

Nicaragua

A Story of Hope: Six Months of Breaking Silences

It's time to expose the grave after-effects of sexual abuse. This tragedy continues to be a silent epidemic in Nicaragua, but today that silence is finally beginning to be broken, and by the very women who used to hush the "secret." This is a story of hope, field notes of an experience that may liberate many Nicaraguan women.

Brigitte Hauschild

All over the world, including Nicaragua, sexual abuse is the worst expression of the unequal power relations between women and men, adults and children. This abuse, this crime, is eating away at the foundations of Nicaraguan society.

It's time to learn

We read about this tragedy in the newspapers almost every day. What we never see is news about the grave after-effects of sexual abuse, the lasting damage this crime can do to its victims. Nor is there awareness that the violence of sexual abuse against children can be reproduced later, in those children's adult lives, generating new violence against others in an unending chain that imprisons our society.

The Nicaraguan media haven't carried any reviews or commentary on books like *La Pederastia en la Iglesia Católica* (Pederasty in the Catholic Church) by Spanish journalist Pepe Rodríguez, which would teach us how widespread child abuse by priests is. Also unavailable in any Nicaraguan bookstore is psychologist Alice Miller's book (www.alice-miller.com), which shows how our early emotional experiences get imprinted in our bodies, coded as a certain kind of information that unconsciously influences our way of thinking, feeling and acting as adults, often resulting in a vicious circle of new violence. She shows how that chain is forged when we bring our children up with physical and psychological violence; more importantly, she teaches us how to break the chain. Nor can you buy in Nicaragua the extraordinary book *The Courage to Heal*. Written by two US women, Ellen Bass y Laura Davis, and already translated into 13 languages, this book lucidly identifies the many consequences of sexual abuse and accompanies us on the road to healing these wounds.

Only recently did US psychologist Judith Herman's pioneering book *Trauma and Recovery* become available in Nicaragua. In it, Herman explains that during most of the 20th century our knowledge of traumatic disorders was developed through the study of war veterans. Only with the emergence of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s was it recognized that women's experience of post-traumatic disorders, due to violence in civilian life, was actually more common than traumatic disorders suffered by men as a result of war.

Many Nicaraguan women have been doubly victimized, suffering violence in the war and violence in their homes. How many of them also bear the scars of another trauma, sexual abuse in their childhood? There are no studies estimating how many women have survived this triple trauma. It's time to learn about the consequences of childhood sexual abuse, which continues to be Nicaragua's most silent and secret tragedy.

Today, fissures are beginning to appear in that silence and those secrets. Just short of a year ago, the first mutual support groups of dedicated women determined to work on the after-effects of the sexual abuse they suffered as children started operating in Nicaragua. My "travel diary," a diary of hope, recounts how this process developed and what the women of Aguas Bravas Nicaragua (Wildwater Nicaragua) are achieving.

I'm a survivor

Why did I take this path, and why did I encourage others to take it? Between 1988 and 2001 I lived and worked with the women of a textile cooperative in Managua's Villa José Benito Escobar barrio. All along, I also felt part of the women's movement and joined the Women's Network against Violence when it was formed in 1992.

I am a survivor of sexual abuse. During my childhood, several members of my immediate family

repeatedly abused me sexually, and over the years, like so many other girls, I developed mechanisms to survive the pain that let me “naturalize,” “normalize” what they did to me, make me forget what had happened. I buried the memory of abuse within myself. Everyone who suffers sexual abuse in their childhood develops their own mechanisms. One of mine was to “pack up” the experience in nightmares. For years, I had the same one over and over again: in the deepest darkness, a giant would approach and grab me, a very small girl. Nothing more. There are women who remember the abuse they suffered in detail. It probably depends on how old they were when it happened.

My story began when I was very young. The scars left by the abuse became confused with my personality. “That’s just how I am,” I always thought. As a child I was depressed, and as a woman subject to abrupt changes, lacking stability in my relationships, very low in self-esteem...

