



FOOD PROCESSING IN PARCONA, PERU

PROMOTORS OF CHANGE

Parcona, a district ten minutes away from the centre of Ica, has never been the same since she arrived there. Leslie Felices, a 49 year-old engineer, let loose her ideas about giving women more opportunities and designed a new course of action for the women in Parcona. The first step was a pair of brochures on food technologies published by Practical Action. The rest was sheer willingness.

She was not even ten years old when Leslie Felices Lizarreta discovered that nothing much is required to begin helping others. In Pisco forty years ago, life was peaceful and the girls in her area used to meet at the Los Diamantes Children's Club to discuss their dolls' clothes. It was then that it crossed Leslie's mind that these meetings could serve for more useful purposes. With the few coins the girls gathered together at tea parties, they visited the poorest area in the province to hand out hugs, 'paneton' and hot chocolate a few days before Christmas.

Ten years ago in 1999, when she founded the Women's Association of Parcona in the Parcona district ten minutes from the centre of Ica, she recalled those times. In the meantime, a lot had occurred in her life: she had studied Chemical Engineering at the San Luis Gonzaga National University in Ica, had achieved excellent academic acknowledgements, married and had three children. As far as Leslie was concerned, however, that was not enough. She had to change the lifestyles of the women in Parcona and the founding of this organisation was the first stone.

According to Leslie, "the objective was not only to provide a source of income for participating families, but a new activity in their lives, a new passion." When the Flora Tristan Centre for Peruvian Women arrived in this district to conduct a brief jam-making course, the engineer looked beyond that. "The expectations were such that a one-day class was far too little", she recalled. That is when she decided to give classes on food technologies, based on the pamphlets produced by Practical Action.

"A colleague at the University gave me a copy of Practical Action's fruit wine-making brochure, which served as a guide. As soon as I found out the address, I went to Lima to obtain more material", she said. She approached the Practical Answers area of Practical Action, which has been providing information since 2002 on implemented projects that can be replicated in other communities. With a few handbooks on making jams, yoghurt and fruit nectars, the association's classes began.

"I always look up the brochures because the way the procedures are explained are infallible for our numerous classes", said Leslie. "How to reach out to the mothers regarding calculations and costs can be difficult, but how to achieve that is detailed in the handbooks", she added. In the end, the classes which began in only one sector expanded to the six areas in the district. "We self-financed everything initially so that they could learn and then invest", explained the engineer.

So far, more than one thousand women have been trained in these programmes. Although they began producing dairy products, chocolate-making soon became the star of the workshops. "Ica is a region known for its so-called 'chocotejas' and many women wanted to learn how to make them, so we wanted to promote this idea", said Leslie. She even had a half-hour programme on Chanel 15 in Ica, sponsored by the chocolate firm Negusa. "That came to an end when the earthquake occurred", she added.

This teacher of the Chemical Engineering faculty in her alma mater recalls that initially, the association only had 17 members. "Now we are 100 and an increasing number of women are attending our workshops", she stated.

Leslie went on to say that this year, chocolates and dairy products were not the only things the women in Parcona were involved in. "We also make handicrafts, costume jewellery, leather and macramé handbags, ceramics and even cosmetics", she said.

This teacher also transferred her knowledge to the academic field. Based on this project of the Women's Association of Parcona, of which she has been President twice and is now the secretary, she presented her Master's thesis and has now proposed a new item for the Chemical Engineering career

in the San Luis Gonzaga University. “We must have a final social outreach course that will enable the students in their final year to apply their knowledge”, she explained.

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stories of change