

## FINANCIAL TIMES

September 11, 2013 5:57 pm

# Women in Panama get a route out of crime and abuse

By Andres Schipani



One sweltering afternoon in Panama City in a rickety, pale blue room overlooking the Pacific, Yann Tiersen's "La Valse d'Amélie" plays softly. Six women, all of them black or mixed race, in white polo shirts and black trousers, are doing a mime to express their feelings – anger, rage, anguish.

One seems particularly into the acting exercise. Those sentiments are all too familiar to her – Luzkeira Pérez is a former gang leader.

Raised in a dysfunctional family, she was forced by her father and mother to deal drugs when she was only 10 years old, went to prison for the first time when she was 13 and has served two more sentences since, including one for attempted murder and arms dealing. She has been shot twice and stabbed several times.

Her former partner, the father of her 10-year-old daughter, was killed by a gunman in mid-July. A week later, she decided to take care of her 10-year-old nephew after his mother was stabbed 17 times and his father shot 16 times by a rival gang.

After "discovering God" in prison she realised the clock was ticking for her as well. After all, she lives in the violent El Chorrillo neighbourhood, once a recruiting ground for the Dignity Battalions, the paramilitary thugs of former dictator Manuel Noriega, and now home to many of Panama's most ruthless gangs. To support her family she is on the streets every night selling coffee and empanadas (stuffed bread).

But now, during the day, she is preparing to become fully integrated into the life of the city, thanks to Fundación Calicanto – a community-wide effort to help marginalised women seize opportunities in fast-growing Panama.

"I have dedicated my life to many bad things, but I want to change my life, reintegrate into society and achieve new goals," says Pérez. "I want to show it is possible – one can move on. In many places in Panama people discriminate against us; people believe we could never change.

"I found this place where they really helped women to discover themselves, to create goals, a future."

Fundación Calicanto's programme offers women such as Pérez basic life and work skills, including courses on self-esteem, personal health and grooming, English, family relations, conflict management and customer service.

The six-week hands-on educational programme, called Capta (which means to catch or attract in Spanish and stands for "training for work") was established in 2006 by Hildegard Vásquez, a US-trained architect. Her focus was originally just the revamping of Panama City's old town, the Casco Antiguo – a Unesco world heritage site – where Capta is based.

The old town is both a relic and deprived, where people from all social strata live and work in a range of Spanish, French, Caribbean and art deco buildings. Such a social mix is very rare in Latin America, which is marked by inequality. "This little bit of Panama could serve as an example of urban development because, in the end, an 'exclusive' city works fine for just a few," says Vásquez.

The area began to change during the country's general economic boom after the US handed over control of the Panama Canal in 1999. The country is expected to chalk up an impressive 9.5 per cent growth in gross domestic product this year.

Those new market forces are, though, having a drastic effect on where people can afford to live. "People are the human heritage of the neighbourhood and if they can't work or afford where they live, they have to leave," says KC Hardin, a US developer involved in long-term and socially responsible investment projects in the old town.

"A sea change is coming. And if the tide is rising very fast and people have no boats, someone has to provide the means for them to buy boats – that is what Calicanto does."

In most countries in Latin America, not least in Panama, public policies tend to encourage economic segregation, he says. "They tend to push the rich into enclaves within the city and the poor further out into what eventually become [favelas]."



Going places: Panama's expanding tourism sector is just one destination for graduates of the course

But as Panama grows as a tourist destination, Calicanto has created a niche to provide opportunities for local residents. The attraction of the old town for tourists heading for the Pacific and Caribbean beaches has seen boutique hotels and restaurants mushroom in recent years.

Calicanto provides those hotels with the "sustainable factor" of their business, says hotelier Matt Landau, as "these women are a natural fit, offering true hospitality". The organisation boasts a 74 per cent employment rate for its trainees, with some of the foundation's graduates even finding jobs elsewhere in Panama City, away from the Casco Antiguo – at the Trump Ocean Club or Copa Airlines, Panama's national carrier, for example.

"Calicanto is attacking a real problem in Latin America for women," says Stanley Motta, chairman of Copa Holdings, the parent company of Copa Airlines. "It offers them the self-esteem they need to be trained to have a good job."

Increasingly, word of mouth has brought in women from all over the city, including far-flung shanty towns. The success of most of Calicanto's near 600 graduates has prompted some members of the board to develop a similar pilot scheme for men, most of them gang criminals.

A truly mixed community would create a culturally lively and sustainable neighbourhood, and furnish everyday interactions between some of Panama's richest and poorest people – thus helping to avoid segregation and, some say, crime. If replicated across the many deeply divided urban sprawls of Latin America, the pay-off could be substantial.

"These life examples not only indicate a positive attitude towards life but are also contagious. They effectively reduce violence inside and outside people's homes," explains Rosa Castro, a social worker with the National Women's Institute of Panama, part of the ministry of social development. She believes the experience of these women is having a ripple effect. "An empowered woman contributes to the development of society," she says.

But people both from the public sector, like Castro, and the private sector, like Motta, agree that Fundación Calicanto offers lessons of wider relevance that could benefit urban populations across the globe. "The dreams and goals multiply easily: first they reflect on to these women's own families, then on to society and then even on to other societies," explains Castro.

Nevertheless, many of these women have not found it easy to make the decisive first step, having for years been victims of domestic violence and reluctant to leave their homes, not only because of possible acts of retaliation but also because they were financially dependent on their husbands or partners.

"We are poor, but I had never worked in my life before. I didn't know what showing up at a specific time was, or why it was necessary to say 'good morning'. I was just used to stay at home, taking care of my husband and doing what he said," says Julia Sánchez de Mena, who lives in the old town and is one of Calicanto's first graduates.

"At first he was jealous, even raging. I was afraid one day that he would hit me. He simply couldn't understand I was leaving the house for eight hours a day in order to become a better, more complete woman."

Following her example, her daughter recently enrolled at university to study hotel management – she is the first in her family ever to set foot in a higher education institution.

Julia, now a chambermaid at Canal House, one of the old town's top hotels, sings and chuckles as she tidies a bedroom – the very one actor Daniel Craig stayed in a few years ago during the filming of *Quantum of Solace*.

"Thanks to the manners and basic English I learned at Calicanto, I was able to serve him well," she says proudly. "I can now say I served breakfast to James Bond, and he was grateful to me. Tell me, how many people could say that?"