

**BREAKING THE SILENCE: GATHERING AND DISSEMINATING THE MOST  
RECOMMENDED PRACTICES AROUND THE WORLD TO PREVENT,  
HEAL, AND END SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA**

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**Abstract:** *"I have the RIGHT... to heal".* This paper describes the experience of a partnership between organizations in New York City that has developed a model of sexual violence prevention at the community level, which can provide useful lessons for similar models to be adapted in Latin America and comparable local settings.

Sexual violence is more than numbers, are names and faces. Describing the fear, shame, guilt, hopelessness and pain that all the survivors suffer deserves much more than a paper. I honor their incredible strength and courage by trying to bring awareness and attention through these few pages.

Sexual violence is a silent epidemic and also a cause and a consequence of many social problems. Sexism, racism, classism and other related societal phenomena are inextricably connected and overlapped with sexual violence in a variety of contexts. It is also a crime and *"a serious public health and human rights problem with both short- and long-term consequences on... physical, mental, and sexual and reproductive health... it is a deeply violating and painful experience for the survivor"*, according to the World Health Organization.

We need to stop this epidemic that goes from generation to generation. We have to BREAK THE SILENCE to start the healing process in our communities: for the survivors, for the ones that are not here any more and for the ones that sadly are coming. It is through this healing process that we can start contributing to an enduring social change.

**Key words:** sexual violence; gender violence; survivors; prevention; healing; empowerment; social norms; Latin America; most recommended practices.

**Introduction: Sexual violence: a silent epidemic**

**with names and faces:** In 2004, I counseled teenage girls survivors of sexual abuse who lived in a shelter after being abandoned by their parents or removed from their homes because of the abuse. The shelter was located in a wealthy neighborhood of Guadalajara, Mexico and the neighbors were upset and trying to get rid of the place not only because the house wasn't in a very good shape due to the few money available to sustain the girls, but also because they were low-income kids that had been sexually abused and these "weird cases" were a shame and didn't give a good image of the area.

In that moment, overwhelmed by the injustice, I realized that sexual and domestic violence are the first encounter that many children have with oppression and trauma, which is why this is a problem to eradicate if we really want to build a better world. However, sexual violence is a taboo and nobody wants to talk about it. Period. Not the government, not the media, not the teachers, not the parents... creating a continuum veil of ignorance that reinforce the same myths and stereotypes that allow these to happen and re-victimize the survivors over and over again.

One of the consequences of ignorance starts with a simple statement: nobody knows exactly what it is. Sexual violence is about power and control and its roots are founded in the patriarchal culture. Ending sexual violence, its causes and consequences requires an integral approach where everybody is involved. We need to generate not only quality and holistic care to survivors and their families, but also long-term, sustainable, people-empowering preventive strategies based on changes in social norms that perpetuate sexual

violence. This of course should include governments assuming their responsibilities of ending the criminal impunity that comes from social and political tolerance to this problem.

The Rape Crisis (England and Wales), a network of independent member Rape Crisis Centres, defines sexual violence in a very accurate way as *"any unwanted sexual act or activity. There are many different kinds of sexual violence, including but not restricted to: rape, sexual assault, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, rape within marriage / relationships, forced marriage, so-called honour-based violence, female genital mutilation, trafficking, sexual exploitation, and ritual abuse. Sexual violence can be perpetrated by a complete stranger, or by someone known and even trusted, such as a friend, colleague, family member, partner or ex-partner. Sexual violence can happen to anyone* (regardless race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age, gender identity...)*. No one ever deserves or asks for it to happen. 100% of the responsibility for any act of sexual violence lies with its perpetrator. There is no excuse for sexual violence- it can never be justified, it can never be explained away and there is no context in which it is valid, understandable or acceptable."*

In the United States about every two minutes a person is sexually assaulted. One in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused before the age of 18 (direct services providers estimate that the real number is one in three children). A new report "Rape and Sexual Assault: A Renewed Call to Action" launched on January 2014 by The White House Council on Women and Girls provides an overview of the problem:

*“Women and girls are the vast majority of victims: nearly 1 in 5 women... and 1 in 71 men... have been raped during their lives. Most victims know their assailants. The vast majority (nearly 98%) of perpetrators are male. Young people are especially at risk: nearly half of female survivors were raped before they were 18, and over one-quarter of male survivors were raped before they were 10. Repeat victimization is common: over a third of women who were raped as minors were also raped as adults. Other populations are also at higher risk... including people with disabilities, the LGBT community, prison inmates (of both genders)... the homeless” and undocumented immigrants. Rape is the second most expensive crime, behind only murder “...the existing research indicates that the costs are great... ranging from \$87,000 to \$240,776 per rape.”*

The United States statistics reflects the sexual violence situation around the world: few research done and data coming from sources like police reports, clinical numbers and non-governmental organization that doesn't reflect the heinous reality. Due to the stigma and victim blaming, sexual assault is one of the most under reported crimes and, even when is reported, only 3% of perpetrators end in prison. In some countries, like Mexico and other from Latin America, the numbers are similar or worst and it is even harder to obtain indicators. Mexico is number one in sexual violence against women according to comparative research by the United Nations in 2010, with 44% of women sexually assaulted and followed by Costa Rica with 41%, Czech Republic 35% and Denmark 28%. In Nicaragua, assaulted girls under 19 years old represent 50% of registered pregnancy cases (Health Department). In Argentina, 54% of psychological therapies are related to sexual abuse or incest (Red en Lucha contra la violencia, abuso y trata). And in Bolivia, only 4% of lawsuit results with a sentence to the perpetrator (Defensoría del Pueblo). Despite these devastating numbers there are almost no local agencies working on prevention and there are only a few saturated trying to take care of the survivors. Laws are incredible well written but due to the lack of political will they have not been translated into effective public policies. This in turn reinforces a policy context of generalized lack of consistent and reliable statistics, insufficient attention for the victims, insignificant budgets for prevention (including treatment options for rapists), and the loss of hope for survivors to gain access to justice. *“We believe sexual violence is a problem. But it is not inevitable”*

**“I have the RIGHT...” campaign and intervention project** Project Envision Coalition NYC is a community-based collective, working in collaboration with the New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault, local service providers, business, and individual, aimed at changing the social norms that promote and perpetuate sexual violence by community mobilization for a multi-level change.

