



Division for the Advancement of Women



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

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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 concerned CEFEMINA from very early was sexual violence, and later, in the 80's, the violence that many women endured from their partners. In that time the shelters for abused women seemed to be the only answer to the problem of violence from partners and ex-partners. In Costa Rica, and that could be spread to all Latin America, they were even presented as the solution to the problem.

This proposal, in the opinion of CEFEMINA, had more weaknesses and risks than advantages. It is a very costly option that involves a huge human effort, with a limited coverage and focused only on women who suffer the most extreme violence. What was offered to those women that had not reached those situations of high risk for their lives? Furthermore, the numbers showed by the North American experiences were discouraging; most of the women who turned to the shelters, about two out of three, returned with their partners.

Two crucial questions, together with those above, took CEFEMINA to look for other proposals. The first is related to its low effectiveness. The shelters themselves do not encourage the autonomy of the women; on the contrary, it continues and, occasionally, reinforces their dependence on others. The second has to see with the social response towards the problem of violence against women. The State has a main responsibility facing this problem, and if it does it by adopting the model of the shelters, the problem becomes institutionalized, with all the consequences entailed by it, such as restricting the responsibilities and competences to one single institution, when it is the entire society and the whole State who must involve. Another risk implied in this institutionalization is that of state action becoming limited to shelters, since they are very expensive, justifying thus the inaction at other levels. Finally, a further risk is that the problem of violence against women might be linked to the women who experience it, since the entire proposal is focused on them and not on pointing at and acting on the responsibilities of the aggressors.

### **Women You Are Not Alone is born**

In the late 80's, CEFEMINA knew what it did not want to do in relation to the violence against women from their partners, but it did not know what it had to do. It did not have an alternative proposal. A public appearance changed this situation. When some members of CEFEMINA spoke about the problem of violence at a TV program very popular amongst women, and gave the phone number of the organization, the phone calls flooded the central. The following day, in the same program, women who were interested were publicly invited to attend a meeting at CEFEMINA.

In December the first 1988, almost 100 women from all areas in Costa Rica arrived to the headquarters of CEFEMINA. Some of them were survivor women who had been able to leave violent relations and wanted to support other women. After some welcoming words from our side, one woman started telling why she was there. When tears silenced her, other women, with great respect and kindness comforted and reassured her. When she tried to apologize for crying, others asked her to unburden as much as needed, that that was good and we all understood her. When she said that she didn't know what to do, some told her that they didn't either and that it was normal when you are going through a very hard time and everybody is telling you what you have to do. A survivor reassured her and told her what she had done to escape the abusive relation despite the fear and the confusion. We all told her to keep coming, that she wasn't alone and that we were all together going to support each other to get out of so painful situations. We also told her that the group would be open for any woman, no matter if she had stopped coming.

The first Shelf Help Group was thus born. Invented by the women. CEFEMINA took the commitment to maintain this space the same way it was born, and we had to defend it from many attacks. In Costa Rica in 1988, and in Latin America in general, for many professionals, it was unthinkable to work on such an unstructured and free space, with absences and late arrivals, without schedules or theories, without themes or activities, without directions from the facilitator. Despite the attacks we had, *Woman You Are Not Alone* remained, and shortly achieved great national recognition, due without question to the positive results that not any other work proposal with abused women could equal.

### **Impact studies**

The first operation months of the Self Help Groups were exciting and disconcerting. Many women attended them, and their changes could be observed from week to week. We learnt from that dynamics of confidence, horizontality, respect for each woman's beliefs and decisions, empathy and affection. But we also had doubts and fears. Most of the women only came once to the Group and many only a few times. We didn't know neither how they were nor whether the Group had helped them or not. We decided to phone some, and then our surprises started to arrive. Most of them were better, and that was the reason why they didn't go back to the Group; some had gone back to study or work, or started other personal development activities such as exercising or writing.

