

CASE STUDY

WOMEN’S NETWORK AGAINST VIOLENCE, NICARAGUA

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I. The situation and the context

Nicaragua, located in Central America, covers an area totaling 121,428 square kilometers. It is divided into 154 provinces and two autonomous regions. It has a population of 4,357,099 inhabitants of which 54% live in urban areas and 53% are under the age of 18 years. Men make up 49.2% of the population, while women make up 50.7%. The growth rate is 2.9%. The most densely populated region of the country is on the Pacific coast.

A few indicators of the country's poverty levels can be taken from the 1998 National Demographic and Health Survey: 31% of Nicaraguan homes are headed by women, and this figure increases in urban areas. On the average, families in Nicaragua consist of 5.5 members. Twenty-three percent of the male population aged six and over have not had any formal education, while for women this figure reaches a level of 22%. Only 5% of men and 4% of women have higher education.

As for housing conditions: 70.3% of homes have electricity and 49.1% have a source of water for consumption inside their homes. This percentage drops to 15.1 in rural areas where, in addition, 13.5% do not have bathrooms. In 31.3% of Nicaraguan homes, more than five people sleep in the same room; this figure represents a greater risk of incest due to overcrowding.

Domestic violence

In a study given the name of "Sweets in Hell" (*Confites en el Infierno*) on the prevalence and characteristics of partner violence against women in Nicaragua, figures indicate that 40% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 have experienced partner violence at least once in their lifetime.

In the previously mentioned 1998 Demographic and Health Survey, 28.7% of women living with a man have suffered from domestic violence at one point or another in their lives. In 57% of the cases, their children were present during the aggression, and 36% of the women were pregnant at the time.

According to the Report of the Commissioner's Office on Women and Children (*Informe de las Comisarías de la Mujer y la Niñez*), a total of 1,289 women filed complaints of rape in 1999, and of these, 464 were housewives.

In a recent study carried out between 1999 and 2000, among 300 women who sought assistance from the Commissioner's Office on Women in two Managua districts, the majority of these women who had suffered aggressions were over the age of twenty, housewives, single mothers, and had either completed elementary school or started but not completed secondary school. The most frequent clinical diagnoses referred to psychological damage, including Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, emotional distress, depression and anxiety.

2. Implications of domestic violence

A study on the socioeconomic impact of domestic violence against women in Chile and Nicaragua was carried out in 1997 by the Inter-American Development Bank and indicated that:

- ⇒ Domestic violence in Nicaragua reduces the income of female victims by 29.5 million dollars, equivalent to 1.6% of the 1996 Gross National Product.
- ⇒ Women who suffer severe physical violence earn only 57% of that earned by women who have not suffered this type of aggression.
- ⇒ Women who have suffered from acts of violence use health services twice as often as women who have not suffered from acts of violence.

Research carried out by the Nicaraguan Human Rights Center (*Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos*—CENIDH) to study how the police and the legal system handle cases of sexual and domestic violence revealed that:

- ⇒ Fifty percent of cases reported in police stations were resolved through extra-legal settlements.
- ⇒ Only 12% of the cases in the study were sent to competent local and district tribunals.
- ⇒ In 43% of the complaints filed, no legal actions or procedures were undertaken since the person who filed the complaint abandoned the case.
- ⇒ In other cases, aggressors were freed on bail.

3. The reasons for this situation are:

- Lack of information on rights and laws protecting women and children.
- Lack of transparency in the administration of justice.
- Lack of sensitivity and training of government personnel.

4. Description of the Women's Network Against Violence

In Nicaragua, systematic, organized efforts have been undertaken over the past almost ten years to fight against violence directed at women. Civil society—particularly the women's movement—has carried out a range of actions from within different spheres to confront the problem of domestic violence.

The main forms this struggle has taken focus on awareness-raising promoted by the Women's Network Against Violence.

The **Women's Network Against Violence** is a national forum for coordination and effective action within the women's movement in Nicaragua. The network is broad-based, diverse and participative, and emerged in January, 1992 from the "Unity in Diversity" National Conference.

The Network is made up of approximately 150 groups, associations, collectives, women's centers, churches, labor unions, and local networks, plus nearly 100 individual women.

Women of all ages—without discrimination—participate in the Network.

