

Survivors' Words: A New Tool for Nicaragua

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*“Our heartache pours into one another like water from cup to cup...”
Placing the power of the word at the disposal of a group of dignified women
who have survived the tragedy and trauma of child sexual abuse
can help these women begin their healing process.*

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exual abuse is epidemic—or, perhaps more precisely, endemic—in Nicaragua. In just a short time, evidence of this has been making its way into people’s consciousness, increasing concern, although few are yet involved in providing responses. Both the scant and partial research being conducted and the news items that appear daily in the media are bearing out the accepted theory that the vast majority of abusers are not unknown to the young and adolescent girls they select as victims. They are their fathers, stepfathers, uncles, grandfathers, older brothers... Or they are neighbors, occasionally a teacher, pastor or priest. “Un enemigo conocido”—a known enemy—is the title of one of the more recent investigations by the Nicaraguan Human Rights Center (CENIDH). Amazingly enough, the title caused an uproar, as if some felt the finger pointing at them.

Although the number of male children abused—also within their own homes—is both more silenced and more frequent than we imagined, this article refers mainly to girls and women because they make up the majority of the victims and survivors in our society.

A nearly empty toolbox

Our society is far from able to respond to everything we’re discovering about this social disaster, one of the most hidden enemies of any development project and even of democracy itself. Those who suffer sexual abuse in childhood, in adolescence, especially if they suffer it at home, spend the rest of their life trying to survive that trauma and its insidious scars. Although the effects, the age at which it occurred, how long it went on, the social context and the resources available to help them move on differ from one personality to the next, all are survivors. They all must learn to survive, and do so every day, consciously or unconsciously. All need support, accompaniment... and information.

We aren’t prepared for these challenges as a collectivity, a society. If the survivors decide—among many other options—to speak out and press charges, the laws and “administrators of justice” are not yet up to the task. Institutions are still ineffective and prejudiced. Society still prefers silence, concealment or even punishing the victims over speaking about and understanding the phenomenon and confronting the victimizers. If the survivors do decide to speak out as part of a healing process, they find few friends and loved ones to listen to them and even fewer attentive and skilled ears to respond adequately to them. In addition, little information is available to help us detect the signals being sent out, sometimes unknowingly, by those who are suffering abuse and have said nothing, or perhaps don’t even know what’s happening to them. In Nicaragua, there are hardly any texts, the experience has been

insufficiently systematized and there is little information or knowledge on the subject. Our toolbox is virtually empty.

A simple, cheap method

At the same time, the war, our own underdevelopment, the vices sown and nourished by political paternalism, the omnipresence of international cooperation in all fields and other subjective problems deriving from our work culture have made us believe that our serious structural problems can only be addressed with generously financed projects. From this perspective, projects frequently go to those who project themselves, with posts, salaries and “orthodox” experience viewed as more important criteria than taking a risk with some local, untested grassroots initiative. Equally frequently, the first thought is about computers and offices, vehicles and infrastructure, televised publicity and billboards than about the most basic things needed by the people whom all this folderol is supposed to serve.

There are simpler tools, with proven effectiveness. One of them, made to the measure of our reality, is about to be unveiled in Nicaragua. It’s a method in which people themselves are the basic “input.” It’s about women and their words; the words they say and hear. I’m referring to self-help groups, in which women who suffered sexual abuse as children and adolescents—especially within their own home—talk among themselves about what happened so that the very act of talking about it starts the healing process.

“I’m a survivor of sexual abuse
and this is how I began to heal...”

Early last year, a German friend of mine whose entire heart and quite a few of her neurons are dedicated to Nicaragua, where she lived for several years, decided to collaborate with some people here who were beginning to think about how to respond to the sexual abuse epidemic. Her message to those who wanted to specialize in an area that requires specialization was to invite them to reflect on the usefulness that self-help groups might have in a society such as Nicaragua’s. She presented her suggestion with the force of her own words: “I’m a survivor of sexual abuse and this method has helped me heal...” And she told them her experience. Dozens upon dozens of people—men and women, professionals and students, lawyers, psychologists, doctors, social workers—heard her in various events organized in Managua, León and Masaya.

Listening to her speak with such passion and conviction, I learned that the inspiration behind her proposal was the organization Raging Waters (Wildwasser) in Germany. A few months later, on a trip to Berlin, I had the chance to talk at length with Dorothy Zimmermann and Christiane Brückner, enthusiastic second-generation activists in this life-giving cause.

