefits like independence, confidence and intercultural friendships deeply, it often feels unfair compared to the girls. Since we met, I have moved countries several times and even had a previous experience of living abroad as a high school student. These experiences sparked their curiosity about possibilities to study abroad.

The bigger German Bolivian organisation we cooperate with, offers a year of work experience in Germany. I am determined to support the girls if it remains their dream. Still, when I considered how to help, we chose the scholarship program as initial project because more girls can benefit from the donations and tertiary education is essential for an independent life.

Successes

In the first 19 months we celebrated multiple successes. The project began with a presentation to about 70+ people in Germany, resulting in more donations than I hoped for (10-15 euro/month). It was an honour to tell them about the girls' dreams and hopes. A major milestone happened when I got to tell the girls about the project in early spring last year via a video call. While I was still in Bolivia, I hadn't dared to tell them about it to not raise their hopes, as I was far from certain this idea of mine would succeed. Their emotions during the call were a major reward. Over the coming months I regularly received messages from the girls who would graduate high school later that year. They were saying that an enormous burden was taken off their shoulders and expressed their excitement to pick career path of their interest. During this time, I was overjoyed myself when I received my positive application results from Sweden. I mention this here, because my experience and the close connection I was able to build with the girls motivated me to start my bachelor's degree in international relations.

The first two girls began their studies/vocational training in February 2025. In April, we organised a charity concert with a pianist. In between these steps and events lies something more profound: personal development. I want to share Flavia's story. She was the first to finish high school and begin university studies. During my stay in Bolivia, I perceived her as an intelligent and ambitious young woman full of dreams. Months after her studies had started the team drew my attention to her personal development: she has developed into a kind, caring and inspiring person, motivating the other girls. I am sharing this story because it taught me that there is so much more to studying or vocational training than academic results.

Setbacks

Looking back at the last 1.5 years of the scholarship project, there is much joy and pride, but also setbacks and learnings.

First, Bolivia's economic and political situation has worsened considerably since my stay. Rapid inflation, fuel shortages, lack of US dollars in the country and riots impact daily life. We had to recalculate support to cover rising food costs, especially after the state stopped its financial aid for several months. Now all the girls in the shelter receive some of the donations as financial help for food.

Personal setbacks occurred, too. One case in particular illustrates this. Liliana was raped by her half-brother at the age of 13, resulting in a pregnancy. For a while, her family managed to cover up the abuse. A few months after the birth of her daughter, Nelia, the two were brought to the girl's shelter. At the beginning her family tried to convince her to withdraw her statement. But Liliana refused. With the help of the shelter's lawyer the brother was rightfully convicted and is imprisoned for several decades to come. For Liliana however the painful journey continued. With the shelter's psychologist, she talked often about her story. After a while her family started to visit again, taking part in conversations with their daughter and the shelter's professional team. I remember these meetings as extremely emotional and tough on everyone. Both Liliana and her mum often had tears running down their faces after the sessions. Usually, Nelia and I would play in the room next door, while the rest of the family and team gathered.

A year after I left, the team informed me that Liliana had decided to move back home with her daughter. It became clear that the girls' dreams could change fundamentally and must be respected. I learnt that while higher education is the ultimate hope for some, it is not for others and all dreams and choices are valid.

Conclusion

While reading the text you might have noticed that I used the word "we" often. I might have had the idea; however, I wouldn't have been able to accomplish the project by myself. For instance, without the organisations' assistance it wouldn't have been possible to handle the administrative challenges that come with such a project.