The Network's mission is to: Transform power relationships to eradicate domestic and sexual violence which threatens the dignity and the physical, psychological, moral, social and sexual integrity of women of all ages.

OBJECTIVES

In relation to the State

- To have an impact on the defining and carrying out of public policies for preventing, providing services for and punishing domestic and sexual violence.
- To see that governmental and nongovernmental programs provide better access to higher quality services for women and girls who have suffered and survived acts of domestic and sexual violence.

In relation to the society

- To raise awareness and to acknowledge and encourage the reporting of acts of violence against women and girls through an ongoing public campaign.

Women's access to justice:

- The correct implementation of Law 230 for the Prevention of and Punishment for Domestic Violence, and Law 150 which sanctions sexual crimes.
- Eliminate obstacles encountered by women, children and young people to their access to justice.

Network's functioning

Participation in the Network's activities is voluntary. The main actions are determined in national meetings held periodically as well as in the following work committees:

- ❑ **Women of Faith Committee:** composed of Lutheran, Moravian, Baptist and lay Catholic women, among others, who come together to carry out activities and have an impact on and from within the country's religious sectors.
- ❑ **Communication Committee:** made up primarily of female journalists who propose and organize national campaigns against violence. They also try to influence the way in which the media address the "news" related to domestic and sexual violence.
- ❑ **Commissioners' Offices Committee:** composed of women from different organizations linked to the operation of Commissioner's Offices on Women and Children. They provide follow-up and define joint proposals aimed at having an impact on the State in the development of the commissioners' offices.
- ❑ **Methodology Committee:** provides follow-up on the Network's strategic planning process, and assists in preparation for national meetings.
- ❑ **Legal Committee:** provides follow-up on the Network's legal strategies, specifically regarding the implementation of the Laws Against Domestic and Sexual Violence.
- ❑ **Health and Research Committee:** works to have an impact on this issue from a health perspective. Develops written material on domestic violence and public health intervention, and trains health personnel from the Health Department and from alternative centers that are members of the Network.
- ❑ **National Plan Committee:** participates in the development of the National Plan Against Violence in which both government institutions and civil society intervene.

- **Psychosocial Development Committee:** provides follow-up on the strengthening of capacities of the Network's organizations in the areas of psychosocial attention and emotional healing of Hurricane Mitch survivors as well as victims of domestic and sexual violence.
- **Zoilamérica Support Committee:** composed of women who provide follow-up on the case of Zoilamérica, who filed a complaint of sexual abuse against Nicaragua's former president Daniel Ortega.
- **Executive Secretariat**

The Network has an Executive Secretariat to facilitate communication among members as well as to provide organizational, logistical and administrative support for the Network's activities. It is a team that supports the work plans of the different committees.

Our Most Important Actions and Achievements:

Law 230

- After a process of formulation, consultation, lobbying and public pressure on the National Assembly, we succeeded in obtaining approval of Law 230 Against Domestic Violence on August 13, 1996. This law was denominated the **Law of Reforms to the Penal Code to Prevent and Sanction Domestic Violence (Law 230)**.

National Training and Meetings

- In 1995, over 500 women and 150 national organizations came together for the National Meeting Against Violence to define new proposals for action.
- We provided training for social defenders, psychologists and lawyers of women's centers and collectives on the implementation of Law 230 for preventing and sanctioning domestic violence.
- A priority of the Women's Network is to have an impact on the prevention and elimination of sexual abuse and incest against women and children, and we carry out processes to reflect upon these issues and to develop proposals. We are currently participating in a reformulating of Law 150 which sanctions sexual crimes, and we are also developing a national radio campaign for prevention of this problem.
- We have held six Regional Forums and a National Symposium on Sexual Abuse and Incest in 1999 with the participation of over 2,000 people including representatives of the government and civil society.

The Case of Zoilamérica Narváez

- In light of the public charges of sexual abuse and rape of Zoilamérica Narváez against the former president of Nicaragua, Congressman and Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega, we are reinforcing a process within the country of reflecting on the characteristics, implications and effects of sexual abuse within the family. We are also carrying out actions aimed at eliminating parliamentary immunity as an obstacle in the application of justice.

Public campaigns:

- Every year, as November 25 nears, we carry out national campaigns against violence directed at the government and civil society, and aimed at increasing the awareness and visibility of domestic and sexual violence, and denouncing this problem.

