



#NT100IS5: QUIPU

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SHARING THE STORY OF PERU'S INDIGENOUS POPULATION

By Quipu

Project URL: <http://blog.quipu-project.com/>

Project Twitter: [@QuipuProject](https://twitter.com/QuipuProject)

Organisation URL: www.quipu-project.com

To celebrate five years of NT100 we've revisited [Quipu](#) to understand what's helped the initiative grow, since it featured in our 2015 NT100.

When heavily pregnant Victoria Vigo fell ill, she was taken to a local hospital in north-western Peru for an emergency caesarean. When she came to, she learned her baby did not survive. She was hardly ready for more bad news. "There was a doctor trying to console me saying: 'don't worry, you are still young, you can have another baby'," Vigo recalls, when speaking to the BBC earlier this year. But within earshot she remembers hearing another doctor correcting him: "No, she can't have any more children. We've sterilised her."

Vigo is one of an estimated 272,000 women and 22,000 men sterilised without informed consent in Peru, during Alberto Fujimori's rule in the 1990s, as part of a 'family planning' campaign funded by a range of government and NGO grants, including a \$36 million donation from USAID. At least 18 adult deaths were recorded during the campaign.

To date, Vigo, who was 32 at the time of her sterilisation in 1996, is the only surviving sterilised Peruvian who succeeded in receiving damages of approximately £2,000 after years of lengthy legal wrangling. She believes that she received compensation in part because she is educated and speaks Spanish, while the majority of sterilised women and men are members of indigenous Quechua-speaking communities in remote areas of Peru.

Operations were usually rushed, and carried out in unsanitary conditions by inexperienced personnel coerced or incentivised to do the work. Patients – many of whom were pregnant before the sterilisations – were made to walk home straight after, with no follow-up care. Men and women were often bullied into providing consent, by being threatened with fines or taxes, or by being told that their child support would be withdrawn.

The international community initially commended Fujimori's campaign for making family planning accessible, but concerns soon emerged about methods on the ground, which appeared to be more about population control than reproductive choices. "Instead of promoting a range of contraceptive methods, there were targets, quotas and numbers of sterilisations that the health personnel had to achieve," explained Rosemarie Lerner, director of the Quipu project, when speaking to the BBC.

A filmmaker from Peru, Lerner was studying in London when Fujimori's daughter Keiko was running for president, while her father was imprisoned for human rights abuses unrelated to the forced sterilisations. Keiko's opponent Ollanta Humala brought up the issue in a bid to discredit Keiko, who at the time held a strong lead.

Lerner followed the elections closely, and in 2013 her film production company Chaka Films teamed up with academics Karen Tucker and Matthew Brown at Bristol University, and British creative technologist Ewan Cass-Kavanagh, to gather and publish more testimonies from the women and men targeted by Fujimori's campaign. Thanks to funding from REACT (Research and Enterprise in Arts and Creative Technology), the team set out to explore the possibilities for documenting what happened in Peru, combining their skills in research, film and technology.

The first women Lerner met during research trips back to Peru were initially reluctant. "They had lost their trust in the traditional media, because they felt that they were being used," she explains. "People came with cameras, and they never saw them again." Similarly, there was mistrust of non-profits, some of which were perceived to hijack the issue to get funding from international organisations, without helping, or even contacting, those affected.

most of
the women were illiterate and had no access to the internet. And while the BBC

had made a film featuring the women, most of them did not have a TV. “We were asking how interactive documentary can go across the digital divide,” Sebastio Melo of Chaka Films explains. “How does an interactive documentary work, where there’s no available internet or digital connection?”

A Peruvian friend who was working with indigenous populations in the Amazon taught Lerner that the only technologies available across Peru were phones and radio. The team were further inspired by mobile-phone platform WeFarm, which was at that time trialling a way to connect Peruvian farmers without online access; an internet for people without internet.

