

## **PREVENTION AND ERADICATION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE—WITH THE HEALTH SYSTEM AS THE STARTING POINT: A NEW PARADIGM**

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### **Presentation**

Gender violence was recognized in the Convention of Belen do Para as a discriminatory factor that frequently prevents women from developing their full potential and taking advantage of opportunities in egalitarian conditions with men.

Thanks to the fight waged by women's organizations over the past three decades, it is increasingly more widely recognized that a vicious circle is created by the prevalence of gender violence, inequality and the conditions of discrimination faced by a good number of the women in our hemisphere, where it is estimated that one third of women suffer different types of violence in the home.

Therefore, the prevention and eradication of gender violence is a basic, essential first step in preserving women's fundamental rights, fighting all forms of discrimination and achieving equal opportunities and treatment for men and women. This is the reason the National Institute for Women exists. I am honored to serve and represent the Institute. I also want to thank the United Nations Population Fund, for their invitation to participate in this important Symposium, and to thank those present in this Panel for the attention they so kindly give me. Thank you.

Violence as a general topic on the global agenda, is becoming increasingly relevant. Not only because of the growing number of violent incidents: in the streets, in the workplace and in the home, but also because it is evident that we live immersed in a culture that has *naturalized* violence between those who are strong and those who are weak; between adults and children; between white people and people of color, and in a more general sense in relationships between men and women. That is to say, in situations that are marked by power imbalances.

According to data published by the WHO, between 30% and 50% of married women or those with partners in Latin America report having suffered some type of violence. At the same time the world report on Crime and Justice at a global level, reports that half of the homicides of women in the world are perpetrated by their partners or someone they know, generally a family member.

In Mexico, the Survey on Domestic Violence (*Encuesta sobre Violencia Intrafamiliar, ENVIF*) carried out by INEGI (*National Institute for Statistics, Geography and Information Technology*) in 1999 in the Mexico City metropolitan area, revealed that in at least a third of the homes, violence is experienced in various forms: emotional abuse, intimidation, physical abuse and sexual abuse. Emotional abuse seems to be par for the course in domestic relationships, since it is present in 99% of the homes. Even though physical violence is reported in only 11% of all cases, the Survey reveals that of those suffering from these extreme forms of violence, only 14% seek assistance, and of this group only 3% seek assistance from the judicial system

This data points to two types of problems to consider when designing new strategies to fight this phenomenon. First, the need to sensitize the general population so as to uncover this veil of indifference, complicity and even tacit approval of violence as a way of resolving conflicts in society, in the community and, in particular, in the home.

Second, the realization that the judicial system is doomed to failure in trying to detect and prevent the most extremes forms of gender violence. The judicial system is already working beyond their resources trying to deal with the increasing street violence, and they frequently re-victimize the victims by subjecting them to torturous judicial processes, without offering sufficient or adequate support services to fulfill this growing demand.

With this evidence in hand, women's organizations and international agencies have proposed the development of a new paradigm in public policy with regards to the prevention and eradication of gender violence.

### **Gender violence as a public health problem**

Establishing gender and domestic violence as a human rights issue was without a doubt a success and a wise idea. It has ended the silence and invisibility surrounding a situation that is endemic in the lives of millions of women, and it firmly placed this topic on the agendas of all of the democratic countries in the world. Nevertheless, while it is a fundamental step, human rights institutions offer an inflexible playing field and they are ill prepared to handle the victims, and above all, to prevent and eradicate violence in gender relations. This is why there have been attempts over the last decade to establish the topic of violence as a matter of public health, involving the health system in its treatment and prevention. The health system, in fact, offers some unique institutional advantages in this area.

The reasons for this are self-evident. First, domestic and gender violence have short, medium and long term effects and consequences on the general well-being and health of those abused. Not only does violence affect the physical and mental health of its immediate victims: children, women and senior citizens. It also affects, sometimes permanently, the possibilities for productivity, professional performance, quality and opportunities for those who suffer these actions.

