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## **'Unable to learn' - Transgender schools in Latin America offer a fresh chance**

***Only about a quarter of trans women finish secondary school, and one in five never finish primary school in Latin America, campaigners say.***

By Oscar Lopez

Thomson Reuters Foundation (06.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/374ZNFO> - As a transgender girl growing up in Buenos Aires, Viviana Gonzalez dreamt of being a writer, composing poems to console her mother who fled Gonzalez' abusive father.

But when Gonzalez tried to enroll in secondary school at age 12, she said she was rejected because her name and gender identity did not match her legal documents that listed her as male.

"The system achieved what it truly sought - to stop me from dreaming, aspiring and demanding my necessary education," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "Unable to learn, I stopped writing."

Gonzalez' story is common across Latin America, where transgender people are regularly confronted by conservative social norms, discrimination and abuse that often limits their access to formal education.

Only about a quarter of trans women finish secondary school, and one in five never finish primary school in Latin America, according to a 2017 report from regional advocacy group REDLACTRANS.

Trans women "flee their schools," said Yren Rotela, a trans activist in Paraguay.

"There's so much bullying, so much violence, so much stigma, so much discrimination ... that they end up quitting, escaping and leaving their studies behind."

In Bolivia, 70% of trans people never complete their education, REDLACTRANS found, while according to the United Nations, 45% of trans students in Argentina leave school because of bullying or being excluded.

But parents, advocates and trans people across the region are hoping to reverse this trend by setting up schools for transgender students, where they can study in a safe environment and gain the skills they need to get good, stable work.

In Buenos Aires, Francisco Quinones helped found the Mocha Celis school in 2011, and this year the student body numbered more than 200.

The school offers a three-year program to help transgender adults finish secondary education, improving their chances of getting a well-paid job, accessing health care and leading a longer, healthier life.

In Argentina, the life expectancy for a trans person stands between 35 and 41, according to the U.N., roughly half the life expectancy of 77 for the general population.

"Our objective is to reverse that life expectancy through education," Quinones said.

### ***'If she can do it, why can't I?'***

Countries in Latin America have made strides in recognizing the rights of transgender people in recent years, despite criticism from social conservatives and the influential Catholic church.

In Brazil, the Supreme Court made transphobia a crime last year, while in both Brazil and Argentina, trans people can change their legal name without having surgery.

In Uruguay, trans people can have medical procedures paid for by the state.

But with countries like Mexico and Brazil often ranking as the world's deadliest for trans people, legal strides have not always translated into social acceptance.

In Chile, where children as young as 14 can legally change their name and gender, Ximena Maturana had to fight for her daughter Angela, who came out as trans four years ago.

Angela's Catholic school accepted her daughter's transition, but according to Maturana, had no protocols for how to deal with a trans child.

Small things like going to the toilet became impossible for Angela, Maturana said, because other students kept watching her to see which bathroom she would use.

"They were super invisible acts of violence," Maturana said. "She started to feel that insecurity, that anxiety."

Realizing that other trans children faced similar struggles, Maturana joined with other parents in 2017 to found the region's first school for transgender children in Santiago.

The school began with five students and this year, there are 70 children, according to Maturana, taking classes online due to the coronavirus pandemic. The school has three trans teachers and offers discussions with trans adults in various careers.

"That empowers trans children a lot," Maturana said. "I see myself reflected in another person who is like me, and if she can do it why can't I?" 'THE CHILD POET' In Brazil, where 129 trans people have been killed this year, according to rights group ANTRA, access to education is even tougher.

In the southeastern city of Belo Horizonte, nine out of 10 trans women never finish high school, said Duda Salabert, a local teacher and trans activist.

"The transgender population is an extremely vulnerable situation," she said. "Brazil is a country, one of whose pillars is transphobia and hatred towards the trans population."

Nationwide, the same number of trans women - nine out of 10 - work in prostitution, she added.

"Prostitution for us is almost compulsory, almost obligatory," she said.

To provide trans people with better options, Salabert founded Transvest, a non-profit organization which offers free classes for trans students in Belo Horizonte to complete their university entrance exams.

"The greatest victory is creating a space where trans people can feel safe," she said. "The greatest achievement of the project is seeing a person rescued, feeling happier, empowered. That's what motivates us."

But access to education can only do so much to alleviate hardship without widespread changes in society, campaigners added.

"We still have a lot of problems on a social level," said Claudia Falcon, a student at Mocha Celis. "Many transgender colleagues aren't well received if they go looking for a job, even if they have their high school education."

But Gonzalez, who graduated from Mocha Celis at age 48, has found her ambition renewed: she is now a published poet and studying to become a literature teacher herself.

"After the first day of school, the child poet who used to live inside me, who I believed was dead, finally awoke," she said. "He had fallen asleep awaiting that welcome to finally finish high school."

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