This first search, caused by our anguish, allowed us to acknowledge the need of knowing with more accuracy what the effect of the Self Help Groups was on the women that attended them. We then designed an impact study that in its first version included a telephone interview, focus groups and interviews to survivors. It was carried out three years after the Groups were created, and in the telephone interview a random sample of around 10% of the women that participated in them were interviewed.

The results were startling and very encouraging. The most surprising was to discover that 67% of the interviewed women had been able to recover a life free of violence. It must be stated that in our impact studies that refers to any type of violence, i.e. physical, psychological, sexual or patrimonial violence. It is indeed well known that aggressors eventually stop abusing physically, but psychological violence is more persistent and it even gets worse when physical violence stops. And from our experience and some qualitative studies carried out in Latin America, patrimonial violence is often the last

string of control that the aggressors keep towards their partners and ex-partners. We were then very strict in that sense when identifying a successful result.

In addition to the above, more than 80% of the interviewed women that said that they had recovered a life without violence stated that it was due greatly to having attended the Group. In that moment, 1991, in Costa Rica there was nor the specific legislation neither other support programs or resources for abused women, and the counseling institutions and religious groups didn't recognize the right of women to live free of violence.

Most of the women (82%) needed to end the couple relationship to get rid of violence, and only a minority was able to renegotiate it. They didn't necessarily think that way from the beginning, but during the process for many of them this was the only way. Something that surprised us greatly was that many of those women had only come to the Self Help Group of Woman You Are Not Alone only once.

Since this first impact study we have carried out two more and shortly we will start the fourth one. The results are still striking, not only in the numbers but also in the consistency. In each occasion we have found that around 66%, two out of three women, are able to flee the abusive relation that took them to attend the Self Help Group.

With time, however, there have been certain evolutions. In the last study we found that 47% of the women were able to renegotiate the relationship, a number considerably bigger than that of the first study. This result might be explained by the social, institutional, and above all cultural change that has taken place in Costa Rica in the last years. At present there is legislation that, even with deficiencies and limitations, has allowed thousands of women to have protection measures. In 2003 47,086 applications for protection measures were filed, mainly by women. On the other hand, police forces respond better in practice than in the past as a result of some public political initiatives. There is for them a training program on violence against women, since 2002 there is an agreement with the emergency service 9-1-1 and calls from abused women (57709 in 2003) are attended by police patrols, and there are also some mechanisms to control and supervise their performance.

But, above all, there has been an intense national debate about violence against women that has had, among others, the result of delegitimizing that violence, challenging male hegemony and recognizing the rights of women, together with making known the state actions to control and penalize the aggressor. This has allowed reducing to some extent the power imbalance in the relation between genders. Women's individual and collective empowerment and a stronger state and social control on the aggressors are, in our opinion, what is creating the conditions under which women are able to renegotiate more than before the couple relationships.

Other results of the last impact study are interesting. The women that are the most successful in escaping abuse are those who have taken to judicial action (100% of those interviewed in this category); this shows the existence of a synergic relation among the different resources that women turn to, which is very desirable. And it isn't the women who attended the group for a longer time those who were more successful, but those who stayed between three months and a year (100%). These women seem to be those who decide to make changes and choose to follow the process accompanied. In any

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, orient<sup>1</sup>, encourage, support<sup>2</sup> 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**

With time, the proposal of Self Help Groups has proved to be more than effective to support women in the processes to free from abusive relations. It is also an efficient, replicable and sustainable.

The Self Help Groups bring together the possibility to receive many women and to have low costs to do it. Compared to other proposals of individual attention, it allows a higher impact of the work developed by one person. The Group meets once a week, and in the two hours of the meeting many women can participate, not only two, as it would be the case in individual attention. Besides, the Self Help proposal eliminates the administrative duties of individual therapies or consultancies, such as records and

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<sup>1</sup> Orient means helping the woman to identify her options, exploring with her strategies and actions, analyzing possible alternatives when facing obstacles, in a way that she can know the range of choices and is able to choose freely.