The many and severe after-effects of sexual abuse

Childhood sexual abuse leaves many scars, some of which can mark us our entire lives. The ability to develop trust—so fundamental in human life—is permanently damaged. We’re born with that ability, we need it to survive. We’re totally defenseless in our first years of life without the adults around us. Rebuilding the capacity for trust is always painful. In many survivors, we can see one of two extremes: some don’t trust anyone, others trust everyone. We don’t know how to distinguish who is worthy of trust. Another effect is that we don’t feel anything. To avoid suffering during sexual abuse, we shut down our feelings. Our body becomes “dead.” Afterward, throughout our lives, we may be able to express feelings, but not to feel them. Rebuilding the capacity to feel is also very difficult because it means re-encountering the abused child we used to be and always carry within us.

Another of the effects is difficulty enjoying sexual life. Many survivors can’t be happy in sexual relationships because their body will suddenly remember and not want to be touched. Others become promiscuous, addicted to sex, or end up in the slavery of prostitution.

Many of us who are survivors have self-esteem problems, because sexual abuse leaves us with a profound feeling of guilt and shame. We feel dirty; we feel nobody loves us because “that” happened to us. It’s very hard to believe that we’re valuable people, human beings with many good qualities, and difficult to accept that it was the adults who didn’t know how to free us from our painful experience. When we rebuild ourselves, we discover that the survival mechanisms we developed are simply our own qualities. Often, the sexual abuse we suffered in childhood prevents us from protecting our own children—or the other way around: we overprotect them, fearing the same will happen to them.

We need to learn more about such after-effects of sexual abuse in order to understand the serious problems it causes in society. The gravity of these effects must be taken into account by research centers, teachers’ colleges and psychology, social work and law departments.

When the moment of remembering arrives

Those of us who survived sexual abuse will never know what kind of people we would have been, what professional path we might have taken, what life we could have had, if we hadn’t suffered abuse. We can’t erase that trauma and make it disappear. All we can do is work on healing the scars. To begin that work we have to remember what happened to us. And talk about it.

For many years, I forgot. Despite having lived in Germany in the 1970s, when German women were starting to talk about this issue, I didn’t remember. Now I know that I forgot because I didn’t yet have the strength to remember. And that’s what happens to most of us: we only remember when we have the inner strength to confront the truth and start on the path to healing. It will take us years to come through, but we can’t live in peace if we don’t work on our scars. Meanwhile, we have the capacity to “function,” which is also a survival mechanism, even if we sometimes do it very badly.

We function... until the moment of remembering arrives. Sometimes that moment appears unexpectedly. Sometimes it bowls us over and produces a life-or-death crisis.

The moment of remembering what we lived through when we were young is always very personal and depends on many factors. Some “trigger” provokes it for most of us. Many women remember when their son or daughter reaches the age they were when they suffered the abuse. They fear a repetition of the tragedy they experienced. Or they only remember when their own son or daughter becomes a victim of

abuse.

I started to ask myself questions that took me into my past in 1998, when I was translating Zoilamérica Narváez's testimony about her stepfather, Daniel Ortega, into German. It was several decades after what had happened to me, but only then were my memories awakened.

My healing process

In 2000, I started therapy. Very soon, I felt the need to exchange experiences with other women who had suffered the same thing. But at that time there were no such spaces in Nicaragua. Not even in the Women's Network against Violence. I felt very alone. I looked for a self-help group and found one with a facilitator for women who had experienced various kind of violence. Some suffered physical violence at the hands of their husbands, others were emotionally mistreated by their partners, others were forced to have sex in their marriages, two were lesbians who felt rejected by society... I spoke there about my pain: I said I had suffered sexual abuse in my childhood, but couldn't remember the details. I felt a lot of solidarity. They felt sorry for me. But nobody understood what I was talking about, because nobody had experienced what I had, or at least, no one said so.

This group was useful to me: mainly it helped me realize I needed something else. That was one of the reasons I left Nicaragua and returned to Germany. I needed to go back to the place where it had all happened, to climb the same stairs I climbed as a child, be in the same room, open the same doors. I also returned to confront my abusers.

In Germany, I came in contact with Wildwasser—or Wildwater. This association, which originated over 20 years ago and has offices in some 25 German cities, offered me exactly what I needed: the chance to participate in a mutual support group of women who had lived through the same painful experience I had, and were starting the healing process. In March of 2002, I joined one of these groups. The days I went there became the most beautiful in my week. Participating in that group almost became an addiction, and for a time I felt as if I couldn't live without the group. I was part of the process. Two and a half years later, things had changed. I had healed.

