

By the beat of your heart

By Elsa Ursula

Leidy arrived at the Pucallpa hospital leaning on her mother's arm, and her heart bursting with fear. It was a feeling that had accompanied her for the last three months, from the very moment she found out that she was pregnant. She was 17 years old, her partner had left her, and she had only managed to tell her parents that she would leave her community in Masisea to work in the city. During that time, panic gripped her, reason disappeared from her mind and the only way out she saw for herself was to lose the baby. She took an unimaginable number of pills and when she started bleeding, she managed to call her mother and tell her the truth.

"My mother took the first boat and found me in Pucallpa. We went to the hospital and there the doctor did an ultrasound to see if there was still a heartbeat. I was lying down, crying, when suddenly I heard my daughter's heartbeat. That shocked me so much and I said, 'I'm going to have my baby no matter what.' My life changed then," Leidy says as she plays with Lara, her precious 8-month-old girl.

It was not an easy road for her. "I was still very scared until I went for check-ups at the Masisea health center," Leidy says. "I never imagined it to be like this. There they explained so many things to me about the growth of my baby. They guided me on how to prepare my body to receive my little daughter, on the importance of breastfeeding, how I needed to eat well for my baby, and they prepared me for childbirth. I learned many things. And the best thing is that no one judged me for having gotten pregnant so young. They spoke to me naturally and that calmed me down a lot."

Leidy received all the support she needed from Masisea's health personnel. This was possible thanks to the Adolescent Girls' Health and Protection project implemented by UNICEF with

the support of Zonta International, which seeks to improve health services for adolescents and empower adolescents, especially girls. Thus, health personnel (doctors, nurses, midwives and health technicians) from Ucayali were trained to provide care on adolescent sexual and reproductive health, mental health, nutrition, violence prevention and in developing confidence and autonomy in adolescents to take control of their lives and know their rights.

"We face a very difficult situation, especially when pregnant adolescents or those that are victims of violence from their partners come to the service," says Alicia Tello, midwife at the Masisea Health Center and coordinator of the adolescent health service. "For me, the training I took to work with girls like Leidy was essential to develop my work. I think what helped me the most is that they taught me to put myself in their shoes. When we are adults, we judge them, we don't listen to them and we forget that we were also adolescents, with fears and doubts".

Much of Leidy's fear is experienced by hundreds of adolescents who go through similar situations.

Ms. Tello points out: "What happens is that they think they know because they look for information on the Internet, where there is a lot of false material. And they do it because they can't talk about it at home with a well-informed adult. What we did here was work with the schools. With the help of the teachers, we brought the adolescents to the health center, we watched movies with them, we talked in a relaxed manner so that they felt



confident in telling us their problems, talking to us about their worries. And that gave us great results.

"Here in Masisea, we worked with the three local schools; but due to the pandemic we had to suspend these activities. But we still have found ways to approach them and if they come to the health center, we never say that we don't have time. The training we received has helped us remember and understand better all the processes that adolescents go through."

Leidy walks through the health center with her little girl in her arms and says: "I always grew up thinking that I would leave my community and go to Pucallpa to become a teacher. Now I know that dream will not stay there, but that one day I will achieve it. At the health center, they have opened my eyes, they have given me the security I needed, and I know that I will achieve everything I set out to do.

"I used to think I would do it alone. Now I know that I will do it with my daughter. I'm not afraid anymore" she says while she smiles because Lara doesn't stop looking at her with intense eyes, like the beating of her heart, which one day beat without stopping.