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BREAKING BARRIERS: Yanela Zapata Garcia

Engendering Industries partner, Yanela Zapata Garcia, is the Director of Strategic Communication at EDESUR Dominicana, S.A. The first speaker in the Engendering Industries Leadership Speaker Series, Yanela discussed the role of mothers, fathers, and husbands in supporting women to pursue their professional dreams.

YOU CREDIT YOUR UPBRINGING AND YOUR PARENT’S WORK ETHIC FOR ALLOWING YOU TO OVERCOME GENDER-RELATED STEREOTYPES THAT OFTEN PREVENT WOMEN FROM THRIVING PROFESSIONALLY IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC. WHAT DID YOUR PARENTS MODEL FOR YOU THAT MADE YOU FEEL, EVEN AS A LITTLE GIRL, THAT YOU COULD ACHIEVE ANYTHING YOU SET YOUR MIND TO? I was the only girl in my family, with two older brothers, but I was not forced to learn the typical gender norms that are taught in the Dominican Republic, which is that a girl’s role is to take care of the house. My parents came from poor villages and moved to the city so that they could pursue an education. They both worked, and I grew up seeing my mother and father both going to their full-time jobs. This influenced me a lot as a young girl, even if I didn’t realize it at the time. Family support in the life of a woman is crucial for professional development. It’s at home where you develop your understanding of the world, of gender norms. It is where you develop your interests, your attitudes, your beliefs, and your drive to pursue and achieve your goals.

YOU FOUND OUT YOU WERE PREGNANT WHEN YOU WERE 20 YEARS OLD AND IN THE MIDDLE OF YOUR ACADEMIC CAREER. FOR MANY DOMINICAN WOMEN, THIS WOULD HAVE ENDED THEIR ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL PURSUITS. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THAT TIME IN YOUR LIFE AND WHAT ALLOWED YOU TO PUSH FORWARD? Getting pregnant at 20 years old was the most challenging event in my life. My husband and I were classmates, in

a relationship, and we both had been accepted to Master's programs in France. When I found out I was pregnant I was working on my thesis and preparing to go overseas to study. In the Dominican Republic, the rate of pregnancy is 21% for girls between 15 and 19; we have one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy in Latin America. When a young woman gets pregnant, she is usually condemned to abandon or postpone her studies. But I had a dream of continuing my studies in France, and my husband shared that dream. So, we planned together and pushed our studies back so we could get married and have our child. We were a team, and we went to France as a team with the commitment that it was important for both of us to continue and complete our education. When women have this level of support from their partners, they can overcome significant challenges. Today we have two children, and I have three master's degrees.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY ARE THE TOP THREE THINGS THAT HAVE ALLOWED YOU TO SUCCEED IN THE WORKPLACE AND BECOME THE STRONG FEMALE LEADER YOU ARE TODAY?

Conviction, family support, and work-life balance. The most important thing is to have your own internal conviction to go after what you want. This is what will allow you to overcome the limitations in your life and chase your dreams, no matter what. But, for women to succeed, it helps to have the support of your family, and that is achieved through a process of conversation. It's a constant conversation, not a path that you start and finish. We bring this approach into how we parent our two children, our girl and our boy, and we try to help them learn how to respectfully listen and express themselves so that they too are empowered to have important conversations when the time comes.

Now, the big challenge for us is work-life balance. As the Director of Strategic Communications, I have to always be prepared to solve problems, no matter what day it is, what time it is, even if it's the weekend. It's part of the job, which I love, but it was also a challenge for me in the beginning. My husband used to have this kind of difficult schedule and I was working in international organizations with a schedule that allowed me to do the job but also be home with my children or do my own activities. When I started at EDESUR, we sat down to talk about it and realized that we needed to adjust. Now my husband is more flexible in terms of time, so we've sort of switched roles. It's like a sacrifice but one that we made together. Building strength through conversation is a superpower that we call "marital determination."

Even with that conviction, it wouldn't have been possible without the support of our families as well. My mother and my husband's mother took care of our child while we were both working and studying, and this family support was key. It may sound crazy, but don't try to be Superwoman. Receive help. You can be a professional and you can be a mother, but you need help. Maybe this help will come from your partner or maybe from your mother or father, but we cannot do it alone.

WHAT HAS YOUR CONVICTION FOR GENDER EQUALITY ALLOWED YOU TO ACHIEVE AS A LEADER AT EDESUR?

I am one of the few female directors of the company. EDESUR is almost 40% women, but only 22% of directors are female. We are in the process of working to address that gap as an organization. Right now, we have a group of leaders who are working with the Engendering Industries Intensive Program, and we are in the phase of building awareness around the issues. The general director publicly signed a letter about his commitment to create more opportunities for women and more gender equality at the company. We also have a group of leaders taking part in the Engendering Industries Accelerated Course. We have created and implemented new Gender Equity, Anti-Discrimination, and Equal Employment Opportunity policies, and have started to draft new rules for

both maternity and paternity leave, and practices to improve work-life balance. We must go step by step. First we need to raise awareness across the workforce and then we will start to make more significant changes at the company. My team is all women, and we have created opportunities on my team for women to advocate for themselves and move up through the organization. It helps that my supervisor, EDESUR's General Director, believes in the importance of an employee's skills and profile no matter the gender. I have to admit though that, while there are people who believe in the inclusion of women, there are others that don't. The mindset of employees is not divorced from the context of the country. We are living in a country that only just approved a law that prohibited child marriage in 2021, for example, so there are still many gender issues on the table here.

HOW DOES EDESUR TRY TO INFLUENCE THE CULTURE, BOTH INTERNALLY AND EXTERNALLY, TO CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT IS MORE SUPPORTIVE OF WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE? To try and change traditional opinions—both at the company and in our society—my office is working to use communications to shift the narrative. We try to put female faces in our campaigns and are beginning to plan a national-level campaign to shift gender norms. It's both a conversation and a negotiation. This is a sensitive topic. In my house, there are times when my husband and I need to express ourselves, but we also give each other the opportunity to be heard. We should use this example in the company and model it for the country, allowing each of us to express ourselves and be heard so that we can all work together to find a solution.

Yanela Zapata Garcia has been the Director of Strategic Communication at EDESUR Dominicana, S.A. since September 2020. She specializes in corporate communications, project management, and sustainability, with a career spanning more than ten years in the international development sector, consulting for non-governmental organizations and private companies. She holds a master's degree in local development, sustainability, and urban planning from the Panthéon Sorbonne, Paris and the Francois Rabelias University of Tours. She also graduated from the Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra (PUCMM) with a bachelor's degree in social communication and a master's in corporate communication management.