



"Violence against women: Good practices in
combating and eliminating violence against women"

Expert Group Meeting

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“WOMAN YOU ARE NOT ALONE” AN EFFICIENT PROPOSAL

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Woman You Are Not Alone is a program that CEFEMINA started at the end of 1988 in Costa Rica to challenge and prevent violence against women. CEFEMINA is a feminist organization whose origins can be found, in the mid 70's, in the will of a group of young university women. The implication of CEFEMINA in a housing movement allowed the organization to expand the profile of its members and its agenda. It rooted among the women of marginalized communities and started to worry about the common problems, goals and ambitions of the women of the country, learning from real life what could not be found in academia and theoretical texts.

One of the problems that concerns women is violence against women.

case, the percentage of women that attend the Self Help Group only once and recover a life free of violence is very high (56%)

The factor that contribute to make it a good practice

The focus groups and the interviews to survivors gave us hints about this successful result. Firstly, the women in the Self Help Groups feel understood and appreciated and this is what they most often emphasize. The fact of not being questioned allows them to think for themselves what they want to do, how to do it, and above all take time to construct strategies, take decisions and carry them out. On the other hand, they find hope in the Groups at a time at which they are very confused and overwhelmed. A very important role is played by the survivors, as they show that it is possible to escape an abusive relation. Additionally, the veterans, women that had already attended several Group sessions although they are still facing the problem, show that escaping aggression is a process, not something magic or instantaneous but something that the woman herself builds little by little, in a process in which each one has its rhythm and way to do it, for there are no recipes. Furthermore, in the Self Help Group the women find information about their rights. As a result of this factors combination women gain self confidence and feel that they have the right and capability to put limits, regain autonomy, decide for themselves and, eventually, design “exit strategies” including negotiate clearly the couple relation.

These characteristics of the Self Help Group were emphasized by the women from the very first impact study. After some time in Woman You Are Not Alone we identified them with the relations that take place within it, and we summarized them in eight main aspects in its dynamics: listen, inform, validate, unblame, orient¹, encourage, support² and respect. And we kept conscientiously the horizontal dynamics from the first day that it took place. In that way the Self Help Group breaks with the verticality of other proposals and the directionality in the interventions of the facilitators.

More than effective

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reports³, so it also requires less time. And all of it with a higher effectiveness than those other proposals.

On the other hand, the facilitation at the Self Help Groups is a voluntary action, and it could not be otherwise, since it is a horizontal space in which all women participate as equals, as women that are experiencing or have experienced abusive relations, not as professionals or experts. It is carried out by any woman that has been appropriately trained and qualified, therefore the direct professional costs are nil. The ideal facilitators are survivors, i.e., women that have attended previously a Self Help Group and have been able to escape the abusive relation, that are trained as facilitators. Since that duty only requires three hours per week, it is easy to assume it as a voluntary activity.

The above means that, moreover, that the proposal is “naturally” replicable, as the Self Help Group becomes a space from which new facilitators arise and where they can train. For that purpose, Woman You Are Not Alone has developed a training program that has so far allowed to train around 300 facilitators in Costa Rica, and a similar number of women in Central America are involved in that process at present.

A program like Woman You Are Not Alone cannot be developed without financial resources, based completely in voluntary work. But the costs are not produced by running the Self Help Groups, but by the training activities, the publication, the campaigns, the investigations or the activities of political impact that are carried out.

The low costs and the simplicity for replication make the Woman You Are Not Alone Proposal very sustainable⁴. And this is a crucial point, considering the precarious resources of the women’s organizations. This proposal of Self Help Groups was born in Costa Rica at a time when international cooperation was more committed to the support of women’s organizations and their work than now. By starting the program Woman You Are Not Alone, CEFEMINA took a different route to that of the rest of the movement in the region, where the women’s organization approached the work versus the violence against women through multidisciplinary centers that included lawyers, psychologists, social workers, and eventually shelters. This typca

woman. The unequal power relations among genders are the foundation of this violence, and what explains its directionality. We state that being all contemporary societies to a smaller or larger extent discriminatory against women, violence is the predictable consequence of this power imbalance and therefore a condition of women in general, and not a peculiar situations of some. In that sense, we share the opinion of the Interamerican Convention to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate Violence Against Women that asserts that “the violence against women is an offense against human dignity and a manifestation of the historically unequal power relationships between women and men”⁵. Therefore,

A difficult future

Over 16 years of Woman You Are Not Alone have shown CEFEMINA important lessons. The most important have already been mentioned. So many years have also left the awareness of the great fragility of the conquests related to the eradication of the violence against women and of the great obstacles to advance in this area. In general this is the situation in everything related to women's rights, and I would even say with Human Rights.

We live in a time of great backlash. The aggressors organize under familist flags, questioning the laws that protect women and children, arguing that they destroy the family or leave the children without a father⁶. Religious fundamentalisms of diverse character reinforce that thought and question the right of women to decide about their lives. Private programs that promise women a perfect future, a united family and an ideal partner that they never had, under the condition of themselves to change, multiply. The discourse that put the blame of the aggressions on the women who suffer them advance, with a new one joining in stating that the progress of women is the cause of the insecurity of men, and therefore, of their aggressions.

The resistance to create specific legislation and programs about violence against women increases, and the privileged argument is that they discriminate men. Even in a continent such as the American, where there is a Convention to address in particular violence against women, ratified by most of the States, the proposals of national laws to protect women specifically are rejected. The women national mechanisms are ex