I went to meet them at a shelter for young and adolescent girls who were “at risk.” Although the shelter had been founded only three years earlier, 300 girls had already passed through it. At the time of my visit, a sizable number of German girls as well as immigrants from Turkey and countries of the former socialist bloc were staying there. I asked Dorothy and Christiane to give me a brief history of their organization, which now has a presence in 40 German cities, with 500 volunteer and professional women either working in consultation sessions to treat women and girls in shelters such as the one I visited or actively promoting these self-help groups. It is an exemplary story.

The first seven and a goal: “Be raging waters”

To reflect on the extent of sexual abuse and not feel strange or misunderstood, the first thing you need to recognize is that this is a relatively new issue, not only in Nicaragua but in the world as a whole. We need to realize that humanity has only recently awakened to the seriousness of a reality that has affected women from the beginning of time, but towards which we have remained anesthetized, as was the case with slavery a couple of centuries ago. We’re finally accumulating a critical mass that is learning about and grasping the issue and wants to change the course of this history.

It’s hard to believe, but as recently as 1982, no one was yet speaking openly about sexual abuse in Germany, such a modern and developed country, nor was much known about this

problem. Silence reigned. That year, as usual, the Summer University for Women was held in Berlin, where women from all over the country came together with feminist activists to exchange and share experiences in a week of activities. There a woman who had been working with women drug addicts in the United States—thus crossing paths with the reality of sexual abuse—met another who had been working in England directly with the survivors of abuse. The two women talked and talked. What united them even more than their work experiences was that both had suffered abuse as children, both had buried the experience, both had found that their memories had been triggered in the heat of their professional work and both of them felt a desire to begin doing something.

They made use of the arena offered by the university and chose the simplest and most direct method: they tacked little notices up on tree trunks and walls, inviting any other survivors of sexual abuse present at the event. Five other women joined them.

These first seven began to talk. They got to know each other, exchanged views, talked repeatedly, and the following year, in 1983, they decided to organize a massive public gathering. Not all of the 160 women who attended that pioneer meeting were survivors, but all enthusiastically decided to get involved in the issue. Their ages ranged from 25 to 40. Some publicly recounted their own history of abuse, which gave the scene a particularly emotional level. No one had ever seen anything like it in Germany. The first four self-help groups were born of this gathering.

At the same time, a group of professional women—doctors, psychologists and the like—started taking an interest because they knew women who they intuited were also survivors but had not yet spoken to anyone. Based on their own experiences, the first seven women spoke with those professionals, providing clues about how to address the topic. The same year, both groups came together to found Wildwasser.

“We call ourselves Raging Waters,” says Dorothy, her intense blue eyes sparkling, “because it’s a symbol of what we want to be. We want to have strength and we want to make noise, like a waterfall. Waterfalls are also beautiful, adorned with foam, and their transparent waters reflect the colors of the rainbow. These beautiful raging waters find their own path among the rocks and stones. We want to be just like this clean water that pours forth impetuously, forcefully and making a powerful noise. We want to declare that we have survived and affirm that we’re going to find our way.”

Speaking out made us human

In the beginning, there was the word. By speaking out, they found each other. By speaking, they discovered how to begin to act.

Humans have been speaking for some two million years. The first words—pronounced at night, when early human beings gathered around the recently discovered fire and much later perfected and made increasingly complex and beautiful—constitute our most valuable heritage as humanity. We have safeguarded our collective memory in words. Both the low position of our larynx and the development of what is called Broca’s area—a small but important space of the human brain situated in the left frontal lobe of the cerebral cortex that is involved in language processing, speech production and comprehension—permitted our species to communicate with words.

There’s no greater revolution than that. Sharing words permitted us to get where we are today. No other tool or technology has made us advance nearly as much. Speaking is what made us human. And so far, words are what humanize us. In a universal ethic, valid for any religion or for none of them, respect for the word, “not lying,” is a commandment, a value, a principle. Giving “a name to things,” translating into words everything that would be found in paradise, is one of the privileges and missions that God confides to the humans recently formed by his hands in the Hebrew book of Genesis.

In the dawn of time

when we learned to speak...