Nicaragua: Next stage on my path of hopes

Once we're healed, we want others to be healed. And we feel capable of supporting others. Nicaragua was my goal, the next stage on my path of hope. In a study done in León in 2000, 27% of the women and 20% of the men consulted admitted that they were sexually abused during childhood or adolescence. According to Nicaraguan National Police data, they received ten charges of sexual abuse per day in 2005, and for a variety of reasons only one case in ten was pursued legally. All the Nicaraguan studies and research recognize that the limited statistics available under-document the problem.

In Nicaragua, as in Germany, I dared to talk openly about my story. My silence and my secret had been broken; now I wanted to keep on talking and to support others as they talked. In August of 2006 I proposed to the Network of Women against Violence that we conduct workshops on applying the guide for mutual support groups that *Wildwasser* had been using very successfully for 20 years. To my surprise, 15 women's centers all over Nicaragua immediately signed up to take part in these workshops, in addition to 17 women who identified themselves as survivors and wanted to join a group to work on their own scars. For the first time, they felt a door was opening for them.

We translated the guide into Spanish, calling it "Every road begins with a single step," and printed 14,000 copies. We decided on printing such a large edition so we could be generous in handing them out. The thirst was obvious, and we wanted to make sure there was enough water to satisfy it. We knew many women weren't going to speak out, but they might read. Breaking the silence about our own history is a process that takes a long time—more so if the person is a psychologist or a community educator, as most of the women from these centers were. It's easier to offer support to others from an office or organization than to deal with our own stories. But we can't heal others if we don't work on our own issues, don't touch our own wounds.

For the first time, wildwater flows outside of Germany

I started working with Abigail Figueroa and Zoraida Soza. Right away, the three of us clicked. Probably because we shared similar experiences as survivors, we felt we had known each other for a long time

and shared the desire to do something about sexual abuse, to help not only others, but also ourselves.

We began by designing the workshop methodology. We decided to open and close each day of the workshop—as the guide suggests—with “blitzes,” a methodology that lets us very briefly tell ourselves and others how we’re feeling at the moment we arrive and the moment we leave. We decided to use this method because one of the worst effects of sexual abuse is that it leaves us unable to feel. In each workshop we led, we observed how much easier it is to talk about what we do than to express how we feel.

We also decided the workshops would last two days. The first would be spent assimilating the contents of the guide: how to organize a mutual support group, how to get started, the golden rules, how to resolve conflicts that crop up, how to conclude a group. The second day would be spent imagining ourselves in one of these groups through role playing, dealing with concerns and talking and thinking together. We felt like pioneers: it was the first time anyone linked to *Wildwasser* would try to offer training on using the guide outside Germany.

The kind of group survivors need

In our discussions, the three of us clearly saw that women survivors cannot form *self-help* groups, because we can’t help each other individually. Instead, we proposed that they be *mutual support* groups. For the great majority of us, the memories are so deeply buried that merely talking, exchanging experiences with others who have the same “black holes” in their memories, can help us put together our own puzzle piece by piece. Only together can we support and help ourselves understand that we’re not “like that”—rather “like that” is how we were left by the abuse.

We need the mirror provided by other women in the group to recognize ourselves in it. Why do we put up with marital violence? Because in childhood, abuse destroyed our right to say “no” to what we didn’t want, to abuse by a father, a brother, an uncle, a stepfather, a teacher, a priest, a neighbor... Why do we always let ourselves get overburdened with work without complaining? For the same reason.

Talking behind closed doors in an atmosphere of trust we must learn to build; we search for the truth of our childhood; we pour into other women the pain we have held onto as water is poured from one cup to another; we allow ourselves to speak of things we never would outside the group; we analyze our behavior in daily life and decide to change and start practicing those changes within the group itself. In this process we lose our fear, our shame and our sense of guilt, and develop the courage to speak and defend ourselves, our children, and those of others. In the long run, the valor we acquire makes society healthier.

All this requires time and a stable group, always with the same women, with whom we share an understanding that comes of having lived through the same thing.

