

Safe passage

Faced with a rash of kidnappings, parents in Argentina created a self-managed school bus system to keep their young girls safe

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Layla Nayeli Sainz Fernández was kidnapped twice within 10 months.

She was first kidnapped in 2015, when she was 13 years old, and then again in 2016, after testifying in the Gesell Dome during the lawsuit that investigated her first disappearance. One Tuesday at 7 a.m., Layla left her home in a slum in the Bajo Flores area to travel to her school. She travelled alone for only the third time since she first went missing, and she did not arrive. Ester Romina Oropeza disappeared while making the journey home from school to the same slum. She reappeared, alive, a few days later. The last of the cases is that of Judith Yoley Mamani Vera, who is 15 years old. She went missing for 11 days and reappeared on May 19.

Upon their return, all of the girls spoke of the horrors they experienced. One of them said that while she was kidnapped, she was locked in a dark room from Friday to Sunday. Her captors released her at Plaza Miserere, one of the main squares in Buenos Aires, where the police found her sitting on a post.

The disappearances of these three girls have something in common: nearly all of them disappeared while making the journey from their schools to their homes and all of them were released after a few days. Their quick release was thanks to social organizations, family, friends and neighbors acting quickly, posts being made on social media and community solidarity.

'La Domitila'

Faced with the recurring disappearances of girls in Bajo Flores on the journey between their schools and their homes, the Movimiento Popular La Dignidad, or MP La Dignidad, decided to get the ball rolling to prepare and offer security to girls going to and from school, in partnership with La Red de Docentes, a network that protects children in the Bajo Flores area from violence, kidnapping and abuse. MP La

Dignidad handles social, cultural and education services; such as setting up soup kitchens, picking up garbage and providing access to community healthcare and popular diplomas.

Since the end of April, an orange and white bus organized by the residents of Bajo Flores, with a sign saying "La Domitila" on the front, runs Monday to Friday. It takes more than 40 girls from a meeting point in the slum to school. When they leave class, La Domitila – which pays tribute to Domitila Barrios de Chungara, a Bolivian mining leader who initiated the fall of the dictator Hugo Banzer Suárez with a hunger strike involving four women in 1977 – is waiting for them outside to take them home.

The first 24 hours of anguish

The boys who also travel on La Domitila are between the ages of 13 and 16. When they go to secondary school, they are also exposed to many dangers, including the threat of human trafficking and organized crime – which involves large sums of money, almost as much as drug trafficking. However, these boys' captors manage to avoid punishment, because of the lack of public policies in place to combat their

crimes.

Laura Bitto has worked with La Dignidad since 2015. She said that the center set up by the Movimiento Popular where parents can come for help if their children go missing has been receiving reports of disappearances of girls between 11 and 16 years of age.

"We think of the La Domitila project as a safe route which has come about because of the disappearances we are seeing at the moment," she said. "With the community's participation and work carried out alongside networks of teachers and health centers, we are developing an intervention protocol to defend against the disappearances of young people and, from there, we are able to contact the relevant organizations. We feel that the state is turning a blind eye to the problem."

The protocol will operate as follows: When a young person disappears, it will first be reported to the on-call public prosecutor's office. Then, a photo of the disappeared person, with their name and age, how they were dressed, when they disappeared, where they were last seen and a list of contact telephone numbers will be released. They then notify the missing people's center in Buenos Aires, and search the school, places they often go, hospitals



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and police stations.

If it is suspected that they have been abducted in order to be sexually exploited, number 144 is called, which is the national advice line for women, and the case is anonymously reported to the number 145, the public prosecution's office for human trafficking and exploitation. This is all done within the first 24 hours.

In 2016, the 145 number received 3,256 reports – the highest number since 2012 – with the majority coming from the city of Buenos Aires.

The other form of safety

Aidé is a small Bolivian woman, who walks slowly and speaks firmly. She coordinates the team of women who lead the La Domitila project. Every day, Aidé arrives at the Cobo y Curapaligüe stop at 6 in the morning. Aidé is a member of a group of activists who fight for the improvement of the slums and protest against the government's current policies, which includes La Dignidad. "Here we lose teenage girls but neither the police nor the Public Defence Service listen to the mothers of Bajo Flores. It seems that they don't have the budget for us!" said Aidé, as we board La Domitila.

The school bus's team is completed by Elizabeth, who is the driver, and Jannett, who Aidé defines as being a sort of security guard. Jannett gathers information about the boys using the bus, including their names, what school they go to and who their parents are. This provides kind of back story that they can look back on at any time. In Riestra and Bolívar, the bus parks to wait for the children and Elizabeth talks about how the number of boys using this community service has increased over the past few weeks:

"On the first day we started out with five and by midday we only had two," she said. "Now word is spreading among friends and we're now full in the morning!"

Driving through the city

At the first stop, Jacqueline and Evelyn – who are aged 14 and 15 – get on the bus. They are best friends and go everywhere together. One month ago, they took the bus together and they sat in one of the last seats as they traveled to and from Technical School No. 5. There are lots of girls in the Technical School but hardly any of them live in the slums.

"We are the only ones from here, which is another reason why we're such good friends.

Before, we took the 132 (bus), but the journey was very long. Sometimes it was full and just drove past us, so we had to wait for the next one," said Jacqueline. "Now, it only takes us 15 minutes, it's more comfortable and we feel safer."

In Varela and Oceanía, Juan, a first-year student at Trade School No. 21, gets on the bus for the first time. He sits alone in a corner and, with his headphones on, he gazes out the window. He's happy, and he feels safer because he doesn't have to walk the many blocks that separate his house from his school.

Elizabeth drives calmly around the streets of Buenos Aires. She is a careful driver and keeps her eyes on the road. This is not the first time that she has been in charge of a large vehicle: "In Bolivia, my family owned cargo lorries," she said. "I learned how to drive them because my job involved transporting corn."

Aidé has been in Corriente Villera for 15 years.

"I never would have thought I'd be here; I have learned a lot. I have taught myself politics and have gotten to know the organization's politics from within because I went to the canteen for a plate of food. Now it is my turn to fight for the neighborhood,

and for our friends and our neighbors who need this cesspool repaired. I am convinced that here, in Argentina, the government does not take notice of those living in the slums because they know that the people who live in these places don't have papers, so they apparently don't count," she says. "The slums are a no man's land."

There was no slum here 25 years ago; in fact, there was nothing. This is what Aidé remembers.

The small houses that did exist were made of wood or sheet metal and a large part of what is today's neighborhood was just one enormous dumping ground.

"The slum is not growing outwards but upwards, and there are many people living in each house," Aidé said. "Because of this, we want to talk about what is happening in Bajo Flores and make sure that all the neighborhoods have a school bus. ... In Lugano, in Baracas, they have the same problem. In these bigger slums, even more children go missing. These streets are very dangerous, especially for girls. This is why La Domitila is available to all of them."

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Translated from Spanish by Clare Morgan