In the long history of our evolution, at the beginning of humanity, female humans spoke much more than males. They developed language while men evolved to hunt. The men’s lives depended on their ability to pursue bison, stags and mammoths. They learned to track animals

and organize mental maps to help them hunt. And they learned to remain quiet. They spent hours walking and stalking their prey in silence, with nonverbal signs the only form of expression.

Women, in contrast, spoke constantly as they awaited the return of the men with the catch that would guarantee them sustenance. Speaking, they accompanied each other and overcame the fear of the wild beasts around them. Speaking, they shared their experience collecting fruit and seeds. Speaking, they learned to understand their offspring and take better care of them. And the development of their children's language depended on their own words. The women taught them to talk.

Millions of years of evolution and natural selection created profound differences. Today, the female brain is configured differently than the male one. It's more and better integrated. Women use both hemispheres of the cerebral cortex to speak, while men only use the left one. Even today, the tracks of that ancestral past are being discovered in our differences. In all cultures, in all latitudes and at all times, women are more loquacious, more expressive. They enjoy the pleasure of talking, especially in each other's company. And it is proven that girls learn to speak sooner, do it more clearly, enjoy conversing with each other from a very early age and tend to be better at school in writing, grammar and reading comprehension.

Three keys locked it in:

Fear, modesty and pain

All of these characteristics come from the depths of time. But now they are being put to use in the indispensable reflection involved in dealing with and surviving sexual abuse. The universal message contained in the slogan "break the silence," sent out to women and girls, to all of society, has to translate into more than the need or urgency of public denunciation and accusations in courts. There are important prior steps: as in Genesis, the very first thing is "giving a name to things."

Talking openly about sexuality was not possible in the era of prohibitions and taboos, and has still not been fully attained in the current era when inhibitions are falling away. If speaking of sexuality in a mature, responsible and festive way—which is not the same as banally, vulgarly or morbidly—is still a utopia, speaking of sexual abuse is particularly fraught. In human sexuality, profoundly distorted by gender inequity, this is one of the issues most protected by a silence locked under the three keys of pain, timidity and fear. It is frightening to talk about "it"; doing so makes one feel ashamed, and it's very painful.

Many women go to their grave without ever having spoken to anyone about what happened to them. And many choose to die so they won't ever have to talk about "it." Many girls who were abused by their fathers or stepfathers in their own home say that they grew up thinking that "it" happened to all girls and was supposed to happen, that it's simply how life is. Many women have cast what happened to them into oblivion because at that very moment the need to survive froze inside of them any word that would describe it. Due to memory's tricks, many others, particularly those who were very small when it happened, are unable to remember the deeds whose consequences they are suffering.

It is essential to speak of "it" by name, surrounding the experience with a circle of words, dissecting the feelings with the most appropriate words. It is always the abusers who are favored by silence, be it the personal silence of the victim or social silence. And it always harms the abused. In the face of these tragedies, silence is a routine that lulls. And as such, it is an obstacle to a healthy psychology. That routine, that silence, has to be broken. It's virtually impossible to pass from victim to survivor without talking, without naming it. Precisely what self-help groups offer is the possibility of talking about it in a collective setting, among survivors.

Breaking the silence:

Conflicts and counterarguments

Speaking as survivors both among themselves and together to society was how Raging Waters was forged. The organization of these German women was already functioning when in 1983 several of them decided to speak openly of their sexual abuse in press, radio and television interviews. Their photos appeared as well. "We didn't want them to be anonymous testimonies.

We felt it was necessary to expose the issue to public opinion, that it was time to rock the boat. It took a lot of courage to take that step, but we did it," recalls Christiane, with a smile of satisfaction.

The word always has an impact. It creates, transforms, builds. It confronts, obliging the listener to reflect. And, naturally, it generates controversy. Speaking up always has consequences. Some of the first conflicts triggered by that unprecedented way of "breaking the silence," for example, were with the most top-down leftist groups. It's worth recalling their arguments because some of them are still being used today, by our own "Lefts," in another context. Why make such a fuss about sexual abuse, they complained, if it's just one of many varied expressions of violence among human beings. They alleged that it wasn't a suitable problem for the Left's struggles and should be resolved within the family. They argued in favor of family therapy and didn't believe that the state and society had any responsibility regarding the perpetrators.

