

**CASE STUDY:
COMMUNICATION AMONG YOUR PEOPLE ON
SEXUAL AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

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General considerations

Experience suggests that when we talk about adolescent sexual and reproductive health, the discussion tends to be limited to questions of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Of course, these are two key issues in the search for alternative ways to promote sexual and reproductive health among adolescents while encouraging them to fully exercise their sexuality in a pleasurable and responsible manner. However, when discussing adolescent sexual and reproductive health, we must not forget sexual and domestic violence, an issue that either directly or indirectly affects a broad sector of young people.

In Venezuela, for example, we know that:

- Out of all of the abandoned children and adolescents held by the National Institute for Minors (*Instituto Nacional de Atención al Menor—INAM*) during 1997, 17.39% were victims of sexual abuse or exploitation (INAM 1997 Annual Report).
- Out of all the young people receiving psychological attention for sexual abuse from the Venezuelan Association for an Alternative Sexual Education (*Asociación Venezolana para una Educación Sexual Alternativa—AVESA*) between 1986-1994, 83.57% were girls and 16.46% boys.
- A study conducted jointly in 1994 by FUNDA-ICI and CISFEM, in conjunction with UNICEF, indicates that there are currently 40,000 children and adolescents involved in prostitution in Venezuela (Venezuela, 1998: “NGO Alternative Report: Application of the UN International Convention on the Rights of the Child”).
- Between July 1997 and August 1998, officials reported that they held 17,132 young people, and 3.79% were in connection with rape cases (Statistical data “Technical Staff of the Judicial Police, Statistics Division, 1998).

We believe that it is also important to point out that when the topic of sexual and domestic violence is dealt with, either in the case of youth or the population in general, it is assumed to be an exclusively women’s issue. While the numbers clearly suggest that women are the most affected, the importance of taking men into account when designing educational programs containing effective alternatives should be similarly evident. As men, we have an obligation and a desire to take part in constructing joint solutions. As young men, we wish to avoid subjecting our partners and families-to-be to the same situations in which we were victimized in our homes; as the numbers indicate, we too can be the objects of sexual abuse.

In addition, projects for promoting young people's sexual and reproductive health are generally designed from the vantage point of adults. We believe it is necessary that the perspective of young women and men be brought to bear in developing options for designing prevention strategies and methodologies that allow us to definitively accept the way we perceive ourselves as part of the search for alternatives.

We now wish to share with you a project that was conceived with the following premises in mind:

1. The question of adolescent sexual and reproductive health includes issues of sexual and domestic violence.
2. Both men and women are affected by sexual and domestic violence.
3. Young women and men have the right and the wherewithal to propose and implement proposals for combating sexual and domestic violence.

Background

The Venezuelan Association for an Alternative Sexual Education (*Asociación Venezolana para una Educación Sexual Alternativa*—AVESA) is a nongovernmental organization founded 17 years ago, made up of men and women who understand that sexual and domestic violence is a matter for both men and women. The association's work is broken down into three areas/programs: Sexual and Reproductive Health, Services in Response to Sexual and Domestic Violence, and Community Sex Education.

AVESA's mission is to promote a process of reflection and consciousness raising with regard to how the traditional concept of sexuality in which we have been inculcated has influenced us individually and collectively, and the way in which our sexuality is a central facet of human existence that touches every aspect of our lives. In this way, we seek to help achieve socio-cultural and individual transformations that allow us to fully experience our sexuality in a responsible, pleasurable and healthy manner, based on an equitable relationship between men and women.

With the support of the United Nations Population Fund, between 1995-1997 our Community Sex Education program developed a project for the promotion of sexual and reproductive health among young people in the San José de Caracas district.

One component of this project was a program in which 170 students from four preparatory schools were trained to serve as sexual and reproductive health promoters. Personally, I was trained in the program at one of the participating schools, Andrés Bello, so I am a product of the experience that we wish to share with you today.

In the contents of the training program, we addressed the specific issues of sexual education, sexual and reproductive health, sexual education and daily life, questioning around sexuality, gender inequality, the beginning of sexual relations for females and for males, early pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, how to prevent pregnancy and STDs, responsible sexuality, sexual and domestic violence, and sexual and reproductive rights during adolescence; at the same time, we developed issues related to personal growth, leadership and group communication.

To assure that as promoters we would be able to reach the most young people possible, we were trained as social communicators through a strategy that combined technical information with training focused on print media, radio and video. We developed specific communicational products reflecting the criteria established by the members of each group of promoters and the orientation offered by communications experts. We produced 52 radio spots, 9 television spots and ten issues of the newspaper *Juventud y Punto*.

Once we had been trained as promoters, all 107 of us launched the youth program entitled *AVESA Juvenil*, through which we decided to sustain a permanent campaign to promote sexual and reproductive health, young person-to-young person, under the slogan: "You decide."

The Work of AVESA Juvenil

In the three years since it was founded, *AVESA Juvenil* has been able to:

- ◆ Establish a theater group that created the play regarding HIV/AIDS prevention “Onda Látex,” which has been staged at several Caracas preparatory schools and theaters. We are currently preparing a second stage production focusing on social pressures on young women and men to begin sexual relations.
- ◆ We have produced and anchored “A Little More about a Subject Nobody Talks About.” Our weekly hour-long radio program dealing with sexuality, “Not Just for Young People,” was on the air for a full year.
- ◆ We have produced two issues of our bulletin: *Traspasando los Limites* (Beyond the Limits).
- ◆ We participate in a campaign against sexual and domestic violence, holding an event each November 25 at the *Universidad Central de Venezuela*.
- ◆ We participate in the May 28 international campaign for Women’s Health Day, under the slogan: “Yes, we young men and women want to exercise our sexuality responsibly; we demand education and services.”
- ◆ We have attended a variety of international events.

