

Empower for equity (Ep. 3)

Locutor Víctor Ramos [00:00:05]

Moving toward a sustainable and inclusive Puerto Rico. A special series from En Puerto Rico and GFR Media, sponsored by the Puerto Rico Community Foundation.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:00:20]

Gender equality and closing the gap on inequalities are closely related, particularly when in Puerto Rico more than half of women live below the poverty level. I am Luis Alberto Ferré Rangel. Welcome to the third episode of the series Moving toward a sustainable and inclusive Puerto Rico, sponsored by the Puerto Rico Community Foundation, in collaboration with GFR Media. In this episode we will address goals 5 and 10: Gender equality and Decreasing inequalities. To discuss the topic, I have as our guest Verónica Colón-Rosario, executive director of the Women's Foundation. Welcome, Veronica.

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:01:01]

Hi. Thanks for the invitation.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:01:04]

Part of the goal of this series, Verónica, is to make known what is being done from the grassroots movement with each of these objectives. I would like to know a little more about what the Women's Foundation does.

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:01:14]

Yes, the Women's Foundation in Puerto Rico was launched in 2020 — 2019 and 2020 — with an initiative for women in the diaspora. Initially they wanted to establish a temporary fund to address the situation of women in Puerto Rico following the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria and they realized with the mentoring of women's foundations in New York, the Women's Foundation in New York, that in Puerto Rico there was no fund that worked directly with the issue of gender equality. So, we're a women's fund, that's how it's known, a women's fund, our mission is to empower women, girls, and non-binary gender people in Puerto Rico. So, we're the first and only fund in Puerto Rico dedicated to gender equality.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:02:07]

And this could be seen as a social impact and gender-focused fund. From where are you receiving the funds?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:02:22]

We are one of the few community foundations in Puerto Rico and we receive money from individual donations, anyone in Puerto Rico can be part of the foundation with a small or large donation. But we also depend on funds, of course, to have a great impact we need a lot of money. So, we depend on funds outside of Puerto Rico and in Puerto Rico there are foundations that support us: the Community Foundation is one of them, Hispanic Federation, Banco Popular Foundation. There are three examples of foundations that support us in Puerto Rico, but most of our funds come from other foundations outside of Puerto Rico that focus on the issue of gender equality and that have a very strong component in gender equality.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:03:04]

And that's the issue we're precisely addressing today, the reduction of inequalities and gender equity. What are the main programmatic areas of the Foundation and the Women's Fund?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:03:16]

We have two areas on which we're primarily focusing on at this time given the emergency and need in these two areas. The first and broadest is gender justice and within gender justice we work on issues such as gender violence, immigration, and rights of the LGBTQ community. Everything that has to do with the justice of living fully as women, girls, and the non-binary community in Puerto Rico. The second focus is a recent one from a year ago and it's about food security in Puerto Rico but led by women. As you know, we import more than 80% of the food products we consume. These aren't necessarily the healthiest, so we have to start investing in agriculture issues and agriculture is a sector predominantly developed by men. We're changing that narrative a little and investing in women who are at the forefront of sustainable agriculture in Puerto Rico. This is all under the umbrella of economic justice, because our funds are directed to organizations that typically don't receive foundation funding, either because they are small or growing, just starting out, but do good work for gender equity. And we also provide flexible funds for operational expenses. What does this mean? That many of the funds that go to nonprofit organizations are restricted and are specifically for programs. But someone has to run those programs. So, our funds go to salaries and our goal is that eventually, and this also applies to the issue of equity, is that these women who are at the forefront of the struggle, women in all their diversities, also have decent salaries, because the majority isn't paid and do this work voluntarily.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:05:23]

How many organizations have you been able to benefit with your investments?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:05:28]

Since 2020 we have worked with 27 organizations and have awarded more than \$350,000.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:05:36]

And the profile of these organizations, is there anything in common in them, is there a common denominator?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:05:42]

Yes. They must be led by women or people from the non-binary community. They have to have a full leadership of women. They must comply with our mission and vision. Just because they are led by women doesn't mean that they are working on our issues. They have to be reaching for gender equality in Puerto Rico. And they must have an organizational structure that needs investment. That is, typically the organizations in which we invest have a budget of less than \$300,000 a year.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:06:18]

And how is the situation in rural areas, in the mountains, in our mountainous area, where there is greater poverty, have you been able to intervene there?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:06:29]