Trusting in the power of the word

In many parts of the world, there’s a long tradition of self-help groups to assist each other in various kinds of crisis. In Nicaragua, these are just starting to be formed; Alcoholics Anonymous has the longest experience—25 to 30 years. And now we’re starting to hear about self-help groups for people with cancer, AIDS and other illnesses.

These groups don’t have facilitators; the participants themselves organize the meetings, create the rules and determine the schedule, length and frequency of meetings. In Germany, there are houses dedicated just to hosting a wide variety of self-help groups. Municipal governments support these efforts financially because it’s now understood that those affected by such problems are the ones best able to find solutions. In turn, people’s own experience is a source of knowledge on the issue that brings them together and creates openings for new learning about these diseases and traumas. These groups demonstrate the healing power of the reflexive, responsible word.

In Nicaragua, in fact anywhere in the world, one of the state’s responsibilities is to assure all people a life free of violence. It is a constitutional right. Until sexual abuse disappears, it is also a task of the state to allocate funds so that women’s centers—and, in future, men’s centers—can provide professional care for survivors of that crime, which is also a public health problem. A government like Nicaragua’s current one, which calls itself revolutionary, should consider this. Because in order for the “wretched of

the earth” who have suffered abuse to “arise”—as the government’s slogan puts it—it is absolutely necessary for us to free ourselves of this incredibly painful burden.

The Aguas Bravas team is ready

It’s striking how quickly we survivors become convinced of the importance of a mutual support group for healing. I observed it in Germany and saw it again in Nicaragua. Our tenacity in preparing the workshops was impressive—as was the depth of the relationships we developed in the team. We were creating relationships of responsibility, equality, respect, honesty, punctuality and openness to constructive criticism. We were learning that constructive criticism is positive, because it helps us reconsider our way of thinking, overcome mistakes, change the way we interpret or analyze so many things and listen with all our senses in order to reflect anew. All this helps us grow.

My colleagues gulped when I read to the team the introduction I had drafted for the workshops—“My name is Brigitte and I’m a survivor of sexual abuse....” Wouldn’t that be too strong an opening? In fact, the participants were shocked in some rural areas where I introduced myself with those words, even though sexual abuse is something they know well, something so common.

Ocotal: First workshop, first words

The workshop calendar filled up quickly. On March 30th, at 4:10 in the morning, Abigail and I caught the bus to Ocotal, where we would hold the first workshop and have our first experience. Both of us were sleepy, but too nervous to close our eyes. We wondered many times if we had forgotten something: tape recorder, batteries, guides for the participants, the books, the flash cards of the presentation... All there. The movie they showed during the bus trip was violent from the first scene to the last. Even the romantic moments were tinged with violence. We allow too much violence in our society...

Familiar—and happy—faces were waiting for us at the Ocotal training center run by Nicaragua’s Institute of Human Promotion (INPRHU). The atmosphere was welcoming. When I did my introduction, I looked at the surprised faces and stunned expressions: how can this woman speak so openly about “that,” the thing we don’t talk about?

I told them: “The statistics say an abused girl has to tell seven adults before finding someone who will believe her. But many girls keep quiet forever after the first attempt.” They nodded their agreement. I told them: “You know the other meaning of the word “esposa” (wife), right? It means handcuffs, what the police put on criminals to stop them from escaping, from running away... Words say a lot, and sometimes they tell us what we are within the patriarchal system in which we’ve experienced our relationship with men.” They looked surprised.

In the opening “blitz” one of the participants confessed: “I don’t know if I’ll be able to speak here about what happened to me and my sister. I’ve carried it inside for thirty years. Many memories are buried, but even so, they don’t leave me in peace. I know it affects me a lot, but I don’t know how or who...”

When the silence is broken

The 16 participants in this first workshop were psychologists, nurses, social workers and social promoters from 12 different Ocotal centers and state agencies, as well as from Santa Rosa, Jalapa, Dipilto, Mozonte and Macuelizo. They introduced themselves and told us about their expectations.

One said: “Women come to the office with their abused daughter and during the discussion they mention that they experienced abuse too, but I can only look after the children, not the mothers. Maybe with the tool we’re going to learn about here I’ll have something to offer the mothers.”

Another one said: “We don’t know anything about what sexual abuse leaves behind in us. Many of us think the way we behave is quite normal, that our problems are normal.”