- These campaigns have reached all parts of the country as well as a great many organized women's, youth and children's groups.

Publications

We have developed the following written materials which have been used by organizations and by female victims of violence as support documentation for addressing and reflecting upon this issue:

- A booklet called "What To Do and Where To Go in the Case of Violence."
- The re-publishing of the study on the prevalence of partner violence: "Sweets in Hell."
- A booklet called "The Story of Ana Cristina: I don't want sweets in hell anymore."
- The brochure "If You Are Living in a Situation of Violence...There Is a Way Out"
- A basic orientation manual for health personnel: "How to Help Women Living with Domestic Violence."
- A pamphlet for young people, adolescents and children: "To Live Life is to Live without Violence!"
- Christian reflection material: "How to Help an Abused Woman."
- Law 230
- How to Use Law 230

In relation to the State:

- We are part of the national project for Commissioners' Offices on Women and Children.

The Commissioners' Offices are specialized offices within the national police department that were created as a system of integral services for women suffering from domestic and sexual violence.

- We belong to the National Committee to Fight Violence, a cross-sector committee for developing a National Plan Against Violence.

In response to hurricane Mitch

- Given the national state of emergency caused by hurricane Mitch which affected thousands of men, women and children throughout the country, a number of the Network's groups and members are working in activities to help affected populations and mitigate the effects of this disaster. Many of those working were themselves affected by this natural disaster.
- A psychosocial development committee was formed to promote psychosocial training and services to emotionally aid survivors of this disaster.

Health and Research Committee

The **Health and Research Committee** arose from the need to influence health policies in order to increase the visibility of domestic violence and define it as a public health problem.

Background

The Health and Research Committee has supported research and the publication of written material prepared for personnel who work with victims of violence and aimed at raising awareness and providing tools to enable them to provide high-quality, caring services. Efforts are also directed at raising awareness among the public in general.

With regard to training, fifteen workshops have been carried out with personnel working in alternative centers that provide services to women and children who are victims of violence. Others have been carried out with committee members who then duplicate these workshops with health personnel in their own communities.

Financial assistance was obtained from SWISSAID for carrying out workshops for personnel from the Health Department and alternative community centers. They were held during the first half of 2000 and the first quarter of 2001 and had the following objectives:

- Address domestic violence as a serious public health concern.
- Raise awareness among health personnel regarding the problem of domestic violence.
- Provide knowledge for addressing and providing services to victims of violence.
- Establish mechanisms for coordination between the Health Department and alternative centers that aid victims of violence.

A total of 390 men and women who are health workers in the provinces of Managua, Chinandega, León, Granada, the Autonomous North Atlantic Region, the Autonomous South Atlantic Region, Rivas and Nueva Segovia participated in the workshops. The most important achievements from this activity were the following:

1. Heightened interest among health personnel in the issue of domestic violence and recognition that it is not unrelated to their work. Motivation to continue to learn more about this problem.
2. Analysis allowing them to see themselves as agents of change with respect to the violence in which women find themselves.
3. Awareness was raised as to the seriousness of the problem of domestic violence.
4. Awareness regarding the invisibility of this problem, that victims often feel shame and therefore refrain from speaking about it, while health personnel fail to investigate further despite obvious indicators of violence. This situation can be explained by the fact that many people consider this to be a private problem; others fear retaliation from their aggressors; and still others feel insecure about the problem and the way to address it.
5. After the problem of violence was analyzed, obstacles to providing better quality care were addressed. During this process, health personnel recognized the need to keep a record of cases reported, and to establish referral and counter-referral mechanisms to follow up on cases of domestic violence.
6. Through this training process, relationships were established with personnel from the Health Department. This will facilitate attention to cases that cannot be taken care of in alternative centers and require intervention by health personnel.

With regard to research carried out to date, the Women's Network Against Violence, through its Health and Research Committee, has participated in the development and publication of the following work:

Sweets in Hell (*Confites en el Infierno*) is a research project on the prevalence and characteristics of partner violence against women in Nicaragua. It is being carried out by a group of health professionals in coordination with the Department of Preventive Medicine and Public Health of the UNAN in León, and the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health of the Umea University in Sweden.