Marveling today at the road she has already traveled, Dorothy recalls: "There was another, even more insidious argument. Important people from a certain segment of the Left claimed that sexuality must be free and liberated, even when it involved children. Although they dressed their arguments in fancy theories, what they were justifying and defending was pedophilia. And as sexual freedom had been a central issue for the Left in the sixties, they interpreted our words, also liberated but never heard before, as those of feminists repressed within our own sexuality. And with that, they disqualified us. It was clear to us that ideology always seeks—and usually finds—some way to oppose change."

All changes are slow, and not everybody embraces them at the same time. Some never do. It's perplexing and worrying, for example, to read the literary sublimation of pedophilia in *Memoria de mis putas tristes*, the latest novel by Nobel Laureate Gabriel García Márquez; it is particularly lamentable in such a brilliant author at a time when humanity is growing increasingly aware of this crime.

We know how to speak;

we're a country with an oral culture

The male brain is neither better nor worse than the female one; they're just different, complementary. And it's not enough to tolerate the differences, as some propose, or even respect them, as others who have gone a bit further along say. The ideal is to celebrate them. But we have to get to know them first. As US anthropologist Helen Fisher says, male brains are extremely classified and have a huge capacity to separate and store information. At the end of a day in which numerous incidents have taken place, the male brain can file them all away. Because a female's brain typically can't store information this way, problems continue flying around her head. The best approach for a woman is to talk about her problems, not necessarily to find solutions or reach conclusions, but to slough them off. Men talk to themselves silently and women think out loud.

Many women have found self-help survivor groups to be a liberating tool because of the word, the shared word. The groups don't offer solutions; they let the women lighten their load, reduce its weight, free themselves from the fatigue it produces. They allow the women to think aloud, in front of others, with others and for others.

In 1992, after ten years of experience with self-help groups, Evi Striefler of Raging Waters, with the collaboration of Martina Birresborn, Dorothy Rula and Lydia Sandrock, put together a manual as a sort of guide to help sexual abuse survivors organize their own groups. What this guidebook proposes would be truly "revolutionary" in Nicaragua because we're a country with an oral culture. So much so that our deaf children invented their own autochthonous sign language, which researchers the world over are studying with amazement. It was these children's own "linguistic big bang."

We Nicaraguans know how to talk; we want to talk. But we don't always feel free to do so. In rural areas, Nicaraguan women don't speak in public if men are present. Machismo has taught them to remain quiet. To complicate things, our particular brand of oral culture goes hand in hand with a non-reflexive culture. Organizing, systematizing, ordering, sequencing are not habits of Nicaraguan culture, which is more inclined to rhetorical rambling, verbal explosions as brilliant in their production as they are erratic in their orientation. It's as if the world begins anew each day, the previous day's experiences blocked from our memory. The

failure to accumulate and learn from experience is one of the thickest roots of underdevelopment, certainly of ours. Worse yet, Nicaraguan culture is proud of its *capacidad de aguante*, the ability to keep putting one foot in front of the other despite the traumatic misfortunes that come our way with cruel regularity, be they droughts, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, wars, domestic violence or sexual abuse, or just the grinding everyday poverty, malnutrition, exclusion and their shattered political or personal hopes.

The self-help groups are about trying to organize women's words so that, sharing them, they can begin to understand what happened, and by understanding it in the present begin to free themselves from a past that silence has made unbearable. Using words to order those feelings from the past helps women assume the fact that they are survivors with security and dignity, replacing old feelings of powerlessness, blame and isolation with the sense that "we are," "we can" and "we're not alone." Getting there requires words, naming things. But it also requires speaking in order, sequentially, systematically, listening and assimilating, reflecting on what has been said and heard.

"It's also legitimate not to speak in these groups," my friend hastened to stress. "There's also room for women who are victims and have not yet been able to find words for their feelings. They come and they listen. The groups also welcome those who can only learn to speak by hearing other women do it."

We're a country with an authoritarian culture...

We're also a country of foremen and peons, of bosses and employees, with leadership traits molded in authoritarian-ism and the formalism of hierarchal power. From this angle, too, there is something very positive in these groups: the women decide when to meet, establish the rules of their own game, can decide to change or fine-tune them on their own and engage in an ongoing evaluation of themselves. All this creates a non-hierarchical environment of extremely enriching horizontal relations. And this is the source of personal empowerment.

