



## Creating Safe Space in a Challenging Landscape: Empowerment for Rural Women in Nicaragua

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### Abstract

Programs and policies addressing gendered violence in impoverished rural areas in developing countries face a number of challenges: high rates of intimate partner violence, low reporting rates, cultural restrictions on women's employment, lack of education and adequate healthcare, limited access to legal options and social services, and corruption in the criminal justice system. These social contexts in which anonymity is low and patriarchal notions of gender are especially persistent, are challenging in terms of creating safe space for victims of intimate violence. Even where legal interventions are available, the outcomes often favor the perpetrators, making this option less attractive and in some cases, dangerous. Because of these barriers, victims of intimate partner violence in rural settings rely more often on informal or community networks of support rather than formal authorities and legal sanctions to stop the violence. Consequently, addressing intimate partner violence in rural areas in developing countries requires more than a criminal justice response; it requires community intervention, empowering rural women economically and socially. This article describes one program in particular that attempts to empower rural women in Nicaragua, and the implications for creating safe space for victims of violence in challenging contexts.

### Keywords

United Nations Commission on the Status of Women; CSW63; gender equality; empowerment; developing countries; Nicaragua

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## Introduction

The 63rd United Nations Commission on the Status of Women—focusing on social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls (UN Women 2019)—narrowed attention to the underserved population of women in rural villages in developing countries who have few options to escape intimate partner violence and limited access to social services. The inadequate criminal justice response to instances of intimate partner violence in rural areas of the developing world calls for the creation of an alternative policy approach that supports survivors and that intensifies the need for prevention work. Police forces in developing countries are seldom trained to sensitively respond to intimate partner violence, and they may even be hostile towards women who report abuse (Creel, Lovera and Ruiz 2001; Kids in Need of Defense and Human Rights Center Fray Matías de Córdova 2017). Prosecution is rare and criminal justice personnel are often perceived as being corrupt (Andvig and Fjeldstad 2008; Sagot 2005). Additionally, rural women in developing countries are less likely to have options for escaping intimate partner violence due to many unaddressed reasons—insufficient support from social services (e.g., there are fewer shelters in rural areas), a limited understanding of laws and legal options, more traditional gender restrictions and consequences for divorce, a lack of education, a high level of poverty and other obstacles to women’s employment and financial independence (Kids in Need of Defense and Human Rights Center Fray Matías de Córdova 2017; Sagot 2005; Schuler, Bates and Islam 2008; Naved and Persson 2005; Salazar et al. 2012; Sayam and Khan 2012). In fact, due to the infrequency of sanctions, rural women may feel that they are safer not reporting crimes to authorities (Kids in Need of Defense and Human Rights Center Fray Matías de Córdova 2017; Sagot 2005).

## Partner Violence in Nicaragua

In Nicaragua, despite evidence for a slight decline in intimate partner violence, one-quarter to one-third of women living with a current partner have experienced intimate partner violence, but few report to the police (Bott et al. 2019; Flake and Forste 2006; Ramirez 2013; Salazar et al. 2012). In 2012, Nicaragua passed the *Ley Integral Contra la Violencia Hacia Las Mujeres* [Law Against Violence Against Women] (Ley 779), which, on paper, was a comprehensive law that expanded the categories of gender-based violence, even recognising psychological and financial abuse as criminal offences. However, the Ortega administration immediately began to undermine the foundation of the law. It dismantled specialised police units (*comisarías*), failed to provide funding for specialised courts and prosecutors and refocused national policy to prioritise the needs of the family over the needs of women in abusive relationships<sup>1</sup> (Neumann 2017; Solís 2013). In rural areas, the likelihood that Ley 779 would have any meaningful effect was even further diminished by the normative challenges of policing gendered violence in rural villages, as well as by the limited reach of social services. In rural areas, the implications of Ley 779 were not uniformly communicated, given the lack of effective contact with the police. Even if the criminal justice response was implemented as intended by the new law, it was unclear whether this would effectively change the dynamics of intimate partner violence in rural villages, where anonymity is low, poverty levels are high and the options for survivors are limited.

## The Women’s Project

The New Haven/León Sister City Project provided a small grant for a León-based social worker and a lawyer to provide educational programs—a year-long series of workshops centred on the topics of gender, intimate partner violence and the implications of Ley 779—for the village of Goyena, Nicaragua (Vanegas 2012). Goyena is home to approximately 250 families, most of whom work in the surrounding sugar cane fields. The program commenced with 30 women, though only 16 remained for the entire year, meeting weekly or biweekly in discussion-based sessions that were held in the village’s open-air community centre. The format was designed for participants

of all ages who had varying levels of education—but who all had experienced some form of intimate violence. Some workshops involved a question-and-answer format with the lawyer (with questions related to the new law), while others involved more interactive exercises such as Theatre of the Oppressed forms, which brought to life some of the women’s stories through empowering theatrical exercises. The facilitators continuously asked for feedback, but no formal evaluation was undertaken. Nevertheless, the feedback after one year was quite positive, indicating the presence of new knowledge among participants and that discussions about gender and power in relationships had extended beyond the group setting. For example, many participants were unaware that intimate partner violence was illegal under the new law; others expressed that violence between spouses was no longer normative to them.

