

**COSTA RICA: NATIONAL SYSTEM FOR ATTENTION AND  
PREVENTION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:  
A PROPOSAL FOR AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF CARE**

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The conclusions of the United Nations Population Fund in its *State of the World Population 2000*, are clear, conclusive and confirm – once again- the global and epidemic nature of violence against women throughout the globe.

“Despite the incredible changes wrought by the 20<sup>th</sup> century” – says the report - “discrimination and violence against women and girls continue firmly anchored in cultures through out the world.” Among other forms of violence, it affirms that in the world, at least one in every three women, has suffered some type of abuse or assault, almost always at the hands of someone who is close to them. The report calculates that approximately 130 million girls and women have suffered sexual mutilations.

The governments, political parties, policy makers can no longer ignore this problem or waste time wondering whether it should be included in their agendas. The question at hand for all human collectives is how to effectively face this problem, what strategies and actions will work, how can we learn and how do we work together to remove from our daily lives the abuse that women suffer simply because we are women.

We know because of its epidemic nature that violence against women - both within and outside the family – impacts the economy, labor, health, security and – in general- all social interactions and according to the Interamerican Development Bank it constitutes an “*obstacle for development.*” Therefore this is a problem that affects everyone: the central government, the legislative bodies, the justice administration, civil society, private sector, persons young and old.

We know that facing a problem requires that we define the problem precisely. Gender violence against women has different expressions, all based on common social-cultural patterns of discrimination and domination, but requiring different approaches tailored to their specific circumstances. Violence in couples' relationships and within the family is, without a doubt, the best known of these. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to identify as expressions of gender violence: rape and sexual abuse outside the family, sexual harassment, commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking in persons, torture and massive rapes among others. All these expressions appear – we all know – crossed with other factors such as age, socioeconomic condition, ethnicity ... that add their own specific considerations to the problem and that need taken into account.

Violence can take place in the context of interpersonal relationships or in any other space where social interaction occurs. In the same way – though not necessarily easier to accept- is the thought that not only private citizens are or can be perpetrators of violence against women, but that institutions and organization that offer services can through their insensitive, denigrating practices revictimize these women.

From what has been said earlier we can draw some important conclusions to keep in mind during our deliberations.

First, the need to recognize that on a daily basis as women and in all the spaces we inhabit, we are plagued with acts of aggression and abuse that we need to visibilize and fight against.

Second: The various expressions of gender violence are an indivisible continuum whose goal is to guarantee women's subordination. Attention to and prevention of abuse is an integral part of any public policy attempting to reach gender equity and women's advancement.

Third: Public policies focused on one or another expression of gender violence will have successes, but they will necessarily be partial and their impact will be limited if they do not make reference to, and are not contextualized within, the larger framework of gender discrimination that women live under.

And fourth: Institutions can not approach gender violence against women simply by developing programs and services, they must permanently revise their daily practices and attitudes to avoid repeating the dominant patterns of exercising power which once again –this time from the State– deny women control over their lives.

Having said this, we move on to sharing briefly with you our experience developing holistic, integrated, multi-sector public policies, to confront domestic violence against women.

It is often repeated that the family is the nucleus of society, the element on which it is based. Nevertheless with so many deteriorated, inequitable, and violent families in our countries, no one can seriously think about it genuinely strengthening of social democracy and creating real respect for fundamental human rights. It is no longer acceptable to place the diffuse collective interest of the family above the rights of each one of its members. Women have historically been forced to sacrifice our rights and well being on behalf of others and of a nonexistent family unit that in the majority of cases has served to hide and justify daily abuse. Contrarily, we consider that the level of human development of a society and its families should be measured in relation to the well being of each of its members and by the levels of equity and real opportunities each of them has to develop fully and with dignity. In this context, eradicating violence against women is fighting what Virginia Sau calls "*primary abuse ...the fundamental abuse, from which all others take shape.*"<sup>1</sup> This road concerns us because despite all the advances, 'familismo' (cult of the family) is still an important ideological current that hopes to cloud and delegitimize women's struggle for justice and equity.

As has already been stated, the expressions of gender violence we suffer as women are diverse and are not limited to the family setting. However this type of violence is one of the ones that has gained the greatest visibility and has amassed the greatest number of souls willing to confront it. To a greater or lesser extent, all the countries in the region have developed activities in this field: as pioneers, women's groups and civil society, and later the States. The long term impact of these activities is yet to be determined as cultural changes are difficult to measure in short time spans and we still face the challenge of determining what changes to measure and how to measure them.

We must recognize it is not easy in our countries to develop public policies in the social services in a context where there are serious cuts in social spending and strong influences to reduce the States' participation in social services. This forces us to find creative responses that can work given the available institutional resources by promoting their operational reorganization and specialization.

For this reason in Costa Rica we have decided to design an institutionalized national public policy through what is known as *Sistema Nacional para la Atención y Prevención de la Violencia Intrafamiliar (National System for Attention and Prevention of Domestic Violence)*. From our

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<sup>1</sup> Sau, V. Ser mujer; el fin de una imagen tradicional. (Being a woman: the end to a traditional image.) Barcelona: ICARIA, Editorial, 1993

perspective, the systematic focus is congruent with a problem whose characteristics demand a holistic and integrated approach, for which multiple sectors must be responsible. The program must have national coverage and national impact for its activities as well as being permanent and having long-term sustainability, because the work need is the transformation of long standing cultural patterns. According to our experience only a structured national plan based on inter-institutional and inter-sector coordination and planning can respond to the complexity of the problem, while also being more cost efficient.