The most important source of support for most students and for me personally with this project is the privilege of having sufficient and unconditional family support financially, academically and emotionally. I have had family support for my adventures abroad, my studying in Sweden journey and the setting up and planning of the scholarship program. I am also deeply aware that

my international and university journey is a huge privilege, which also not all people in Europe can rely on. Sadly, as indicated with the various examples above the girls in the shelter in Bolivia don't have this sort of support either. Especially in developing countries family support is even more relevant for one's personal academic success, as if this is not given there are only few if any alternative support mechanisms (Guo et al., 2025). Officially, the shelter accommodates girls up to the age of 18 and we were originally thinking that the girls would move out to study. But it was the team who suggested that the girls should stay at least for the first year continuously to benefit from the psychological and legal support system. This underlines that besides family support, role models and help within a community can make a huge difference too (Wanti et al., 2022, p.287-288). Secondly, the people who kindly support the project financially play a vital role. Flavia put her gratitude in a letter to them with the following words:

“I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart. For your support and for asking me how I am doing on my journey.... Thank you for believing in me, for supporting me on my educational journey”

All of us are motivating each other, from studying to standing up for women's rights. While we face many emotional challenges overall, this journey is one of great joy, especially because we get to see how we each fulfil our dreams individually and as a team. The project taught me the value of expressing dreams and hopes and that cooperation across cultures, time zones and backgrounds can turn them into reality. A new dream is emerging: to build a second house on the shelter's grounds for the girls in the scholarship program, to increase their independence while keeping the support system nearby and to free space for other girls in need of a safe home.

We have only started this long journey. In the coming years, we will celebrate many milestones together no matter our geographical distance. As stated by the world bank: “it is also about ensuring that girls learn and feel safe while in school; have the opportunity to complete all levels of education, acquiring the knowledge and skills to compete in the labour market; gain socio-emotional and life skills necessary to navigate and adapt to a changing world; make decisions about their own lives; and contribute to their communities and the world.” (World Bank, 2022).

Letters

Some parts are anonymized.

Flavia's letter (February 2025)

"Dear donors,

my name is Flavia,

I am 18 years old and have been at the ... centre for about three years.

In December 2024 I graduated from School in the afternoon classes.

At the moment I am attending University, where I am taking pre-university courses to start studying to become a nurse soon.

I like the pre-university courses I'm taking, human development, human biology, social sciences and natural sciences. They help me to better understand and get information about the subjects I need for my studies.

I chose this profession because I have always enjoyed helping people who are in need for help and I have a good sense of people's pain. I find it very satisfying when I can help the people affected.

I am starting this new phase of my life with energy and priority; it is a dream that I want to fulfil. I long to walk the corridors of hospitals and not only provide pain relief to patients, but also to become a professional and humane specialist who carries out their work with love and appreciation.

I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart. For your support and for asking me how I am doing on my journey. Every gesture you have made has made a significant difference in my life. Your kindness and interest are an inspiration, and I can only long to meet you in person one day to look you in the eye and thank you face to face for all you have done for me. Thank you for believing in me, for supporting me on my educational journey and for being a constant source of inspiration. I hope I can return some of that kindness and make you feel as special as you have made me feel.

With all my gratitude and love"

A letter from Dana, a young mother in the shelter:

“Dear donors,

my name is Dana and I am 18 years old. I also have a little daughter called Ella, who is three years old. I have been at the centre for about two years.

I went to high school until the end of 2024 and since 2025 I've been attending evening classes at another institution. I want to get my school-leaving certificate there. In the afternoons, I do my training as a beautician. My little daughter is in kindergarten at the same institution.

I opted for this technical training and career because I enjoy cutting and styling hair and because I am interested in make-up, body and facial care and other areas of beauty care.

Alongside my daughter, I am starting this new phase of my life with a lot of energy to fulfil my duties as a mother and the rules at the centre so that I can do everything I can to pass the semester and successfully complete my education one day.

I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for the kindness you have shown me. I hope to meet you in person soon to thank you for what you have done for me and my daughter.

Thank you for having faith in me and supporting me. Thank you for your kindness, inspiration, love and warmth that you have for us.

Thank you so much! I say goodbye with all my gratitude

Thank you for having faith in me and supporting me in the process. Thank you for the kindness, inspiration, love and warmth you have shown us.”

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