The groups aren't led by a therapist or any other professional. Nor are they conceived of as an alternative to or competition for therapy. As the Raging Waters guidebook says: "An important self-help principle—one that differentiates it from therapy—is that the women mutually support each other, helping themselves." Solidarity combines with individual reconstruction, helping it along, although it could have an initial outside push. In the Raging Waters methodology, two more experienced women from the organization participate in the new group's first meeting, then come back for the third one. After that, the women are on their own and proceed at their own pace.

...and a resigned religious culture

We are a country resigned to "God's designs." Such dependence on "God's will"—an attitude so contrary to what Jesus of Nazareth proposed to us by proclaiming a God of life and liberty, who wants us to be free and vital—keeps a good part of Nicaragua's population, women in particular, paralyzed, tethered, immobilized, fearful. It keeps them ignorant of their duties and rights; only acknowledging masters and caudillos.

With resigned patience, wives hope that "Providence" will eventually lead their husband to change his wife-beating ways. As long as this providential miracle does not come to pass, they accept the blows as "God's will." With patient resignation, they accept marital sexual relations that are nothing more than rape, convinced that by doing so they are being good wives and fulfilling "God's will." This submissive attitude prepares the way for small and teenage girls to accept sexual abuse with resignation, incapacitating them to say no. This attitude largely explains the silence surrounding such acts.

The essence of the self-help groups lies in each survivor taking responsibility for her own healing process. Each woman is made responsible for understanding herself and other women, for rising up, going forward, growing, healing. Miracles that will change reality are neither requested nor expected. Each woman determines to change that reality from within herself.

Meeting places, conditions, periods, frequency...

The Raging Waters manual offers very concrete suggestions that depart from proven experience. The groups must not have more than 10 women; the meetings must take place in “normal spaces”—for example the hall of some women’s center—and avoiding closed-in spaces. This is just one more expression of wanting to bring abuse out of the “private” sphere into which it has been locked by those who don’t want it talked about.

Some suggestions are offered for joining a group: the woman should not have an acute addiction to pills, alcohol or drugs and should not have additional personal burdens such as pregnancy, serious illnesses, even upcoming exams, etc., because these problems require specific support and could overburden the group.

Continuity is stressed as a way to consolidate the group. In Germany, groups usually go on for a year or two, meeting weekly for a number of months. Some keep up this pace for several months until the group stops existing, while others begin with weekly sessions, then move to bimonthly ones. The women themselves decide the frequency according to their needs. With women in Nicaragua facing so many urgent and profound needs, what rhythms might be most suitable here?

The manual proposes five stages for each gathering, which usually lasts a couple of hours: the opening “ray,” the “round for leftovers,” the “core” theme, the reactions and the closing “ray.” At the beginning, the women all share how they “feel,” then evaluate the previous meeting, sharing the mark it has left on them; then, being sure to leave enough time, they get into the common theme, the one at the core of the meeting. It closes with reactions to the theme and final impressions about how the women felt in the encounter.

Wise proposals born of experience

The manual recommends not going beyond the time limit decided upon. A lot of importance is put on knowing how to set limits and sticking to them. “Norms” are suggested for the sharing: each woman should have the opportunity to finish everything she wants to say and must be listened to attentively by the others, who may express support and interest by asking questions to understand better but not give opinions or advice. This respect deepens the sense of personal empowerment.

The manual mentions the usefulness of establishing “contracts” among the participants, with common time limits for all. These agreements can range from pledging to feel part of the group without dropping out for a fixed time to agreeing not to attempt suicide during that time.

The manual also proposes a long list of issues for the core theme: getting to know each woman with her history and trajectory; who they’ve talked to about the abuse; what reactions they had and what they would have liked them to be; ambivalence toward their family, other people or the perpetrator of the abuse; problems and characteristics of the survivor’s relationship with her mother; avoidance mechanisms in childhood and now; feelings of guilt... A particularly important central theme is the collective recognition of the personal strengths achieved over all the years by the very fact of having survived. Another one can be deciding about public actions or debating concrete news items.

Confidentiality: Delicate and fundamental

It is fundamental for everything said in the group to be completely confidential. This is particularly important in Nicaragua, where gossip weaves its way into the national culture with surprising facility, whether to destroy or to build. Gossip is the mortar of our thinking, whether to construct prejudices, distancing and enmity, or to build friends and instructively moralize.