*“It is a proven fact that fragmentation of services and programs has a negative impact on quality, consistency and responsibility in the response to persons who have been affected by violence. An inconsistent response is not only ineffective, in some cases it serves to re-victimize those who seek support. At the same time, isolation, lack of dissemination and problems of accessibility of some service makes them of little use to those affected. Experience shows that state institutions that have attempted to develop policies for attention and/or prevention of domestic violence in isolation have quickly faced the need to work in coordination with other agencies. This in order to optimize their results whose real impact is reduced by the lack of a holistic approach and their institutional inability to offered the responses that are needed. Coordination helps to maximize support, information and existing options for those affected by violence and recognizes that an efficient social response depends on all institutions and organizations advancing in the same manner through shared and integrated processes.*

*The desired coordination is derived naturally from the policy. It is the basic requirement for its implementation and it presupposes: a) strategic goals established by and binding to all participating entities; b) shared responsibility for the achievement of the strategic goals through policies and institutional commitments that each entity must assume as their contribution to the achievement of the strategic goals; c) joint mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the policy; and d) mechanisms and spaces to meet for the daily implementation of the policy.”<sup>2</sup>*

The *Sistema Nacional para la Atención y Prevención de la Violencia Intrafamiliar (National System for Attention and Prevention of Domestic Violence)* – created by Executive Order and mandated under article 20 of the *Law against Domestic Violence*- is composed of 20 institutions, from the Executive and Judicial Branches, and universities and non-governmental organizations specialized in this field.

From an organizational structure perspective, the *Sistema* includes the following levels of action:

- A **national** normative level that designs, plans, coordinates, monitors and evaluates the inter-institutional activities through Comisión de Seguimiento (Monitoring Commission) composed of representatives of all the entities in the system. This Commission is coordinated by the National Institute for Women and must submit semester reports to the Government Council.
- A **sectoral** level that promotes the establishment of specialized commissions and/or programs that translate, design and implement the national policies in each of the participating entities, multiply and develop training, define and design the norms and protocols for institutional interventions etc.
- A **local** level that organizes, trains, and implements neighborhood networks for prevention and attention to violence, that incorporate, the representative of the public institutions represented above, local governments, various community groups, churches, and other organizations in civil society interested in abuse prevention activities. Various dozens community based women’s, religious and other organizations participate at the local level in efforts to eradicate violence.

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<sup>2</sup> García; Gomariz; Hidalgo; Ramellini: *Sistemas públicos contra la violencia doméstica en América Latina*. (Public Systems against domestic violence in Latin America) San José: BID/GESO, 2000.

From the point of view of the target population, the work is to respond in a progressive manner and as a priority to all persons affected by violence in the family, taking into account the need for specific interventions according to sex, age and type of abuse. Also efforts are made to develop activities for the offender population. In both cases the extent of the coverage, the accessibility and the continuity over time are requisites so that these activities can be considered effective public policy.

In accordance with the systematic and integrated approach that inspires our proposal, we have identified at least four major and indivisible core activities, which we consider interdependent and of equal relevance: detection and attention, prevention, access to support resources and training of human resources and institutional and community capacity building.

The viability and effectiveness of this proposal stems from clear definition of responsibilities, the levels of competence of each of the participating institutions –according to their institutional profile- and the existence of spaces for joint planning, coordination, and evaluation of activities utilizing the common strategic objectives and goals.

To conclude, we will say that this is a process under construction with successes and limitations, but above all, great challenges yet to conquer. From our experience we can point to the following lessons learned:

- 1) Its is essential to have a conceptual framework and principles that are shared and have been reached through consensus among all the participants. This not only creates a common language but also constitutes the essential criteria for measuring ideological clarity and quality of services, as well as providing a compass and direction for strategic actions.
- 2) The orchestration with civil society -at all levels- is indispensable as they area key social actor in any national effort to confront violence against women and guarantee that the voices and interests of women are present in decision making.
- 3) It is important to promote the widest possible social mobilization to prevent violence, using as a departure point the idea that society as a whole is responsible for stopping and preventing the violence that occurs in families, especially violence against women.
- 4) It is essential to have a legal framework to support, sustain, and legitimize the activities at all levels. To the extent possible, the legislation should recognize and deal with each specific type of violence. Aside from the Law against Domestic Violence, the country has approved a Law against sexual harassment in school and the workplace. They have actualized and modernized the chapter of the Penal Code on sexual crimes and recently approved a Responsible Paternity Law, which inverts the burden of proof in paternity cases. Finally, there is in the current legislature an innovative project that seeks to penalize violence against women which- if approved- would mean the explicit recognition of the specific violence women are subjected to due to our gender.
- 5) Permanent prevention and sensitivity campaigns in the mass media are a key factor. They not only in inform and connect those affected to services and programs, but also they place the problem on the public agenda and in national politics, helping to guarantee social support and sustainability for the activities and to justify the public investment.
- 6) Mechanisms need to be created to inform the population that benefits of existing services, to gather the opinions of those who use the services, so that each entity is accountable for its activities. It is also necessary to have mechanisms to formulate, investigate and respond to suggestions, complaints and accusations that result from public actions in this arena. In our case we look to the Contralorías de Servicios (Comptrollers of Services) which exist in public institutions to play this role, aside from the role, the technical secretary of the Sistema de Violencia (Violence System) plays in this regard through the National Institute Women.