This anecdotal evidence suggested the need for evaluation, but evaluation under these circumstances is challenging. The sample size is small (as is the size of the population) and resources and personnel are limited. Ideally, participants should be surveyed or interviewed by trained personnel working outside the project, but this would require funding that is not currently available. Pre- and post-tests are possible, but may not offer sufficient information because of the small sample size and because the true effects may unfold or dissipate over time, which cannot be captured in cross-sectional interviews. It is also important to comprehend a) the more predominant reliance on social networks in rural, low-resource areas and b) how local culture is incorporated into community solutions for addressing intimate partner violence in the absence of effective criminal justice sanctions. Traditional methods for evaluation may miss these components in standardised, outcome-oriented research.

Nevertheless, given these challenges and the clear need for more research on innovative programs for combatting violence against women in rural regions of developing countries (Grabe 2010; Krantz and Garcia-Moreno 2005; Moore and Smith 2008; U.S. Agency for International Development 2010), a survey was created to collect relevant information. It included questions that assessed demographic information (e.g., socio-economic status, property ownership and who lives in the home), measures of attitudes regarding a hypothetical husband’s controlling behaviours towards his wife and the acceptability of a husband being emotionally, physically or sexually abusive. A third set of questions inquired about the participant’s experience of intimate partner violence.<sup>2</sup> Survey questions were developed using three types of sources: 1) demographic and poverty measurement questions that were used by Latin American organisations, including one in Nicaragua (Castañeda 2017; FIDEG 2012); 2) the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus et al. 1996); and 3) international instruments that measured attitudes in relation to intimate violence, as well as questions that measured experiences of violence (Garcia-Moreno et al. 2018; UNICEF 2018). Additionally, since the survey was created for this specific context, the social worker who facilitated the women’s group reviewed the survey as it evolved.

The best time to reach women who work in agriculture in Nicaragua is during the rainy season. Therefore, administering the surveys was planned for May and June 2018. However, beginning in April 2018, significant violence erupted in Nicaragua, leading to the suspension of evaluation plans.

### **Policy and Practice Lessons/Recommendations**

Despite the postponement, ongoing research suggests some preliminary recommendations. First, the Women’s Project illustrates one type of empowerment program that is effective in a rural setting in the global south; this is a context in which the criminal justice response to intimate partner violence has been undermined by the national government’s lack of support, which only exacerbates an already difficult context for policing intimate partner violence. Although evaluation plans have been temporarily suspended, the participant feedback from the project has been very promising, and the program has expanded to a second village. Subsequent

conversations with the women who participated in the workshops suggests that they are now interested in economic empowerment. There is evidence that for rural women, land ownership does indeed reduce the likelihood of intimate partner violence (Grabe 2010). This suggests that promoting social empowerment for rural women should be combined with programs that are centred on economic empowerment.

For the second recommendation, women in rural areas in developing countries have few places to safely discuss the intimate violence they have experienced, which denotes the importance of safe space. The creation of safe space must involve education about civil rights, exercises in building trust and creative ways for women to tell their stories. Disclosing and sharing these experiences empowers rural women to partner with social protection systems and create more sustainable solutions for addressing intimate partner violence in the rural context. This need for collaborating with rural women to create safe spaces for empowering experiences underscores the 'access to public services' and 'sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls' that was articulated in the 63rd United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. This type of empowerment may offer rural women the foundation from which to obtain what they require to keep themselves safe and improve their lives.

For the third recommendation, performing evaluations of the programs addressing gendered violence in these rural, low-resource areas is challenging, but not impossible; it requires a collaborative and creative approach that recognises the importance of rural women's stories, as well as the necessity of better understanding their circumstances. Evaluations that focus solely on the outcomes of service delivery and legal reform may result in entirely missing the value of programs such as the Women's Project that challenge the root of intimate partner violence—gender norms (Choup 2016). The United Nations' sustainable development goal 5 calls for the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls. Intentional and unique strategies for the inclusion of rural women and girls in research and evaluation is crucial to achieve this goal.

## **Conclusion**

Given that survivors of intimate partner violence in rural areas in developing countries are more likely than their urban counterparts to utilise community links for coping with, or escaping from, intimate violence, policy and practice solutions should include methods for changing the norms in those communities. If safe spaces cannot be accessed outside the community, then one option is to create them within the community. Rural women require avenues for discussing their experiences and learning about their options. The urban-based criminal justice response to intimate partner violence after it has occurred does little for women who live an hour or more from a police station; moreover, a criminal justice response that is established to favour the perpetrator does little to encourage rural women to trust a system that is distant and often inaccessible. To create safe spaces for rural women, programs must focus on methods that change the norms of communities so that they are more supportive of survivors and women in general. They must 'de-normalise' intimate partner violence so that perpetrators do not have the cloak of social impunity to conceal their offences. Consistent with the theme of the 63rd United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, policymakers and social services should work collaboratively to develop programs that focus on empowerment, honouring the voices of rural women and helping them create safe spaces for each other and generations to come.

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<sup>1</sup> This included supporting mediation in cases of intimate partner violence.

<sup>2</sup> Researchers who have further questions about the survey, or who would like to see or use the survey, please contact Dr Lori K Sudderth at lori.sudderth@qu.edu.

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