Ana Cristina is an extension of "Sweets in Hell." It deals with the testimony of a survivor of domestic violence and how she found a way out.

How to Provide Services to Women Experiencing Domestic Violence (*¿Cómo atender a las mujeres que viven situaciones de violencia doméstica?*) is a guide for personnel working in health units. The objective is first to familiarize health personnel with the magnitude and characteristics of domestic violence on an international level, as well as in Nicaragua. Then, it offers technical criteria for identifying women who are victims of violence and assessing the damage inflicted by the violence and the danger that the women are in, to be noted in the clinical report. Finally, it provides information on local resources with which health personnel may coordinate in order to provide integral services for cases of violence.

What to Do and Where to Go in the Case of Domestic Violence (*Qué hacer y dónde ir en caso de VIF*) uses a simple approach to explain what domestic violence is, how to help someone who is experiencing this type of violence, and where to go in the case of an emergency. It gives a list of the addresses, telephone numbers and services provided. A pocket-sized brochure was developed and distributed among women and adolescents.

Two thousand copies have been made of each of these materials and distributed free of charge in training workshops and to individuals.

This experience has been a successful one because of the comprehensive nature of the movement. The one factor that unites all of us is the conviction that it is a woman's human right to be able to live without violence, and that this right must be defended at all costs.

The network does not discriminate on the basis of political views, religion, economic status, ethnicity, sexual orientation or any other type of discrimination.

Decision-making is democratic and transparent.

Difficulties experienced by the Network

One of the characteristics of the Women's Network Against Violence is that it is a very broad-based, diverse coordinating body that is made up of women who have a full range of personalities, ideologies, and political views and concepts. This is what makes it a strong movement, but this is also what becomes the main obstacle to decision-making by consensus. And over the years, this has led to some serious differences among us which we like to refer to as "knots."

We are currently working on trying to untangle these knots. It is a long and tedious process, in which achieving consensus in assemblies of least forty or fifty participants is almost an impossible task. It was therefore decided to continue this process in the smaller coordinating committee which will then present its criteria for resolutions to the assembly for acceptance.

On an organizational level, there is a strong tendency among some leaders to try to impose a vertical, hierarchical model that contradicts the democratic, horizontal practices that have been promoted and through which we have become consolidated as a civil society movement.

Another equally significant obstacle we face is the national context. This is the second year in a row with elections in Nicaragua, and in a country as politicized and polarized as ours, it is difficult to remain neutral. Some centers that are members of the Network have suffered aggression on the part of the government that views them as political enemies. In this context, the Executive Secretariat often assumes the

responsibility of taking a position with which not all of the Network's members agree. This is a serious problem.

What can we do to solve this problem? There is a great deal of discussion as well as willingness to assume the principles which are the underlying foundation of this Network with responsibility and conviction.

The main difficulty experienced by the Psychosocial and Health Committees has been the resistance by some Network members to the work strategy implemented by the committees. In this situation, the committees assume the responsibility for applying the strategy which they believe to be the most appropriate and which is backed by the assembly.

Each strategy is determined by the type of work to be carried out. For example, in the psychosocial area, the promotion of mental health with an emphasis on violence prevention is carried out via work in healing and self-care with the directly affected populations, and via efforts to enhance local capacities through ongoing education for professionals working at alternative centers.

The Health Committee has determined that its strategy for influencing government actions is to raise awareness among health personnel on domestic violence as a serious health problem. This is carried out through training based on popular education methodologies, thereby allowing these workers with highly technical training to see and feel this problem of violence from their own points of view.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Domestic violence is a serious problem affecting the daily lives of women, families and communities.

The main consequences for women's health consist of psychological effects.

The country's economic situation also suffers from the consequences of domestic violence.

Despite the situation of violence and poverty experienced in our country, the Women's Network Against Violence is an indicator of how important organization is in the struggle to change power relationships. In this way, it is possible to eradicate the domestic and sexual violence threatening the dignity and physical, psychological, moral, social and sexual integrity of women of all ages.

National campaigns have been demonstrated to be a very valuable tool for making domestic and sexual violence more visible to the State and the society, for increasing awareness of and publicly denouncing this problem, since these campaigns involve many organized groups of women, youth and children and reach the entire population.

One last element worth emphasizing are the relationships and coordinating efforts among different institutions in the search for a solution to this problem.