In their “blitzes” the women talk more about all the tasks they did before arriving and less about how they were feeling at that moment. It’s something we noticed in all the workshops: the women are so busy with all their daily work that they don’t take a moment to ask themselves how they feel.

During these two days, they’ll learn to give themselves a moment to feel and to express what they feel. One of those who would manage this said: “I feel very happy about being with this group of women. Maybe nervous, because all of us have suffered. I personally suffered marital violence for a number of

years and I've never spoken of the abuse I suffered in my childhood. I'm 53 years old and it still hurts to remember. I hope to learn something, not only for my work, but for myself."

A heavy thread—a real cord—begins to fray. Some say things in an almost veiled way; others admit similar things more openly. Some may never speak of this again. But they have already experienced the relief that comes with entering into a group where we realize that we are many, we're not alone. In every workshop, it's the same thing, the same, the same...

Worries, worries...

In the plenary session in Ocotal, when we discussed the content of the guides on preparing to form mutual support groups, the women expressed doubts about how they would work, their rules, everything that lay ahead. There are minor, medium and major worries, all important to making the road to hope successful.

"How can we ensure that no one speaks outside the group about what is said inside it?"

"What if people don't arrive on time?"

"Who'll be in charge of preparing the meeting place and leaving it in order afterward?"

"In my church, it's impossible to talk about violence, much less about sexual abuse."

"A lot of women will want to start up a group, but they don't have the money to pay for transportation... We're going to need funds for transportation."

"A lot of men won't let their wives go to a women's meeting every week."

"What do we do with the children during the meeting?"

"We can't just think of ourselves; I know men who have lived through sexual abuse, too."

"It'll be harder in rural areas, because everyone knows each other and they're likely to talk outside the group about what we say inside it."

"In my town, there's only the church building and I don't think they're going to let me have a group meet there."

"No, sexual abuse isn't spoken of in the churches, so it's not a safe place."

"Of course it's not safe. In my town they say the priest abuses the boys."

Can it work with men or with children?

The question about men gets repeated often in the different workshops: "Can this guide be used for working with men, too? Can there be mutual support groups for men?"

Twelve years after it was created, *Wildwasser* set up an organization in Berlin with the same idea: to support men who had suffered childhood sexual abuse. It's called *Tauwetter* (Thaw). Yes, I reply, the guide can work for men's groups, but it has to be the men survivors themselves who analyze the idea and make whatever changes they consider necessary.

The experience in Germany has shown us—and I think it will be the same in Nicaragua—that it's much harder for men to recognize themselves as survivors and decide to work on the consequences of the abuse they suffered. We still have a lot to learn about the scars sexual abuse leaves on men and have to search for ways to support men so they can break their silence, which is even more entrenched than the silence of women. We also need the solidarity of men who are against sexual abuse. We need to spread the belief that the damage that patriarchal masculinity causes is not only a men's issue, just as sexual abuse is not only a women's issue.

I explain to them that there was a breakthrough in Nicaragua last year that fills us with hope, when some young men from Chinandega charged Italian priest Marco Dessi with having abused them when they were children. Dessi was condemned in Italy to twelve years in prison. Later, several of the young men had the courage to call a press conference in Managua and present themselves as survivors. Their bravery and determination has slowly succeeded in bringing together young men and women in Chinandega who are starting to break centuries of silence under the slogan "Youth who believe in other youth."

The women also ask me if mutual support groups can work with children. I explain that they can't, because children who have experienced sexual abuse need a different kind of attention since they want to forget what happened as quickly as possible. The most important thing in working with boys and girls is to believe them from the start, remove them from the setting where they are being abused and create spaces where they can express their experiences and free themselves from the trauma. In addition,

while there's always the obligation of pressing charges in cases of sexual abuse of children—since they've been victims of a crime under the law—it's different with adults. Often, we only remember and speak after the statute of limitations is in effect. And besides, what we want at that point is to become healed. It's almost never our main desire to seek justice and see the abuser behind bars, however much they may deserve it.

“Can we form a group with teenagers?” I tell them it's possible and worth trying, although teenagers probably need more support. In Germany, we don't have experience with such young groups.