The extreme cases of physical and sexual violence lead to homicides and suicides, the spread of pandemic phenomena such as HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, spontaneous abortions, fetal death, premature births and disabilities.

At the same time, the structural violence of gender relationships is responsible for depression, anxiety, sexual dysfunction and eating disorders experienced by a significant number of women. This in turn, increases mortality and morbidity, which has a negative impact on the Disability Adjusted Life Years of the entire population and on the health system's expenditures in the entire region—systems already constrained in their ability to attend to the needs of our population.

The health sector is uniquely positioned in relation to the problem of domestic and gender violence. Not only do health workers have greater contact with women and children, who are frequent and regular users of health prevention, reproductive health and family planning programs, but they also possess greater capacity for providing assistance to the victims that reach their expanded infrastructure. In this sense, the health system is also better positioned to detect and register existing or potential family violence situations, in global actions with an eye toward prevention, which is the principal type of intervention needed to eradicate violence.

The health sector also has a great deal of experience in research, design and implementation of policies designed to fight negative or undesirable behaviors, as has happened in campaigns against alcoholism and smoking, and in the enhancement of positive, proactive behaviors such as family planning, reproductive health and the prevention of infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS, etc.

Anchoring prevention, detection and support activities for gender and domestic violence cases in the health institutions, can also provide positive synergy with justice and police, thanks to the availability of more complete information.

### **The eradication of violence as a problem that requires an integrated and coordinated intervention**

In order to provide adequate prevention, detection and support activities, institutions will need to undergo extensive changes in attitudes and develop new capacities. Above all, they will need to develop a vision that leads to an integrated, interdisciplinary and coordinated approach to the subject. Fortunately these steps are already taking place.

In Mexico, the National Commission on Women, precursor to the National Institute for Women, of which I am president, made important strides and obtained valuable results that should be studied more in-depth.

I would like to mention some priority concerns which must be addressed by INMUJERES (National Institute for Women) in collaboration with other sectors.

In the health field, we must begin by recognizing the progress made through the *Norma Oficial Mexicana para la atención médica de la violencia familiar* (Mexican Official Standard for the medical care of family violence),<sup>1</sup> which is an instrument that anticipates the damage that results from gender and domestic violence, giving priority to prevention and detection of cases, while also providing timely medical care and rehabilitation services.

- The *Standard* created the *registry of information as a subsystem of the system for the epidemiological surveillance of accidents and injuries* allowing us to know the magnitude of family violence on a regular basis. What is needed here is to segregate information by sex, and develop a system of health sector indicators for the situation of violence lived by families, using formats for detection as the base.
- It is essential to continue training and sensitizing health care providers regarding gender and violence, as they are obligated to observe the *Standard*, and the success of its application depends on their knowledge of and their commitment to the issue.
- Also necessary is the development of methods for detecting cases of domestic violence against senior citizens and disabled persons, with the intervention of institutions such as the *Instituto de la Senectud* (Institute for the Elderly, INSEN) and the *Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia* (National System for the Holistic Development of the Family, DIF), which can also bring or develop strategies for support with the participation of private philanthropic institutions.
- Close and fluid communication between health care personnel, the DIF system and the judicial system is fundamental in the development of interdisciplinary and inter-institutional models for responding to needs of those affected by violence and abuse, so that they do not have to suffer the consequences of a lack of coordination among the institutions that are supposed to offer them services.

Educational institutions are also fundamental in the development of greater efficiency in prevention and detection. Therefore it would be useful if educational centers train and sensitize their teachers to recognize and provide an initial response to situations of domestic violence or abuse. With the same purpose, the program *Escuela para Padres Sí para nuestros hijos* (School for Parents, Yes for our children), initially designed to foster reflection among parents and teachers so as to improve family life, could be strengthened and expanded.

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<sup>1</sup> NOM-190-SSA1-1999 Prestación de Servicios de Salud (Delivery of Health Services). Criterios para la Atención Médica de la Violencia Familiar (Criteria for Medical Care of Family Violence), published in the Diario Oficial de la Federación, March 8, 2000.