Talking, conversing, chatting is not the same as gossiping. Gossip is a conversation limited by social norms. It has a special space in arbitrary, authoritarian and macho societies that women tend to occupy because they are excluded from power and at the same time are the best verbalizers in any society. It’s the space left to them, and the one that affirms them. Don’t women gossip more than men? They particularly gossip about issues of sexuality, hiding themselves in rumor, not knowing how to talk about “it.” The self-help groups are a learning experience where women can train themselves to talk about sexuality, to tell the facts without getting waylaid by the tempting cultural imperative of gossiping about them.

But if someone in the group breaks the confidentiality rule and the words shared in the group get out into the street and circulate as gossip, then mutate into rumors, they turn from

healing words into harmful ones. "The rule is that everything said in the group stays in the group and that each woman always speaks about herself and never in somebody else's name. We expect to find the same confidentiality from group participants we would from a truly professional therapist," a Raging Waters member explained to me.

That is the paradox of these groups: telling other women what happened makes them vulnerable by putting the information into other people's hands; at the same time, the very act of telling others takes some of the weight off a load that is too heavy to continue carrying alone. The strictest confidentiality is the alchemy that cleanses the paradox. It's the only way vulnerability can be transmuted into strength.

Conflicts aren't failures

Conflicts are not generated only by violated confidentiality. This method and the process it generates are not immune to conflict. If it were, it wouldn't be human, and if that were the case, we wouldn't be talking about such vital, intimate issues. The manual specifies: "If conflicts exist in the group, this doesn't mean failure. Conflicts make the groups more alive and give them the opportunity to strengthen and grow. Resolving conflicts is also a positive part of learning."

At the same time, a clue to avoid conflicts: "We must be especially careful because group pressure, new standards, unconscious appraisals, unreasonably high personal objectives and even making suggestions can rapidly reproduce new hierarchical structures." The following are examples of objectives that could be too high: "I have to come out the other end of this in half a year," "I have to reveal everything in this group," "I don't have to cry," "We should start feeling good soon." The manual goes on to say, "It's always problematic to make comparisons: 'Which abuse was worse?' or 'Why should I come to the group if I didn't live through something as horrible as the others?'"

Another recommendation: it's important to periodically ask how the group is going—I like this, I don't like that, the meetings are this way or that, I feel I'm not getting anywhere, I haven't been able to overcome this or that... "Shared experience and common suffering aren't enough to be able to talk," warns the manual. "Women who feel the need to remain silent shouldn't ask others or themselves to speak freely or early on about everything they've been through. It's important for each woman to give herself time and observe how she's managing to construct her own security... The self-help group can be a space for intense work on remembering the experience of sexual abuse in childhood or adolescence, as long as all the women feel it and want it to be that way. But the group doesn't necessarily have to achieve that. It's most essential aspect is for the women to feel supported in daily life, to feel we aren't alone, that we're part of a reference group."

The end of the group is a new beginning

When the group ends or the number of women participating in it shrinks, explains the manual, it doesn't mean that the group failed. "Interests can change and the women can come to the joint conclusion that they no longer have a common objective. Or a woman's interest in the group can dwindle once the common objective has been achieved, because it may be that the only objective left is expressing herself, not being alone, becoming more informed. It must be recognized as an achievement for each woman that being in the group has enabled her to state that she wants to go it alone from that point on. Another achievement could be that they all have a better idea where they are now, what the next objective in their life will be and in what way they will feel more strengthened (therapy, a new job, a new relationship or the one they already have). Some groups throw a party to conclude their process."

Self-help groups are economically sustainable

Self-help groups for women living with domestic violence—which should more appropriately be called "gender violence"—began to crop up in Nicaragua in early 2004, when Costa Rican women organized in CEFEMINA exported their experience with "Woman, you're not alone" Self-Help Groups. According to Ana Carcedo, a trainer for these groups in both Costa Rica and Nicaragua, one of the many advantages of this methodology is that it's economically sustainable. She

calculates the costs of maintaining the network of groups for a thousand women in Costa Rica at only \$20,000, including a central office, a telephone, publications and the training activities. Facilitating isn't included, because the structure itself is always horizontal and voluntary.

These groups' Costa Rican promoters calculate that since their work began in 1986 some 15,000 women have passed through such groups, some 75% of whom got involved because they suffered aggression from their partner. Later evaluations demonstrated that 67% were able to stop the violence due to the new capacities and self-awareness they acquired in the groups.

