

COMMUNITY STORIES

Senides Lucumi, mineral selector from Suárez

“We have to be united. We always think about doing things for ourselves, but if we work like that we won't get anywhere. We have to join forces and work in partnership.”

Senides Lucumi Mina is 42 years old and lives in the municipality of Suárez in the department of Cauca (Colombia). **She works outside the gold mines, combing over the mineral waste left by the miners and hand picking any gold remnants she finds.** Senides is also **president of the Association of Gold Waste Picker Women and Peacebuilders in Suárez.** The association was formed with the support of the **Alliance for Responsible Mining (ARM)** within the **Capaz project**, funded by the European Partnership

on Responsible Minerals (EPRM). "I am very proud to be a miner. I learned the trade from my parents when I was 7 years old," said Senides. She explained that her parents were gold panners and passed on to her their love for mining. Despite the occasional difficulties in this field of work, **it gives her self-sufficiency and has covered course fees to study Environmental Control Technology,** which she has not yet completed.

“Mining is like a lottery: sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. We need support to have more methods and technology.”

A day of work for Senides

At 8 o'clock in the morning of a given Monday, Senides starts working picking through minerals. Her day began hours before, rising at dawn to catch the six am public transportation that will drop her off at the work site. A workday lasts until 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

From Monday to Friday, Senides works side-by-side with a group of seven women. They eat lunch together too, sometimes cooking a group meal over a campfire. When they finish in the afternoon, they return to the village by motorcycle or *chiva*, a truck converted into a sturdy bus that traverses many rural areas of Colombia. Senides explains **that more than 100 women work as gold waste pickers in the area.**

However, they do not find material every day, as there is not always anything left to pick through. Finding something is a reward that is not a function of their efforts, but dependent upon the availability of waste material to glean outside the mine entrance. This means that sometimes she completes a full working day without anything to show for it. **On the "good days", as Senides calls them, she may**

obtain between 1 and 2 grams of gold, after grinding the extracted material. "Sometimes they pay 68,000 or 70,000 [Colombian pesos] a gram, depending on the condition of the material", she specified. Senides added that sometimes they are cheated on the weight of the material: "They might say that you have only 1 gram when it's actually 3, and you get paid whatever the buyer says". She went on, "On a good day, we earn 140,000, and with that money we have to pay for transportation to the mine and to the mill, take the material to be processed and ground and pay for that service, put food on the table, pay off any debts..."





“The love I have for my children gives me the motivation and strength to work”

Senides is married and has two children. Her husband is both a miner and a teacher, and **she does both mining work and housework.** "You may be tired, but you get up every day to work anyway. Come thunder or lightning, you go out there to be able to give your children whatever their father hasn't been able to provide," she explained. She commented that her children do not like mining, because they don't see it as a future work option for them. She admitted that she doesn't want her children to work in mining either, since it is not easy; instead, **she wants her children to study and prepare for a better future.**

“That's not to say that I regret or that I am ashamed of being a miner. My children are not embarrassed to say that their parents are miners, but I want them to have other opportunities and another perspective on life.”

Suárez, November 2017
(c) ARM

The current situation and future outlook for women in artisanal mining

Senides can see mining as a source of employment in the future, "if the government and other entities like ARM help us make technical improvements to our work." **She and other female miners are eager to make progress in order to achieve a better quality of life, but they are hampered by the instability of their work.** "When we cannot work [in the mines] because there is no [leftover] material, we have to wash or iron laundry or find some other job to be able to make a living," she explained. She also spoke of inequalities, specifically gender inequality caused by machismo (a male dominance in Latin American culture), wherein women are relegated to picking through the material discarded by the men allowed to work inside the mines. "The work inside the mine entrance is for the men," she explained, "whereas chiseling, breaking, burning, and carting away loads of materials is the work

given to women." In addition, she highlighted the lack of opportunities, stressing the need for tools or financial aid for mills. **Women often feel discriminated against**, because "we bring the lowest quality material, and sometimes they make us wait to mill it until after they've finished with the other miners' mineral."

Another worrisome issue for the gold picker is the environment. Senides agrees that mercury reduction is necessary and requests assistance in this process. She believes that, **"We can work on clean mining, as long as the government and other entities like ARM are there to help us."** Senides asks to be presented with "alternatives that help the environment", and expresses their willingness to plant trees in polluted places, collaborate with water protection, and mitigate the negative impact of mining.

"We have been very pleased with the support from ARM. We began as nine women miners, and now we number about 50."

Working together, a solution that makes a tangible impact

The president of the Association of Gold Waste Picker Women notes that they need to be equipped with their own work tools and receive training, and she's grateful for the support they have received from organizations such as ARM. "We have to be united. We always think about doing things for ourselves, but if we work like that we won't get anywhere. We have to join forces and work in

partnership in order to improve the situation for everyone. We have learned this lesson from the training given by ARM," reflected Senides. She has observed **the positive impact in the increased participation of women, since now "we are very excited"**. Senides hopes that these improvements lead to jointly creating a solid impact.