<sup>2</sup> Support means to accompany the woman in her process, either physically or fulfilling any support action only when it is necessary, without ever substituting her; that is something that any woman in the group does, not only and not primarily the facilitator.

reports<sup>3</sup>, 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 sustainable<sup>4</sup>. 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 type of proposals are financially unsustainable nowadays, and that one of the reasons why the women’s organization in the last two years have been training and qualifying themselves to promote Self Help Groups.

### **A good practice**

The numbers shown by the impact studies of Woman You Are Not Alone are the proof that it is a good practice. But, what makes it have that condition? The answer to that question is in the orientation of the program that finally embodies in a self help proposal. This orientation is based on a concept about the violence against women and the women who suffer it, and from that, in a concept about how to address the problem.

First of all, in CEFEMINA- Woman You Are Not Alone, we insisted on talking about violence against women, not family violence or domestic violence. By speaking about violence against women it is pointed out clearly and without mislead that women, as women, are the objects of violence. In other words, that the risk factor is being a

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<sup>3</sup> If it is a horizontal space, who has the right to register anything about the other participants?

<sup>4</sup> Twice Woman You Are Not Alone has kept working during one year periods without funding.

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”<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, the work carried out to support abused women, or in general aiming to the eradication of violence against women must point always toward reducing this power imbalance and must never justify or support it.

In that line, we challenge and consider highly dangerous the familists focus and some others of religious character, so spread nowadays, that give preference to objective other than the fundamental Human Right of women to live free of violence and that end up justifying the structures of discrimination and subordination of women. We also defy the actions that are argued to be done for the good of women and that mean the giving up or transaction of the right to live free of violence, which are also abundant nowadays. In the name of the right of sons and daughters to have a father, of the benefits of having an alimony, of the indissolubility of the ecclesiastic marriage, of the christian value of forgiveness, or of the right of men to have another chance, many women have been murdered in our continent by their partners or ex-partners, whom they couldn't escape despite having looked for help in public and private institution because in those institutions they were told to go back with them.

Another conceptual pillar on which the program Woman You Are Not Alone is based refers to the abused women. Far from thinking of them as weak, traumatized, sick or incapable of escaping the abuse relation they are experiencing, we believe that abused women are strong, ethic subjects that are capable of making the right decisions, adults and not girls nor incomplete or disabled persons, capable of escaping the abuse relation they are living in. If it was not so, how could it be explained that so many women that come only once to Woman You Are Not Alone are able to recover in a short time a life free of violence?

As a consequence, we believe that abused women don't need anybody to assume or guard them, they are not children. It is their rights what must be guarded. Therefore, it is not the assistance practices what can counteract the imbalance of power that creates the violence, but those that allow women to empower individually and collectively. It is not the material resources or services what allow women to recover their own life. It is them who achieve it, designing their strategies and finding adequate answers from the institutions. In short, they must be authors and agents of their processes, not the executor of someone else's strategies and decisions.

These conceptual grounds are strongly rooted in Woman You Are Not Alone and make themselves explicit in any action, either supporting women, training facilitators, proposing public policies, researching, publishing or carrying out awareness campaigns. We believe that the coherence of this concept and the every day practice is the reason that makes this experience so successful.

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<sup>5</sup> Organización de los Estados Americanos. 1995. “Convención Interamericana Para Prevenir, Sancionar y Erradicar la Violencia Contra la Mujer”.

## **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 father<sup>6</sup>. 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 experiencing a strong attack and it is openly discussed to transform them into Family Ministries or Institutes. In the United Nations each evaluation Assembly menaces to become a setback and the same language that visibilice the subordination condition of women is questioned.

Among these attacks, in this uncertain situation, it would be highly dangerous to address the initiatives to face the violence against women from a technical point of view outside actual context. We are in a period in which moving forward will require defending very basic position, as those are the ones that are being attacked. Not only Cairo and Beijing are under menace. Vienna is too.

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<sup>6</sup> The Association of Separated and Divorced Fathers in Costa Rica, that according to its president is formed almost totally by men under protection measures due to domestic violence, is self called "Good bye, daddy".