In 2007, the New York Department Of Health recognized sexual violence as a health problem and

started to assign budget to focus not only in assist survivors but also on primary prevention. Although now struggling with decreasing funding, the State has a Rape Crisis and Domestic Violence Program in virtually every hospital offering great advocacy services, free group and individual therapy, and primary prevention programs. Even though the numbers are still high, like everywhere in the world, people have more chances to find resources that can help them to make that horrible experience less harmful and move forward from victim to survivor.

In 2009, the New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault (NYAASA) along with eleven rape crisis programs within New York City conducted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) aimed to determining the beliefs within the South Bronx, Williamsburg, Brooklyn and the Lower East Side community about root causes of sexual violence and prevention strategies that will hopefully have an impact upon the community. Following the research, Envision started to engage community members in healthy dialogue to explore the myths and social norms that perpetuate sexual violence, dedicating resources exclusively to stopping sexual assault on the Lower East Side before it occurs and supporting many organizations that work with survivors of sexual violence. By normalizing conversations surrounding sexual violence, Envision aims at helping communities to empower towards enduring social change. *“We believe sexual violence is a problem. But it is not inevitable. We envision a community that takes collective responsibility for ending sexual violence”.*

In August 2013, Project Envision launched its new campaign: “I have the RIGHT... to live rape free”. Since then, it has been organizing activities to engage New York City in a dialogue on the root causes of sexual violence, including awareness events, debates, distribution and display of “I have the RIGHT...” posters and post cards, community discussion and mobilization, etcetera. They have also presented an itinerant exhibit of photos of the campaign including people's thoughts and feelings about what they have the RIGHT to do without someone choosing to rape them. Envision wants people to join the movement and let them know there are different and simple ways to help prevent sexual violence in their community.

This campaign started in the Lower East Side but now is expanding to the five boroughs of New York City and also traveled to Mexico, Colombia and Nicaragua to share experiences about sexual violence with agencies from different countries of Latin America. Envision was represented by their member and partner, *La Casa Mandarina*, an itinerant and independent agency, based in Mexico City, devoted to building a culture of peace by empowering people and communities through the program called “Comunidades libres: entra y vive” (Free Communities: come in and live). The program is holistic, sustainable and replicable, it is generated from within the community, and it aims at promoting change

in those social norms and beliefs perpetuating oppression and violence in individuals, families and community. By doing so, it contributes to generate real choices for people to live the lives they value the most for themselves, which in turn also contributes to promote a positive change at the societal level.

Throughout the years, La Casa Mandarinina has been working on community development projects dedicated to promote social justice, non-violence, peace building and community empowerment most of which have been focused on building a safer and equal world for women and children integrating men into the conversation for a real social change.

In 2010, La Casa Mandarinina collaborated in a project with teenage survivors of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking, and right after that it started a Sexual Violence Program in Mexico City. Nowadays, besides their advocacy work, they offer group and individual therapy for child and adult survivors and workshops in primary prevention in schools, non-profits, service providers and governmental agencies.

La Casa Mandarinina and Project Envision have designed a culturally appropriate "I have the RIGHT..." campaign in Spanish: "Yo tengo DERECHO... a vivir sin violencia sexual". They have also developed an intervention project aimed at strengthening local agencies and service providers by training their staff on sexual violence topics (train the trainers), co-facilitate workshops with their clients in primary prevention, provide resources for survivors, and support the agencies to design their own "I have the RIGHT..." campaign according to their own needs and goals, and to create community awareness and mobilization.

Nowadays, they are implementing a pilot Project at a local agency in Queens, New York with immigrant Latina women and their children, and planning to replicate it in Mexico during 2014.

**Final remarks:** As I traveled, lived and worked in many different places and with all sorts of people, going from

the *Mixteca* and *Maya* indigenous peoples areas in rural southern Mexico, to urban Sao Paulo in Brazil, and Spain, Denmark and New York City, I discovered that even in countries with relatively low rates of poverty there was something all those places had in common: power imbalance and violence in their many different faces. By observing the relationship between violence on one side, and poverty and inequality of opportunity on the other, I came to be convinced that, among others, fighting oppression, particularly sexual and domestic violence, might be one of the most effective ways of improving the life and wellbeing of people, specially women and girls who are particularly oppressed by the patriarchal culture we live in and the gender-based violence that makes them one of the most vulnerable population group on Earth.

As previously stated, sexual violence is a silent epidemic that happens throughout the world and "I have the RIGHT..." is an example of what can be done and accomplished through an easily replicable and effective intervention scheme that helps to empower communities from within communities.

There are a lot of positive and negative experiences around sexual violence projects that should be promoted as learning tools, and practices that should be adapted to different contexts. We need to share our research, our projects and our practices, and systematize them in order to design and disseminate robust regional –or even global– strategies to fighting and end sexual violence together. Research and proactive community-level advocacy to gather and disseminate the most recommended practices around the world to prevent, heal and end sexual violence, is certainly a way to effectively act against this silent epidemic.

I do honestly believe that a different, better world is possible through more collaborative and systematic work in this area, along with a little more solidarity and commitment to social justice.

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