Cases and more cases

In the Ocotol workshop, the women got together during the breaks and talked about the cases they know: “Where I'm from, a man abused his three daughters, and the last one filed charges against him. In the court case, the father admitted it calmly: ‘Yes, it's true; I made them so I enjoy them.’ He said that.” Another woman told how a young girl in her town already has three children by her stepfather. Someone else heard her and said: “I always thought that was normal, because it happens to everyone.”

In the “closing blitz” that first day the women expressed their feeling about the day:

“I thank God for the opportunity of today. For the first time, I've let myself get close to the pain I carry inside.” Her voice became inaudible, and tears flowed.

“I know a young girl who has been abused by her brother. I'm going to tell her about this so she'll join a group.”

“We'll see how it goes tomorrow when we do the role playing... That scares me.”

“I'm leaving very happy. I wish I could talk about this as freely as you did... Maybe I'll be able to in a few years.”

“I want to help my sister. She has suffered abuse and I want to see her laugh like you someday.”

Feeling freer

The second day, several of the women were able to express themselves more freely. But they remained fearful: “Since I know what we're going to talk about now, it gives me a strange feeling in my stomach, like a tickling. I feel nervous.”

Others overcame that first fear: “Yesterday I arrived home so happy because I'd never heard of this before. And today I've come here full of enthusiasm. We've never spoken of this here, because it hurts to speak about it.” Someone else said: “I spent last night with my own memories. Today I feel more relaxed, thinking about how to help others.” Others broke the silence for the first time that second day: “I arrived here happy because I know I'm going to learn. In my house, this happened to my sister, and with our own father. She has never wanted to seek professional help. I think I can help her. I feel that I can be there for her now.”

There's always some fear because the process is very complicated, and we're just taking the first step. One person said: “My blitzes are getting mixed up. While I feel happy to be able to be here and hopeful about starting this work, I'm also afraid, scared of discovering things that maybe I don't want to discover. That's why my blitzes seem to be at cross purposes.”

Questions and more questions

In the “comment period,” which is an exercise to free oneself of burdens, the women expressed some of the things that were still bothering them. During the two days, a lot of questions, worries, comments, expectations and observations came up. Like these:

“To become free, isn't it enough to forgive the abuser?” Well, no. Forgiveness doesn't free us. Working on the after-effects is indispensable. If we do that and heal ourselves, we'll stop asking ourselves whether we forgive the abuser or not, because there won't be anything left to deal with him about; the issue of forgiveness will have lost its importance.

“During childhood, what stops us from speaking openly with adults about abuse or about an abuser?” Often, the parent-child relationship isn't good; there's an abuse of power in it. The parents prohibit things because they have the power to; they make demands because they have the power to. So we lack the trust to tell them what's happening to us. That's why it's important in these groups for women to work on their relationships with their own children.

“And what’s better: individual therapy or a mutual support group?” It’s not a matter of better or worse. Some people need both, while others prefer individual therapy because they can’t imagine speaking about abuse in a group, in front of other women. Where there’s no need or opportunity for individual therapy, the group is an excellent path.

“Can we form mixed groups of women and men?” It’s not recommended. The effects are different for men, and manifest themselves in different ways. Also, in most cases the abusers are men and the women survivors don’t have the confidence to speak in a group where there are men present. It might be different if the abuse had been committed by a woman, but I have no experience with women abusers.

Prostitution? Lesbianism? Therapy for abusers?

“Can becoming a lesbian or a homosexual be one of the effects of sexual abuse? Because that happens to some people.” There’s no scientific research to confirm this. A great deal of scientific work remains to be done to study the consequences of sexual abuse more deeply, but almost no one invests in research of this kind.

“I know women who were abused as children and became prostitutes.” This has been confirmed by several studies: many prostitutes have lived through childhood sexual abuse. We know that working on the consequences of abuse can help them escape from this slavery. There are also many women drug addicts and alcoholics who have lived through sexual abuse. It’s hard to work on abuse and addiction at the same time. If a woman tries, you have to accept her, but if she comes to the group drunk and makes a scene, it’s best to invite her to deal with her addiction first.