Schools and institutes dedicated to legal education and research, as well as lawyers groups and non-governmental organizations should be encouraged to establish programs to disseminate information about gender violence and about the various resources available to defend against it.

- It is of fundamental importance that within the educational agenda the constitutional objective of teaching equality and peace as ideals to be found within families and between men and women be realized. The modification of cultural patterns that promote or permit gender violence must be an educational priority.
- The National Institute for Women (INMUJERES) must promote the inclusion in programs, in the content and in the educational texts for formal education, of models for teaching about relationships among genders that discard violence and promote equal treatment, respect for difference and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.
- Higher learning and research institutions such as *Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior* (National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education, ANUIES), *Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología* (National Council for Science and Technology, CONACYT) and the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (Ministry of Public Education, SEP), could design a system to track research on gender violence in universities and research institutes which would give information about the state of art regarding knowledge on this phenomenon and promote research on unknown aspects, such as the social and economic costs of violence, and could deepen analysis regarding the causes of violent behavior.
- The Ministry of the Interior must give continuity to the model for the detection of domestic violence in minor offenders, revising and adapting these from a gender perspective as well as detecting gender violence in the prison system.
- The Judicial system is a key institution in victim defense. The Conference of Prosecutors, for example, has evolved as a fundamental space for coordinated decision-making in this area, which makes it essential that *Procuradurías* (part of the Mexican court system) co-sponsor legislative reform proposals, to support the struggle against gender violence. At the same time, models of more efficient and effective justice for victims must be established as well as better research into crimes. Public servants must receive training, and finally women need to about the rights that protect them.
- Judicial practices and interpretations that impede victims of gender violence from receiving justice must be urgently modified. The National Institute for Women continues to offer and provide follow-up to the “*Taller para la aplicación en México de la Convención Interamericana para prevenir, sancionar y erradicar la violencia contra las mujeres*” (Workshop on the implementation in Mexico of the Inter-American Convention on the prevention, punishment and eradication of violence against women). The Institute understands that this work is a part of the reflection and study at a national level that must be undertaken in conjunction with policy makers, members of the judicial system, academics and lawyers.
- The labor sector must promote the participation of unions and businesses, encouraging their commitment to ending sexual violence in the workplace.
- INMUJERES must do its part to promote, and coordinate these actions, as well as spearheading the creation of a common database for all these institutions, with uniform detection parameters that can produce reliable information, indispensable in order to implement policies destined to prevent, punish and eradicate gender violence. The *Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática* (National Institute for Statistics, Geography and Information Technology, INEGI) undertook a first effort with the Metropolitan Survey on Domestic Violence in 1999, and has followed up with a national effort in this regard.

## Conclusion

The work that has been developed by public and private institutions and civil society in the areas of domestic and gender violence has allowed the identification of some of the main obstacles that

impede the development of actions to end violence, among these the lack of resources to expand services, programs and projects, the lack of specialized programs and the cultural resistance of institutions like the ones that exist in the judicial system which prevent adequate attention to victims, and effective detection and prevention processes.

In this sense, campaigns that create greater sensitivity to the problem, and which change the intolerance and indifference towards the issue must be reinforced.

The task at hand for the Institute is to contribute, in a decisive manner, to the modification of the collective perception that favors or tolerates gender and domestic violence in all its variations. Its central objective, which is the promotion of conditions that enable nondiscrimination and equal opportunities and treatment as well as the full exercise of women's rights in all spheres of life, demands as a priority activity the eradication and prevention of domestic and gender violence.

In our institution, it is clear that women will not be free of violence as long as inequality and discrimination in all its forms still exist. However, we also know that equal opportunities and treatment among men and women will not be achieved until violence and the threat of violence disappear from their lives.

Therefore, we will make every effort and place our hearts into building a policy model that is anchored in the health sector and rearticulated in conjunction with justice and education institutions, with ample participation of civil society, women and the media, thus building a bridge toward a future of security, well being and full development for everyone. Many thanks.

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