In almost all its points, this initiative is very similar to that of self-help groups for sexual abuse survivors. There has now also been experience directly in Nicaragua, in the Masaya Collective, with self-help groups for mothers of girls who have suffered abuse. But forming groups only of women who survived sexual abuse in childhood would be the novelty in Nicaragua, and not easy, although it would undoubtedly be of great benefit, given the extent to which this problem is coming to light here.

The specific, new aspect is that
we're all sexual abuse survivors

"It's the specific aspect, the fact that we come together as 'colleagues,' that is the most essential part of this proposal," insists my friend, "because only sexually abused women know the harm the abuse causes and can fully understand those who've suffered similar damage. Only together, among ourselves, through the word, can we transform this damage into potential. This might seem excluding, but it is simply realistic, proven by our own experience. Having suffered sexual abuse in childhood creates a special and specific dynamic in the groups that is actually the key to change. That key is necessary."

She went on to tell me the following: "In Managua I participated in a self-help group with women who were suffering domestic violence, and I felt it wasn't working for me, or that it only worked up to a certain point. The experiences are too different and the people don't understand what you're saying. This is even more necessary if you suffered incest in the home, which is a much more specific pain. Sexual abuse in childhood and in the home leaves such a particular trauma that it isn't comparable to the harm caused by other forms of violence; they aren't less horrible; they're just different. Suffering sexual abuse in childhood makes you different than you would have been without the abuse. It's like a 'permanent imprint.'"

The essential aspect of the method we're suggesting is the idea of specifically creating groups of women who have survived childhood sexual abuse. "It's a bit like what happens with Alcoholics Anonymous," explained my friend. "They meet with other alcoholics, rather than mixing with those who have drug problems, even though both are addictions."

Since she mentioned Alcoholics Anonymous, which has achieved such notable results in Nicaragua over many years, I asked her if she saw any parallels with the famous twelve steps around which the AA groups are organized. "The most similar," she responded, "is the twelfth step, because one of the results that makes you feel you've gotten beyond what was blocking you is that, feeling supported, you feel capable of supporting others."

In any event, these survivors' self-help groups cannot be imposed and only function if the initiative comes from the survivors themselves, sparked by their own conviction. They are born within. When I was in Berlin, they explained to me that Tauwetter was created in 1990, seven years after Wildwasser. It's a similar association of men who were abused in childhood and decided to group together to support each other and others. "They began the same way, with a self-help group of seven men," Dorothy told me, "and since then they've promoted self-help groups with adult men. We now collaborate with them. They decided to call themselves Tauwetter, which means 'Thaw,' to evoke the end of winter, when the snow melts and everything begins to bloom again with the arrival of spring. For them, as for us, speaking is equivalent to melting the ice and recovering the warmth of hope, dignity and a future."

Love and forgiveness is not the way to go

I was curious to hear the most common questions asked of my friend by those who came to hear her when she visited groups in León, Masaya and Managua to discuss the importance of promoting these specific self-help groups in Nicaragua. "Once I identified myself as a survivor, they asked me lots and lots of questions," she told me, "and it seemed to me that they came out

of personal interest more than professional interest. I intuited that the women, and men, who were asking them were survivors themselves, that they had remained silent and wanted to know more about my experience so they could explain their own, could respond to their own questions, which had been hidden their whole life. In our groups, we call this 'reflecting': seeing oneself mirrored in what another is saying, hearing clues in their words that awaken our own suppressed memory. I felt some of that in the concerns they were expressing to me.

"One of the most common questions they asked was about whether I'd forgiven my abuser. Given the weight of religious aspects in Nicaragua—and by that I mean religion understood as something almost magical, without much reflection—it seemed to me that they were looking for instant solutions based on 'love.' I told them that many people recommend that we pardon those who harmed us, because they believe that forgiving heals, that pardon cures. But it doesn't work like that. First, you have to heal yourself, and that's what the groups are for. Then, when you've accomplished that, forgiveness follows on its own, or you might not even need it."

"Forget about a sweet
and submissive Jesus"

By proposing that women who are victims of violence should let go of what she calls the "ethic of instant forgiveness," the lucid theologian Pamela Cooper-White reaffirms the common sense of my agnostic friend. She argues that this forgiveness, so often recommended in confessionals and sermons by both pastors and priests, not to mention by pious women, simply masks the memories and negative feelings—rage, even hatred and desire for revenge—and keep them far from our consciousness.