“Are there abusers who had psychological problems from being abused themselves and have gotten therapy to understand why they acted that way?” I don’t know of any, nor is the issue of someone seeking psychological care because they’ve committed sexual abuse documented in any of the books I’ve read. For the abusers, abuse is simply a moment of pleasure, whereas the victims are scarred for life by the abuse. What’s more common is men who were arrested for this crime being given therapy once they’re behind bars. But not in Nicaragua, so far. It’s been proven that many men who commit sexual abuse were themselves abused in childhood. We need to do better research to understand how to break this chain.

The women are the protagonists

Since there hasn’t been much experience with self-help groups in Nicaragua, we concluded that the mutual support groups we were promoting for childhood sexual abuse survivors would need a facilitator for their first meetings.

The most important thing is for the women to feel from the start that they’re in charge of the group and will decide when they no longer need the facilitator. Experience has shown that nobody begins to speak of their story with someone who’s not a survivor, so usually the women will want to be alone quite soon, without a facilitator, to start talking with more confidence amongst themselves.

Role-playing: An effective tool

To organize the first meeting of a group of survivors you have to be aware of how delicate the situation is: until now, these women have never met with other survivors; they may not even know any. Or they may have already broken the silence, perhaps with a psychologist at the women’s center, but now it’s different, now they’re going to start their group. It’s a difficult step that takes a big effort, a lot of courage. Who will the other women be, will I know them, how will I feel, what will I say, where will I start? That first meeting is extremely important because the women have to lose their fear and feel secure, and trust that their participation in the group can free them of many of the burdens that weigh them down in their daily lives.

In the workshops, we do role-playing to imagine what that initial situation will be like. We use simple exercises to break the ice during that first moment when people are feeling very shy. We teach them that the most important thing they have to convey to the members of a group is that they, not the facilitator, are “in charge” of schedules, rhythms, places, rules... Whoever facilitates that first gathering has to empower the survivors, make them feel they can do it. It’s hard to do given the “facilitation” culture cultivated in Nicaragua for so many years, in which the term “facilitating” is synonymous with

running things.

The role-playing exercise to imagine what it would be like at the start with a mutual support group for survivors helped put people in a survivor's shoes. In fact, it even triggered recognition in many of the participants that they, too, were survivors. They *were* in those shoes.

We also talked about the various conflicts that could arise during that first meeting. Two women from the same family might meet and not want to be in the same group. Or two women might meet who "share" the same man, or one might be a man's current wife and the other his ex. The women grasped the importance of confidentiality as a golden rule for the group. And all the women showed great maturity and ability to deal with and resolve conflicts. All problems can be resolved.

Final comments and commitments

We also put together workshops of this kind in Somoto, San Francisco Libre, Estelí, Managua, Jinotega, León and Waslala. A total of 205 women from 95 centers, organizations and institutions serving women victims of violence and sexual abuse participated. At the end of the workshops, during the final round of comments and commitments, we heard things like this:

"For many women, this will be like the sun. From now on, we can no longer let the things we see go on."

"I'm leaving here much clearer about what mutual support groups are and what they do. We haven't had any experience working without facilitation in our center. It's something new but we'll learn as we go along."

"What I've said here about myself I never said in front of so many people before, and I've found that it feels wonderful to get it out and say it openly."

"I'm leaving here satisfied and with a lot of tools for forming one of these groups with my colleagues. We need it."

At the end of one of the workshops, I told the women: "I'm profoundly grateful for having shared this with you. I feel that with these workshops, I'm giving Nicaragua back something of what it and its people have given to me. Sharing this tool with you, which has been so helpful to us in Germany, is not 'colonization.' Knowing that you feel that it's useful, that you see it as a path to liberate yourselves, is very satisfying to me."

Psychologist, heal thyself

In each place where we organized a workshop, we found very similar fears, questions and realities. Analyzing these experiences, we found that 45% of the over 200 participants recognized that they themselves had lived through childhood sexual abuse. No doubt there are more. Not everyone managed to express it, not all can remember it.

Because all of the participants are professionals who work with survivors but hadn't worked on their own history of abuse, it's easy to imagine the pain they carry with them in their daily work. And it's understandable and laudable that they want to form groups among themselves, to heal themselves first so they'll be able to care for others more effectively later on.

