

POPULATION MATTERS

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Every step counts

Moving towards a better world by empowering local communities across the globe

We can change the world

Meet our amazing and inspirational 2021 Change Champions

The Choice Manifesto

Celebrating positive choices for people and planet



Q&A with Sara Inés Lara

Women for Conservation empowers rural women in Colombia to protect endangered species and halt habitat destruction. Executive Director **Sara Inés Lara** discusses the organisation's initiatives, plus its new partnership with PM.



Q: What are the organisation's key aims and objectives?

A: We empower women while working with them to conserve vital habitats for generations to come. We have seen first-hand the tangible, positive results of integrating women's empowerment and family planning into our conservation projects. Through events, workshops and access to family planning, women can live in harmony with their environment, use natural resources in a sustainable way – and have freedom of choice to be able to plan for their future. When Women for Conservation began 17 years ago, family planning was a taboo subject and a risk to women's safety. Nowadays, the conversation is taking place much more freely. When I visit the communities we work with, the girls say, "Don't worry Ms Sara, I'm not going to have a baby yet! I'm going to keep studying."

Q: What are your thoughts about the links between biodiversity loss, population growth and women's empowerment?

A: It doesn't make sense that we don't talk about population growth. Even though more people are recognising its importance in relation to environmental protection, there's still a stigma. In discussing the links between population growth and conservation, you must start with the key issue of women being able to have control over their own bodies. In our workshops, we see more and more young people asking: "how can I be part of the solution?". It's clear for them that having fewer children is one way, and they're very ready to do it. And, when young people are collaborators in this process, we can achieve balance and harmony with nature for generations to come.



Q: How do you reach out and engage with local communities?

A: We work in the buffer zones around Fundación ProAves' 28 nature reserves, which covers 90,000 acres. In Santa Marta in the north, the women are really motivated to learn more about conservation. They're especially worried about the risks of fires due to unsustainable agricultural practices – such as slash and burning to make way for intensive cattle grazing. They're now working with local government to get conservation areas recognised. Conservation is effective when the local community wants it and makes it happen.

Q: Women for Conservation has just partnered with PM's Empower to Plan. How is this supporting your work?

A: We'll be able to work in four different nature reserves and empower local communities to participate in conservation workshops, while training three rural women to become project site coordinators. We'll also initiate our family planning programme with 45 more women, providing sexual education workshops in collaboration with professional health workers from reproductive rights provider Profamilia.

■ For more about our partners, visit populationmatters.org/empower-to-plan

COLOMBIA'S NATURAL WONDERS

■ Bounded on the north by the Caribbean Sea, the northwest by Panama, the south by Ecuador and Peru, the east by Venezuela, the southeast by Brazil, and the west by the Pacific, Colombia is listed as one of the world's 'megadiverse' countries. Its neotropical rainforests, alpine tundra ecosystems and cloud forests host close to 10% of the planet's biodiversity.

■ It has the highest number of bird and orchid species diversity worldwide and second highest in plants, butterflies, freshwater fish, and amphibians.

■ With 314 types of ecosystems, Colombia possesses a rich complexity of ecological, climatic, biological and ecosystem components.

■ Many of these natural ecosystems have been transformed for agriculture, and it's been estimated that almost 95% of the country's dry forests have been reduced from their original cover.

SARA INÉS LARA

has worked in conservation in Latin America for 20 years. After training in engineering and working on major infrastructure projects, she changed career paths and became the first Executive Director of Colombian bird conservation organisation, Fundación ProAves. She founded Women for Conservation in 2004.

