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Empowered women are actively involved in the struggle for a violence-free life

Context and organisation

Mary Barreda is an organisation that promotes and defends the rights of women, children and youth in the department of León, Nicaragua. - It particularly promotes and defends the right to a violence-free life. - The topics covered institutionally are: domestic and sexual violence, prostitution, sexual exploitation for commercial purposes, high-risk child labour and HIV. - In Nicaragua, 7 out of 10 women have experienced violence and in 2011 82 femicides were reported, of which three occurred in León.

Mary Barreda believes in shared social responsibility in which the individual, family, schools, community, organisations and the state have defined amounts of responsibility and power that must be combined in practice in order to guarantee that the people's rights in general are enforced. However, our contribution is mainly aimed at the rights of women, children and youth, which is why our activities are targeted at communities, municipal governments, municipal and national authorities and society in general.

Our engagement is a contribution to the enforcement of what has been laid down in the Constitution of Nicaragua (Constitución Política de Nicaragua), the Convention on all Forms of Discrimination against Women (Convención sobre todas las formas de discriminación contra la Mujer - CEDAW), the Interamerican Convention to Prevent, Eradicate and Sanction Violence against Women (Convención Interamericana para Prevenir, Erradicar y Sancionar la Violencia contra la Mujer) (Belén do Pará), the Brazilian Regulations for the vulnerable Population's Access to Justice (Reglas de Brasilia para el acceso a la justicia de población vulnerable), the recently approved Integral Law to Sanction Violence against Women (Ley Integral para Sancionar la Violencia en Contra de la Mujer), among others.

Mary Barreda promotes real participation of the target population, which is made up of vulnerable people who are discriminated against and excluded. In order to fulfil its mission, Mary Barreda has developed two programmes: one for Special Protection on municipal level aimed at: young and adult women who work as prostitutes; girls, boys and teenagers in high-risk child labour; teenagers that are being sexually exploited for commercial purposes; and women, girls, boys and teenagers who are victims of domestic and sexual violence. The programme offers integral and specialized attention to women in order to strengthen their capacities and skills, provide emotional rehabilitation and recover their integrity. Psychosocial treatment is personalized and legal support is offered during the course of the entire process if a claim has been filed. Working with the victim's families is an institutional strategy, we consider ourselves as mere facilitators of the processes of change.

The other programme we are referring to is a programme to prevent the same social problems at municipal level and the main strategy is to have political impact at all levels of society. Within this context, the experience of sharing is circumscribed as a successful result of the political impact strategy on community level in order to establish a social network that will appropriately and belligerently adopt the responsibility of preventing, detecting and denouncing violence in their communities.

Women empowerment process for an active involvement in the struggle for a violence-free life

When we refer to **empowered women**, we refer to a process which has been defined by women: "we take control over something, over knowledge. We take control over our decisions and mobilize ourselves for more political action." **The starting point** was to analyse the context. - The districts in question are areas in which Mary Barreda can have an impact on as they are high-risk areas according to the police. - They are peripheral districts, their characteristics are different but they also share similar problems. - Two of them are by the Pan-American Highway, which is frequented by

heavy-load vehicles that travel through the countries of the region and stop to rest. In consequence, there is a rise in female prostitution and sexual exploitation for commercial purposes, which affects girls, teenagers and, to a smaller degree, boys.

In these districts, alcohol and other drugs are sold and consumed, there is domestic and sexual violence and crime. They are the districts in which the robbers and assailants live who commit their crimes in the inner cities and in two of them, two of the three reported femicides in 2011 were committed.

The **first step** is to **expose** the phenomenon of violence as a problem concerning public health and as a violation of rights, **raise awareness** using information that makes it possible to **drag the violence out of private homes** into the public limelight, giving the victims of violence in its various forms their own voice and **counting on the sustainability of the results of these awareness-raising measures**.

The second step is to gain presence in the community by contacting the (female and male) leaders in order to introduce them to the idea and make inquiries among the community to find out how things are perceived, about social representation and knowledge concerning violence as well as **which women are identified as being trustworthy** if someone is experiencing violence, that is people they would turn to in order to tell them what is happening. - They name people, especially women, who often are not involved with the commissions for community development, which are focused on solving infrastructure, environmental health and other issues.

The next step is to recruit each of the mentioned women by visiting them and inviting them to take part in a training process that will make them feel empowered. The feeling of being acknowledged by the community is a great source of motivation, something that helps them overcome their fears and respond to that trust.

We are quite aware that these women are part of the same community, that they have lived through their own experiences of violence and that have to face the information as women with skills and abilities, but also weaknesses, as integral beings. This is a personal process that deserves great respect and should not be forced. In order to recruit sexual workers, bars and their meeting points on the streets are to be visited. Their trust needs to be earned before they are invited to the centre to take part of the process.

Before starting the **training process**, a preliminary test is performed in order to adapt the training to their current knowledge and to lay down the rules. When they are invited to venues for reflection, they encounter an environment of trust and warmth that they themselves create. Often, these venues for reflection also function as self-help groups as they find the courage to put an end to their life-long silence and share painful experiences of their childhood, teenage years or the experiences they are going through now. During these meetings they have shared sorrows and joys and this is how they have decided to take action by observing and detecting violence in their communities. Communities in which they are sharing their knowledge and guiding other women, supporting them when they file a claim with the authorities as they themselves have experienced this process and know which entities are involved. It is part of the strategy to introduce the recruited women to the various entities since in some cases, they did not know their functions or even of their existence.

These are women who are able to identify a situation that they previously considered normal, as violence. Some have broken free from abusive relationships and some others have come out of their own four walls into the public. For them it is an achievement to stand before a judge demanding justice instead of negotiating with influences or to take part in marches demanding the state to fulfil its responsibility of guaranteeing them a violence-free life.

For Mary Barreda, **social promotion** is what a member of the community does in order to provide information and promote knowledge, to claim ownership of the rights of women, children and teenagers, to take action to spread the rights and the causes and consequences of risk factors and protecting factors. - He/she provides information on how to file a claim, information about the involved entities and their functions. Some women have also taken over the role of a **social controller**, they identify violence, refer the case and monitor to which extent the state entities take action, denouncing them if they do not.

A smaller group is acting as **social defenders**, they support the victims, promote denunciations and file claims, seek alliances within the community itself in order to provide special protection for victims and keep a record of cases in which rights were violated.

After the training process, a **follow-up** process is initiated to support them in designing and implementing the activities they are to carry out in the community and to strengthen their involvement at local, national or regional level. - Some of them have taken part in gender courses with biblical-theological focus or in HIV courses, both were offered by other organisations and two of them took place during a regional meeting in El Salvador.

Female sex workers have been able to review their personal history and that of their background, allowing them to exonerate themselves, to recognize that the fact that prostitution as the only alternative they could find at a given time to survive, had much to do with a general history of violence, especially of violence in their own homes. This has allowed them to stand tall and fight against discrimination and exclusion when filing claims and to exercise their rights by leading organisational processes on municipal and national level.

Some testimonies:

"Now I know that a diamond is still a diamond even though it may be covered in mud" - sexual worker.

"I've rebuilt my life. - I am no longer prepared to subdue myself to the authority of a man."

"Taking decisions for my life is the most important thing I have learned and my life is changing for the better."

"We don't want laws that look pretty. - We need to gain ownership over them and demand that they are implemented."

"I have lived through all kinds of violence and used to transfer it to my children when I'd come home drunk from the bar. - Now I am a promoter of the fight against violence and HIV, I am respected in my community. I have crossed to the other side and now I am a citizen who knows and exercises her rights and claims those that are not being enforced." (Sexual worker)