How do we address sexual and domestic violence in our training programs for becoming promoters?

In AVESA, we have become aware that all of us have received sex education whether or not the topic has ever been formally discussed in our homes and whether or not we have had access to formal sexual education classes.

In our workshops, we have come to understand that we learn from the behavior, attitudes, lies and stereotypes that surround us.

In exercises in which we use dialogue-based participatory methodologies to analyze our own daily experiences, we became aware of how we unconsciously assume that inequality between men and women is only natural.

I particularly recall an exercise in which all of the young men in the group prepared a collage of their “ideal woman,” while the young women created one representing their “ideal man.” When we finished, we were greatly surprised to discover that we, the young men, had described a submissive, self-sacrificing, delicate woman, prepared to wait on us, raise our children and take care of all domestic tasks. Meanwhile, the women had pictured an intelligent, hard-working, affluent man who could protect them and care for them, assuring their stability and the future of their children.

We began to acquire an understanding of the concept of gender and how society’s stereotypes of what constitutes a “man” and a “woman” affect us as young people.

We laid out our views on this matter in two issues of our newspaper *Juventud y Punto*: issue No. 7 entitled “To be a man,” and issue No. 6 on “To be a woman.”

A basic feature of our learning process was this discussion and sharing of our impressions and ideas, while confronting our differences in the group.

Most of us did not conceive the question of sexual and domestic violence as something relevant for young people.

But when we delved deeper into this subject, we came to understand that gender-based violence was part of our everyday lives: The way we guys demand the so-called "proofs" of love, the *machista* ideas of telling our girlfriends what they can't do, and the unfair division of tasks are all indications of how we have assimilated the relations of power between men and women. We also recognized that if we failed to do something to change this vision in ourselves and our partners, we would run the risk of becoming directly involved in instances of physical and verbal violence or similar situations when we grow up and establish our own families.

What have we proposed to make sure other young men and women become more aware and better informed about these issues?

In order to stimulate reflection, and to spark awareness of these questions among other adolescents, we produced radio spots on Machismo, Being a Man, Being a Woman, The Test of Love, Social Pressure on Females to Begin Sexual Relations, Social Pressure on Males to Begin Sexual Relations; and the documentary "Let's make a deal," plus the short video "Neither you or anyone else."

One very important aspect of this experience is understanding that gender violence is a matter that must be solved jointly by men and women. And young women and men worked on the radio spots and videos with the same degree of commitment. These spots have helped us to produce educational material that we have later used in workshops.

We were all very moved by the issue of sexual abuse. We were shocked to discover how often we fail to support the victims of such horrendous acts, allowing gender stereotypes to induce us into judging and blaming them. We were alarmed to discover how many young men and women, girls and boys, suffer the torture of sexual abuse in silence. Inspired by this recognition, we produced the radio spot Myths and Facts about Sexual Violence, and dedicated issue No. 10 of *Juventud y Punto* to sexual and domestic violence and how it affects young people. Both undertakings were launched with an eye toward encouraging us to reflect on our attitudes, and informing those who may know of victims of sexual abuse and/or domestic violence of places they can turn to for help.

Conclusions

Frequently, young people experience genital sexuality before they comprehend and assimilate their bodily and mental changes, before they internalize the values of self-care and responsibility, and before they acquire the necessary information. Consequently, as young men and women we need to be oriented toward experiencing fulfilling, emotion-rich sexuality, motivating us to value our bodies and those of our partners, to defend our rights and respect those of others, and in this way foment gender equilibrium.

In both our individual and group experiences, we have learned the value of friendship, commitment, responsibility, perseverance in our endeavors, and of doing everything we do with love. These qualities demand that we become more mature, thereby allowing us to overcome the difficult stages of our lives and to commit ourselves as individual and social beings to break out of preexisting social patterns and taboos regarding sexuality; that starting from our daily experiences and interpersonal communication, we reformulate the way we receive and impart sexual education so as to make it less distorted. In this manner, we can assume our nature as sexed beings with the possibility of responsibly determining the course of our sexuality.

Serving as a youth promoter of sexual and reproductive health assumes an unlimited commitment to change the way our society has viewed sexuality up to now. We can achieve this goal if we are convinced that as young people we have something to offer to society and believe in ourselves. We can promote changes in the lives of others by helping them to express their feelings; pulling them toward a more humane way to conceive of sexuality; enriching the exchange between fathers/mothers and children;

finding an alternative and potentially better life; teaching that sexuality involves everything that surrounds us—and has been distorted in the way it is viewed by our society; offering orientation and human support; and publicizing what we have learned about sexuality.

These changes have already been reflected in the way our families have opened up and recognized our efforts. What was an initially difficult task for some has opened new lines of communication in our families and allowed us to enjoy the support, confidence and approval of members of our families who have learned and grown along with us over the course of many conversations regarding each of our deep-rooted beliefs. In the process, many in our families have asked for our help in orienting other members of the family such as our younger brothers and sisters. In this way, our families have become involved (to a greater or lesser extent) in this project.

We have also become a reference point for our friends and other young people who wish to deal with situations involving the exercise of their sexuality, and we have helped them to discover and clear up doubts on this subject. We believe that our endeavors, arising out of our commitment as young people willing to work toward raising consciousness among young Venezuelans on issues of sexual and reproductive health, provide the most eloquent testimony as to the way we have lived this marvelous experience.

One of the most significant accomplishments of this initiative is to have understood the need to use the knowledge and experiences of young people as the point of departure for educational activities based on the collective communication, reflection and construction of knowledge; employing participatory techniques combining dialogue, conceptual discussion, critical thought, and games to integrate our ideas and generate a process of reflecting on sexuality and its cognitive, emotional, social, moral, political and historical dimensions.