Yes. In fact, one of our programs — not really located in the mountains, Comerío, which is almost reaching the center of Puerto Rico, but is one of the poorest municipalities in Puerto Rico — has a project that is called Casa Juana Colón, for example. And Casa Juana, when we started it, had a budget of \$12,000 and all the work was voluntary. As COVID-19 passed, many investors, many

donors, were interested in collaborating with their work. Of course, because the center of the island is where most of the poor municipalities are, and they couldn't because they weren't formalized. That means they didn't have their 501(c)(3) or were registered as a nonprofit. We gave the funds and technical support to achieve that and now it's an organization, for example, that already has a budget of \$300,000. That's the type of project and that's the type of model that we support, but we definitely focus on organizations outside the San Juan area, not only in the center of the island, but Vieques and Culebra.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:07:35]

Very good. Now let's to move more to gender equality and also reduction of inequalities. And from the Foundation's perspective, how do you define gender equality or equity?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:07:51]

For us, gender equality is, in the holistic vision, that women in all their diversities, girls, and people from the LGTBQ community can enjoy the same rights and that they aren't constantly exposed to violence because of the gender issue, which we know that there are disproportionate differences in violence against women and the LGTBQ community. For us that's what it is, it's ensuring that there are equal opportunities and that social pressures toward these communities are scaled back.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:08:32]

What is the reason for so much confusion and why are these non-traditional definitions of gender as genderfluid seen as a threat? Why this violence against people who choose that path?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:08:52]

This is a bit of a complicated answer. I believe that this is global, this is not just a Puerto Rico phenomenon. There are global anti-gender trends, because the word "gender" represents for many communities a threat to dominant patriarchal structures. And that means that we're challenging what certain people think how a family is composed or a family should be. So, when you hear gender, there's so much mistaken and a very falsely informed and sensationalized narrative about what it means to have these conversations about gender. So, they've created this bubble of fear of the word and given it an imposing meaning, right? "You want to impose your thoughts on gender equality on me;" what do "you want to do," and things as ridiculous as "gender perspective education wants to make my children homosexual," which isn't true. In other words, these are narratives that have predominated within religious fundamentalist sectors because it's convenient. It's a protection for the systems and it has worked, it has been very effective because people are afraid of the word. When one says gender equality, I mean, they can burn me alive. It's a ridiculous thing, but what's missing is information. Much more information is needed to understand that this means equality for everyone. In other words, feminist struggles — because feminism is another "bad word" — have been what have made it possible for me to have a bank account or to be able to vote, to be able to wear pants. In other words, these struggles have been going on for many years and I believe that we've forgotten history. And, I think that partly has something to do with it. In addition to this anti-gender strategy, at a global level, I'm talking about a global level, it's a political trend that favors certain authoritarian governments and maintains power. So, if this narrative is maintained, a certain stability of a certain power that has predominated for so many years is being guaranteed. I believe it's fear because those of us who talk about gender and challenging regulations are offering a freer alternative. And this reaction is fear, because there's a power in that freedom and for me it's simply the fear of changing the way things are.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:11:37]

How is the Foundation or the Women's Fund educating about this and starting to break those chains of fear with its actions, in your activities?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:11:48]

We have, among our pillars, one called Sharing Knowledge. It has been a little off the last year because I've been incorporating myself in the Foundation, but which we're going to revisit this year, and it's to highlight stories from our organizations. We call them partners. Co-partes are the people who get grants from the Foundation because they are colleagues and companions in this process. They're part of the Foundation. And we're highlighting those stories to demonstrate the work being done on gender equality and understand it's about nothing more and nothing less than social justice and human rights. And we take our role very seriously, of being those sources of information, not only at the level of public policy, but for the public in general.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:12:37]

And when we talk about reducing inequalities, that can mean a lot to many people, right? If you're a woman of African descent, it's one thing. If you're an LGBTQ person it's another, or if it's an urban woman who lives in San Juan, who works, it can be something else. In other words, depending on the group, the reduction of inequalities has different strategies. How are you advancing this goal?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:13:11]