And because confronting all these feelings is the only way to heal the original trauma, Cooper-White recommends that victims never offer either instant or induced forgiving in the name of religion. She proposes that they forget the sweet and submissive Jesus and remember Jesus' anger in the temple and the words of the prophets who speak of God's 'justified fury.'

Months later, after she had returned to Germany, my friend participated in the campaign now known as the National Day of Action Against the Abuse of Minors in the university city of Göttingen in central Germany. Some 500 people showed up. "The most impressive thing," she recounted, "was that some twenty of us introduced ourselves as survivors, there in the public square, and demanded effective action from the politicians. I don't think I could have done that if I hadn't previously gone through two years in a self-help group." Will we see something similar in a public plaza in Nicaragua some day?

Distinguishing between pain and
suffering is a change for women

Among the sagacious and bold proposals put forward by Mexican feminist Marcela Lagarde, currently an elected legislator, as an effective way to change women's consciousness is that they must learn to distinguish between pain and suffering. She proposes that women "learn not to suffer."

According to Lagarde: "We have to understand that pain is a difficult process, but one that can be lived with, and that what we have to avoid is suffering. Pain is inevitable; but we don't have to suffer. Suffering is produced when pain doesn't end, when it lingers and sets. Suffering is pain stretched out over time. Suffering is also unprocessed pain: its cause has already disappeared but we haven't managed to process it. Not processing pain means that we still live with its manifestations, but haven't learned from it. Suffering is also the sum of different pains: we superimpose one pain on top of another, without processing them. Over time, the pain fossilizes and turns into suffering. There's suffering when a pain from the past is active in the present. There's suffering when a current pain sends you back to all the unprocessed pains accumulated over the course of your life. When this happens, you are hurt not only by the concrete and immediate pain of today, but also by that of a year or five years ago—or by life itself. That is suffering.

"Suffering is considered a female virtue in Latin American culture. People say: 'What a good woman she is; how she suffers.' But we don't want suffering women; we want happy women. Saying no to suffering is an ethical position. After doing that, we have to process the unprocessed pain. What does that mean, really? It means being able to look the pain of the past

in the eye, put a name to it and say, 'That happened to me, and this is what it's called. It means being able to comprehend why it happened to us, understand it even if we're not in agreement and explain its causes. In this process of coming to terms with the pain and keeping it from turning into suffering, we have to renounce our loyalty to who we were at the time of the pain.'

Combining the power of the word
with the power of the group

This could be precisely the most profound effect of the self-help group methodology for child sexual abuse survivors in Nicaragua. Women could learn to identify their pain by talking, and by doing so could stop suffering, although not in some magical way as proposed by so many religious humbugs on so many radio programs. It would be a learning process; learning how to stop suffering. It would mean renouncing being victims, ceasing to be the same person who as a result of the abuse collapsed under a pain that was undecipherable at their tender age.

The efficacy of the groups, of all groups where women come together in a spirit of friendship to share their problems, anxieties and projects as a scientific way of dealing with stress, was demonstrated in a study by the University of California at Los Angeles a couple of years ago. The women who authored the research announced that the scientific discoveries of their study had revolutionized five decades of investigation and conclusions on stress, conducted mainly by men.

The effectiveness lies in the combined power of the word and the group. "The group," commented Marcela Lagarde in that investigation, "is a discovery that allows women to look at themselves and find themselves without judgment, to hear their own voice, think by and for themselves, doubt, learn about and reflect on their lives in an atmosphere of confidence and of gender identification."

Water poured from cup to cup

This method works. It seems cut to the measure of survivors' deepest needs. At the time of writing all this, the fascinating novel by Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones*, fell into my hands. Susie Salmon, the 14-year-old protagonist who has been raped and murdered, proves that speaking also works in "her heaven." One day, as Susie is looking down at what is going on in the world of her father, sister, little brother, mother and all her classmates since she was wrenched so violently away—because the book also explores how this crime affects the victim's surroundings—she meets another little girl who was raped and murdered by the same man:

I was Flora Hernandez, she said. "What was your name?"

I told her, and then I began to cry with comfort, to know another girl he had killed.

"The others will be here soon," she said.

And as Flora twirled, other girls and women came through the field in all directions. Our heartache poured into one another like water from cup to cup. Each time I told my story, I lost a bit, the smallest drop of pain.

It does work. It works to use words to empty the pain from one cup into another.



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ENVIO No. 285, April 2005