We know that many women, consciously or unconsciously, choose to study psychology with the idea that working as psychologists will be enough to help them deal with their own issues. A mistaken idea. In Managua, we visited two universities, the Central American University (UCA) and the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN), where we spoke with those in charge of the psychology departments. They confirmed the need to do something with students in the universities, which have few books on sexual abuse.

First harvests, first groups

The first mutual support groups started in Managua in May 2007, and began to bear fruit while we were still doing the workshops. Soon we started to gather the results. One woman said: "My life has been full of suffering, physical, emotional and sexual abuse. Now I can recognize it with pride. I didn't stick a pin into those passages of my life to hold onto them, but now I have a space where I can go back to them, to deal with a ghost that was following me down every road. The meetings of the Aguas Bravas mutual

support group sometimes seem like an addiction for me, sometimes they're electrifying. Sometimes they pierce and scratch at the scab of the past. Ever since I started, this group has been my refuge. In this space, I can be myself, with no disguises."

The experiences of the various groups formed after this first one in different parts of the country confirm the hope: what is spoken of in the groups is not talked about outside them; the participants very quickly feel that the group is a hermetically sealed treasure for them alone, and together they are finding pieces of the puzzle of their past that were buried under the debris of oblivion.

Another woman said: "I can say things here I can't say outside. For example, I can say how hard it is to love my son, who was born as a product of abuse. I can say that I feel hatred for my father, who sexually abused me. Outside the fourth commandment forces me to say the opposite. In this safe space, I learn to allow myself my real feelings."

We lift our heads up

Someone in another group said: "I can talk here about the aunt who abused me. I can talk about the guilt I've always felt, thinking I was to blame for what happened. Here I can talk about my relationship with my partner and how hard it is to let myself be touched; my body shuts down and becomes rigid. The other women understand; often they understand me perfectly without words."

Little by little we lift our heads higher; little by little the posture of our bodies becomes more upright. Little by little the embarrassment, the shame and the heavy weight of guilt are lifted and disappear. Little by little the pain diminishes and we feel changes. The most important thing is that little by little we lose our fear of speaking of the abuse. Breaking the silence is the first step to emerging from isolation and, at the same time, is the first step toward understanding how many of us there are.

Nicaragua will be better

Until now, what had been done in Nicaragua was work on prevention and care for victims and survivors. That broke the ground for this path. Now, we've offered a tool for those who weren't protected as children or cared for when they needed it, and with this tool they can learn how to heal themselves together. By supporting each other in their healing process they can become involved more effectively later on in eradicating this silent crime. Increasing people's knowledge of the serious scars it leaves in its wake will make Nicaragua better.

Through the internet, Aguas Bravas has already received many letters from survivors in Nicaragua and other countries at these addresses:

yotecreo@gmail.com

aguasbravas_nicaragua@yahoo.com

hablemosde.abusosexual@gmail.com

And, through the coincidences of time and space, the Movement against Sexual Abuse was born in Nicaragua at the same time. It is made up of institutions, organizations and individuals dedicated to confronting this epidemic through a variety of actions.

Assessing the results

The results? After six months of work, a number of mutual support groups were functioning in Nicaragua and several dozen professionals had been trained to form such groups. We managed to produce a version of the guide in Braille for women who are blind or have vision problems. We've also thought about doing an audio version for those who don't know how to read or write. We dream of a documentation center with a collection on the aftermath of sexual abuse, to provide information for those who want it. Each *Wildwasser* center in Germany has some 2,500 titles on this issue. In Nicaragua, we have barely 50 titles in the whole country.

In six months, we achieved much more than we had planned or hoped. Many things had matured in Nicaragua to allow us such a rich harvest. The demand was already there. Now there are resources available with the guide, the Women's Network against Violence centers that participated in the workshops, the network of volunteers who are offering accompaniment and support to survivors and the Aguas Bravas team in Nicaragua. And the demand will grow. Although we still haven't reached every corner of the country—for example, we haven't touched the Caribbean Coast, where sexual abuse is buried in even deeper silence—this wave of desire and volition to change things will start changing them. It will be like those wild waters that, creating waterfalls and deep currents, searching out a path

among the rocks and stones, happy and full of life, make themselves heard. They have broken the silence.

Brigitte Hauschild is a popular educator.