Well, our focus is to strengthen and make sustainable the organizations that work on these issues. We don't work on it directly because the work is already being done and it's being done very well. However, these funds aren't reaching these organizations. Globally, only 1.6% of philanthropic donations go to women's organizations and this figure is much less for women's organizations led by Black and Latina women. And this has been demonstrated in several studies on philanthropy trends. (In) Puerto Rico it is a little harder to get this data because we have a problem here regarding the availability of data on these issues and others, but what we do is strengthen and make sustainable those organizations that are already working on the issue of gender violence, the issue of the rights of migrant women, the issue of the rights of black women and making that work visible.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:14:12]

In other words, it could be said that they have a systemic approach when addressing these two objectives. What are some of the organizations with which you work most closely or alliances, or in alliance, should I say, with other foundations or with other actors in the social-business ecosystem?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:14:33]

Well, at the U.S. and global levels we're in partnership with the Women's Funding Network, which is a network of women's foundations. We're working with the Council on Foundations; we're working with the Human Rights Funders Network and in Puerto Rico we're working with Filantropía Puerto Rico. At a philanthropic level, we're partnering with different entities and we're incorporating the issue of providing funds with a gender perspective and lens here, in Puerto Rico, especially. And encouraging these foundations to look at everything through the gender lens. As for the organizations with which we're affiliated here in Puerto Rico, we provide funds, at the beginning we gave money to Taller Salud, to Proyecto Matria, which are the best known for social impact projects with gender equality and feminist organizations. However, this year we gave again, we gave another grant to Casa Juana Colón. We're working on a project in the mountains of Peñuelas by Impacto Juventud, which is a project in the western area. We're collaborating with La Sombrilla Cuir, which is a collective, and we're also working to develop a fund for reproductive rights in Puerto Rico, which doesn't exist.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:15:50]

Tell us a little more about that.

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:15:52]

If you want, I can talk a little about the impact of Roe versus Wade. With this decision by the Supreme Court, many people think that the decision about your body in Puerto Rico is now an issue of illegality and there has been a lot of misinformation about this. Terminating pregnancies in Puerto Rico is legal. That hasn't changed based on the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:16:17]

And yet, people think it's illegal.

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:16:19]

In fact, for many years people have thought that it's illegal, but it has been legal here in Puerto Rico since the '70s, with the decision of Pueblo v. Duarte, which gives a woman the right to terminate her pregnancy for her physical and mental health. And furthermore, the Constitution protects us, why? Because of the right to privacy. However, two things must be said. One of them, yes, abortion is legal, but it isn't accessible. There are only four clinics in Puerto Rico; three are in the San Juan area and have cases that they sometimes cannot attend to because they have little staff, because these organizations don't receive funds because of the issue of conservatism. So, investment is needed, not only for these clinics to develop but to remain open. And not only because they do that, but because they provide sexual health care services for women and LGBTQ people as well. So, we've realized that there's no investment in Puerto Rico for the issue of reproductive rights. There is none. We're the only ones and, since we're small, we're still giving very little, we aren't giving everything we want. So, we're going to launch an initiative of a fund that's exclusive for reproductive rights. That's about all the diversity of reproductive rights, from gestational care that exists in several forms in Puerto Rico, to the right to decide about your own body. And this fund will be dedicated to supporting organizations that carry out educational campaign projects at the community level on the issue of the right to choose over your body. So, it would be the first fund in Puerto Rico dedicated to this. And the only one, because the organizations I have spoken to aren't receiving funds directly for the issue of reproductive rights.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:18:09]

And how much do you intend to raise for this fund?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:18:14]

Right now, we're guaranteed, we're going to put up \$20,000. I would like to have an annual fund of between \$100,000 and \$150,000. This is a very conservative stance. Of course, because I don't know how the philanthropic community is going to see it in Puerto Rico if they're going to want to invest in the project. But, for it to work, I certainly need at least \$150,000 to \$200,000 a year to provide a recurring investment of several years to organizations that are doing the work of activism and that are on the front lines and are dealing with all the violence. Because right now I have activists within the collectives who must wear bulletproof vests for everything, the entire narrative that is being established at the leadership level, because that highly influences on how people react. They have received threats — their addresses, their phone numbers are being shared in conservative chat rooms and they're being threatened. So, there's not only a component of activism, but a component of protection for those people who are fighting for human rights.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:19:28]

When you talk about donations or investments, which one are we talking about?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:19:34]