When Cass-Kavanagh told the team that phone content can be recorded and archived online via VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol), the idea for a forum for sterilised people to tell their stories via mobile phones that could be archived online and shared internationally was born, and named Quipu. The word means ‘knot’ in Quechua, and refers to an ancient Andean system for recoding information using knots on strings and ropes.

nd. The team purchased an ‘0800’ number in Peru from US-based cloud communications provider Twilio, which anyone could call for free from a mobile or landline.

A recorded message in both Spanish and Quechua explains that the Quipu project is about collecting and publishing testimonies about forced sterilisations under Fujimori, and asks callers to press ‘1’ to leave their own story, or ‘2’ to listen to other stories. A caller can then tell their story through the phone, which is played back to them for approval. Once they are happy, they press a button to archive the story in the cloud, and are given a unique code, which can be used to access it at a later date.

At the same time, the Quipu team moderate and translate all stories into Spanish, Quechua and English, with the help of volunteers. The stories are published on the Quipu website, together with background information about the project. Visitors to the website can also leave responses, which are again ne
back in Peru.

Once Quipu was up and running, Lerner and her team travelled to the remote rural regions of Peru where most of the sterilisations took place, meeting with local associations, organising public meetings, running public radio campaigns calling for testimonies and creating easy-to-understand brochures that helped people navigate the project, and write down their unique code for their story.

Wherever they went, they would travel with one or two sterilised women who had already shared their story, and recruited ‘story hunters’ from local communities. “With the story hunters we were very much in the background,” explains Tucker. “It was a moment where grassroots women’s activists had an idea, took ownership of it, and we were able to provide the technology they needed to run with it.”

In spite of initial hesitance, local women and men soon welcomed Lerner and

her team, and started not only contributing, but leading the project, using Quipu's platform to organise, protest and demand legal recognition and reparations for what happened. To date, over 2,700 people have called the phone line, leaving over 150 testimonies. 21,000 people from 127 countries have visited the website, with 60 leaving responses of encouragement and support in several languages.

While the numbers themselves may seem modest, the value of hearing what happened directly from those who experienced forced sterilisations is immense. Patterns have emerged about the methods used by the government, the conditions during the sterilisations, and the lack of care afterwards, as well as the chronic illnesses, damaged relationships and psychological trauma reported by many who were sterilised.

Women and men who live hundreds of miles apart and have never met tell the stories that happened outside of their own communities can now connect to each other through phones they already use, and learn how to leverage their knowledge and mobilise for justice.

Esperanza Huyama Aguirre, now President of Huancabamba's Women's Organisation, became literate since taking part in Quipu, and has now travelled all over Peru and to London to get the story heard. "I never knew how to read the alphabet before. But, thank God, with training, now I am able to sign my name," she says when addressing a group of sterilised women. "Why did they do this to us? Because we were humble, we didn't understand," she continues. "Now we can communicate, we can understand what we feel in our bodies. We can now talk to be heard by other ladies, by the authorities, by other countries."

Quipu testimonies have now been shared with Demus and Instituto de Defensa Legal (IDL), two legal organisations in Peru that are working to represent sterilised women and men in court, who can use the testimonies to cross check against other court testimonies and strengthen their cases.

Progress is slow. While President Humala introduced a national registry for sterilisations in 2015, only 5,000 cases have been added so far. Sterilised men and women also face opposition in their own communities where Fujimori was popular. Concern for the safety of those who leave testimonies means that all recordings on the site are anonymous.

Some of the women express frustration at nothing being done, in spite of raised awareness and protests. Nevertheless, responses left on the website provide encouragement. "I want to salute the Peruvian women, the indigenous, tell them that they must continue fighting," says a woman from Ecuador. "Please carry on fighting for justice," says a man in the US, with Peruvian grandparents. "Behind each of you there are hundreds of us supporting you each step of the way," says a woman from the Middle East."

The team will return to Peru to host one last workshop to understand how to measure Quipu's impact, before working on an academic report and a multi-platform guide for others thinking about starting similar projects.

Quipu is currently funded to remain online until the end of 2018, at which point Bristol will archive all testimonies for at least 20 years, so they can be accessible to researchers, journalists and lawyers. The project is also currently exhibited at the Museum of Memory in Lima, established in 2014 to address years of violence in the country.

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