I like to refer to donations as an investment. You're investing in a social project, and you're investing because you want to see a change in certain socioeconomic aspects in Puerto Rico, let's say. Why does a donation have to stay within the aspect of charity? It isn't necessary, because when you're donating or giving to a civic social action project, you're investing for a change and it's work that's being carried out, it isn't charity. And it's one of the things that I try to change, that donations to nonprofit organizations are not seen as charity. They aren't charity. It's a business. They're working because... it's a social enterprise. So, I intersperse those two terms. Maybe some people don't agree, but I see a donation as an investment in a social project.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:20:31]

And when you invest or donate to a social project, what kind of returns are you really searching for, looking at? I know it varies depending on the place and the social enterprise, but typically what's the type of return or what type of return are you seeking?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:20:48]

We're very careful with numbers and impact, because there are people who measure impact saying: "How many people did you reach and with how many organizations did you meet?" We're an organization that looks more at the qualitative. If you grew and became stronger and can pay two full-time people to run the organization and you can focus on activism, that's impact. Just as it's also impactful that your activism work has consequences on public policy decisions. It's also an impact that you have projects in your community to reduce gender violence because of your initiatives and your organization's programs. In other words, there are different ways of assessing the impact depending on the organization in which we invest. But it is something moldable that's seen depending on the organization and the populations, because there are diverse Puerto Ricans. There are different Puerto Ricans and the impact that is measured in the metropolitan area isn't the same as what we're going to see as the impact in the central area of Puerto Rico.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:21:57]

Verónica, you arrived in Puerto Rico, did you say just a year after María?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:22:03]

In January 2018... When everyone was leaving Puerto Rico, I decided it was an excellent idea to come live here.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:22:10]

Give us your reflection on these last five years. You've worked in two or three places previously before arriving here, what Puerto Rico did you get to see and what Puerto Rico are you seeing now?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:22:21]

Look, it was a difficult change the first year. I lived in Washington D.C. for eleven years. I lived in a privileged bubble, where I wasn't seeing, beyond the news, the reality that the average Puerto Rican was going through here in the archipelago. When I returned, many people wanted to write the story and say that it was a heroic act, but I said no, because for me returning to Puerto Rico is a privilege. So, for me it has been a privileged experience to decide to come here. Because I have many people who ask me how I did it, what they should do. They can't because the health system is collapsing

here, the education system, or whatever. I mean, my power goes out every day, my power goes out every day. I have already had two refrigerators. I mean, it's difficult. I've seen a Puerto Rico collapsed and glued back together with that white school glue, to show it has been improving. However, I have seen a movement from civil society that hasn't been seen, that I had not seen before, at least I had not seen it, that is much more active, much more open, and much more out there showing change. What I've realized is that in Puerto Rico, change comes from civil participation, citizen participation. The changes and real work are coming from citizen participation. I have a lot of hope in what I'm seeing. There are some organizations doing incredible work. And although the experiences here can be violent from many perspectives, I do have a lot of hope that Puerto Rico is changing. Maybe not at the pace that many of us want to see, but we are, we're moving to something different.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:24:22]

And it's important to make these small changes visible, let's say small because they're physically small, materially small, but they do enormous work in their communities and they're also modeling a new way of addressing our problems. How are the Foundation and the Fund helping to raise awareness? And what recommendations would you give to continue giving visibility to this entire network of organizations that are moving Puerto Rico toward another more sustainable direction?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:24:57]

Well, we give visibility to organizations with which we work. We're constantly listening. My recommendation is to do that, to listen. There are many initiatives such as the Titín Foundation initiative, SinFines, which has a conglomerate of nonprofit organizations that are in its SinFines website, and they can find opportunities there by issue. If you're interested in helping nature, if you're interested in gender equality, you can find it there. To work on the gender issue, I'm always willing to sit at the table with whoever wants to change their type of philanthropy to put a gender lens on it. And I have with me an extraordinary board that has been pioneering issues of gender equity struggles in Puerto Rico. So, my recommendation is to sit down and listen to the people who are doing the work, sit down with philanthropic organizations to understand where they're investing their money and start investing in these organizations ourselves. In other words, any donation to these organizations is worth it. So, I believe that we must begin to mobilize as a society and support the civil participation that's taking place and join in that work.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:26:20]

And not everything is financial capital.

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:26:23]

Not everything is financial capital.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:26:25]

There's social capital, political capital, cultural capital... we all have all these capitals, we aren't poor. Perhaps we have less material, financial capital, but we have abundance in other capitals. How do the Foundation and the Fund continue to articulate these capitals that are inherent in many of these organizations that you support? Because you're investing in or donating to many of these organizations that what they do is really leverage from that, from those capitals.

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:26:56]

We invest in these organizations with the purpose of making them stronger and more visible. I can provide platforms, and, in fact, we've also worked to connect these organizations with other

foundations outside of Puerto Rico, because perhaps I cannot give you everything you need, but I will connect you with people who specifically give to what you're working on and that's a way to contribute. Each of these organizations has their own platforms and are very efficient with their communication strategy. I don't have to do much more than what they do, other than amplify that message.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:27:36]

And how do you see the Foundation's work in the future? You've been directing the Foundation for a year. You're the first female CEO, you're breaking paradigms, you're forging a new path, supported by a fabulous board of directors. What are the Foundation's main challenges when it comes to reducing inequalities and seeking gender equality?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:28:01]

The Foundation's main challenge, and it's something that will take us many years, is the narrative; the narrative that exists in Puerto Rico on the issue of gender. There's a lot... Puerto Rico is conservative, for the most part. There's still a lot of misinformation about what gender equality is and we exist to change that narrative and strengthen the social sector that's working on the rights of women and the LGBTQ community. Because women's funds have historically been the ones that have supported the LGBTQ community the most. There aren't many more funds that work on these issues. So, the main challenge is the narrative; working against very dominant forces that don't agree with this effort. And we know that. And this violence is received every day, and you have to learn to work with that, with what you receive, and you must continue on. But at a global level, there are many very good initiatives that are being incorporated into these efforts. So, I see myself, in Puerto Rico, I would like us to be a global example of gender equality. And that's going to require many components, from the simplest one of knowing how to collect data on these issues, to knowing how to analyze it and use it for public policy. And I see that, I envision the Foundation having a main role in this process. And not only that, that in the future we aren't discussing women's rights and we're giving rights to women. For example, why are we wasting so much time talking about projects about restricting the rights over women's bodies when the women of Vieques and Culebra don't have hospitals to have the children they want? That they closed a hospital in Fajardo, that they moved the terminal to Ceiba, which is further away from Fajardo, where all the hospitals where they were treated are located. I would focus more on giving rights to those women from Vieques and Culebra who do want to have their children and have nowhere to do it, they have to get on a plane and go somewhere else to be able to give birth of their children. So, I see the Foundation already in the future, as that entity where people will go to search for information about what's being done in Puerto Rico to achieve gender equality and as a force, right? Big. And that's going to take a lot, a lot of fundraising, because this requires capital, the great force that drives this movement in Puerto Rico.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:30:48]

It's very important to remember the gender lens approach when investing. Those people who want to advance the lowering of inequalities and gender equality by investing with their own money can do so through the Women's Fund, which is the first and a pioneer in Puerto Rico in this regard. What gives you most hope in your work, Verónica; What inspires the most hope?

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:31:16]

The new generations. The new generations in Puerto Rico are more aware, they're very active, they're very motivated and there's going to be a change in Puerto Rico with these new generations that are more exposed to these issues than others. I wake up every day perhaps a little disappointed

with some of the news I read, but then what I do to counteract it is see the work and effort made by the organizations that we support, for example, and I get inspired every day because they do it with immeasurable force. Sometimes, I don't know where they get the energy from, but that's what motivates me. And it also motivates me, I mean, I'm not worried, maybe during these years we'll see a delay in the issue of gender equality. In fact, I don't see that in the ten years it will take to meet these gender equality goals, I don't see that we'll get it done at this pace, I don't see it. We're going to go backward, perhaps in a few years. But the new generations are going to move us forward because they are, once again, more exposed to these issues.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:32:25]

Verónica Colón Rosario, executive director of the Women's Foundation. Thank you very much for being here in this special series of an inclusive Puerto Rico, sponsored by the Puerto Rico Community Foundation and GFR Media.

Verónica Colón Rosario [00:32:37] Thank you.

Luis A. Ferré Rangel [00:32:43]

And stay tuned for our next episode, number four, where we will be addressing Sustainable Development Goal number three — Health and Wellbeing — and Sustainable Development Goal number six — Clean water and sanitation. Until then.

Locutor Víctor Ramos [00:33:05]

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