

Rebuilding lives, rebuilding Nicaragua

**The importance of Emotional Recovery
in the face of natural disasters and gender violence**

**Systematization of work from the
Commission of Psychosocial Development
of the Women's Network against Violence
(1998-2001)**



**Systematization made possible by:
Commission of Psychosocial Development of the Women's Network against
Violence**

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Presentation:

The effects of a hurricane or any other natural phenomena and the consequences of social disasters such as violence, in a person, family, community, or town, can persist for weeks, months and years. In order to overcome, long recuperation and reconstruction processes are required which include as a fundamental part, the integral health of people.

Even though Nicaragua's history is full of volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, sea earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, droughts, and social disasters such as wars and violence, the work surrounding emotional recovery of persons, is an issue that has not been taken into account.

There are records of community mental health work, both state and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's). However, in a bibliographic review we were not able to find systematic documents or wide disclosure of such documents.

In this document the Women's Network against Violence presents a systematization of the work of the commission of psychosocial development, in order to share the experiences lived during the psychosocial intervention of those affected by Hurricane Mitch, since the conception of the Commission in October 1998 to the year 2001.

The commission of psychosocial development was created in response to the necessity of the people in the zones most affected by Hurricane Mitch. This work is relatively new, and only recently has begun to receive attention: the emotional recovery in cases of natural disasters and social disasters such as Intra-family Violence (Violencia Intrafamiliar (VIF)) and sexual violence (an issue of priority for the Network).

In the presence of natural disasters, it is common for national and international aid to bend over backwards in order to prioritize immediate attention, offering material aid: housing, domestic goods, clothes, food and articles for basic survival.

Without disregarding these urgent necessities "material things can be replaced, but not life". Those lives that were not snatched away were left at half mast, according to some of the survivors, almost "muertas en vida"(dead in life), due to loss of daughters, sons, cousins, husbands, family. It is for this reason, to recover strength and to move ahead to build a new future, that the Network's commission concentrated efforts to support to the emotional recovery of people who were hit hardest by Mitch.

There are no formulas or manuals for how to offer this aid. The Network of Women against Violence along with other organizations of civil society have joined forces, knowledge, abilities, and practices to confront these situations in the best possible way, and offer emotional recovery workshops in different areas of the country, enabling local leaders to reproduce what they have learned in their communities.

There are multiple initiatives on the topic of violence, which have had visible results. One

such example of this is law 230, which penalizes intra-family violence, although it is true that there is a long way to go. For women, recovery from a natural disaster is not the same as the recovery from a social disaster caused by gender violence in Nicaragua.

The support of the Neohumanist Foundation of Colombia and the Wisconsin Coordinating Council on Nicaragua (WCCN), specialists in this issue, came at the best moment. With their aid, a psychosocial intervention methodology used in these types of situations was validated and expanded, and a seed was planted that germinated in different organizations which have incorporated the theme of emotional recovery in their everyday practices.

In the case of the Network, this experience has turned into a pioneering project at the Central American level, which includes a focus on gender and human rights, especially focused on the prevention of and attention to issues of intra-family and sexual violence. The real necessity in that moment was guidance and natural diagnosis to find methodological tools of healing to relieve the suffering, the pain, the traumas and crisis that the catastrophe left behind. Mitch reopened old wounds of previous situations left unresolved; pending grief, violence toward a partner and in the family, earthquakes, eruptions, political changes, war; losses that are real and symbolic, among other difficulties.

In this sense, the Network of Women against Violence prioritized this endeavor with women's groups, since they have shown harmful effects on their physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health, due to institutionalized gender¹ violence. Therefore, we first facilitated processes of emotional recovery for members of the integral organizations of the Network, with other organizations that were offering services, and with the people most affected, to promote a "cascade" effect or a multiplication of what was learned. In this document we mention what we have experienced and how we experienced it, including the hits and the misses, in order to offer a few fundamental clues to how the integral health of people is a determining link in the prevention, attention and mitigation of natural and social disasters: to show how we have constructed a methodology of psychosocial intervention that addresses the necessities of affected people.

To rebuild a country, you have to replace not just material things, but offer alternative ways of living this new life in a dignified manner, with a calm heart and soul. Even though you cannot avoid natural phenomena, we can work on prevention and action in these cases.

"To confront natural events in a way that does not become a catastrophe in the future, it is necessary to prepare in terms of infrastructure and services. It is also important to work with people so that they have the level of psychosocial health that will allow them to confront the challenges of life with hope, common sense, foresight and a desire to live and succeed," says one of the psychologists of the Commission.

¹ The expression "violence against Women" refers to all types of violence based on gender, that results in possible or real harm; physical, sexual or psychological, included are threats, coercion or arbitrary privation of liberty, be it in public or private life (...)

The processes of emotional recovery are carried out in order to promote changes in the thoughts and actions in people as individuals, as well as for groups and communities. For this reason, we establish that: “what is therapeutic is also a political, once we recognize that Nicaragua can discuss not only individual grief, but also social and collective grief, linked with history and the culture”.

The Process of Systematization

The present systematization aims to reconstruct the path taken, showing the steps of this process in order to learn from the experience. This includes the construction of the psychosocial intervention process from October of 1998 till January of 2001, in the affected areas by Hurricane Mitch, as well as the work which continues to date, in order to share with other organizations and people interested in the subject.

We place in your hands a live document, recounting the practice of training and simultaneous multiplication, both of the Commission and of other women’s groups that underwent the process of healing in all its dimensions and who then went to share and facilitate this training with other women in different parts of the country (Chinandega, León, Estelí, Matagalpa, Jinotega and Ocotal). These same processes were developed through a cycle of training workshops to form facilitators in emotional recovery.

Reliving the experience

All the members of the Psychosocial Commission participated in this systematization. Initially, various efforts were made to compile the information. Once the information was obtained, the document had to be given shape. We decided to seek external support and we got the assistance of Kristin Hoffschmidt, a member of WCCN. Finally, with the support of an external facilitator, a draft of this document was achieved and edited.

In order to reconstruct the process, focus groups were formed with the members of the Network in the Commission of Psychosocial Development (Facilitators) and with organized women that had received the training, in five of the cities that were most affected by the Hurricane: Chinandega, Estelí, Condega, Matagalpa, and León.

Also, a revision of the document and bibliography (meeting notes, memos, books, magazines and articles related to the subjects of the workshops, information concerning natural disasters, official data, and data from the Coordinadora Civil para la Emergencia y la Reconstrucción (CCER) about the effects of Hurricane Mitch etc.); as well as interviews with key informants, a workshop “filled” with retrospective analysis information, and another for final text revision. All the phrases in quotations belong to the members of the commission, for which reason there will not be reference as to the source.

Introduction

The Network of Women against Violence emerged in January 1992 during the Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres “Por la Unidad en la Diversidad” (National Encounter of Women “For Unity in Diversity”). At present we are a “national space of coordination of the women’s movement that is wide, diverse, participative and horizontal, that promotes new forms of non-partisan politics”² and unites more than 120 groups in the country.

In our organizations, women of all ages participate, without discrimination of any type, both individually and in the name of our groups and NGO’s. We look to transform the power relations of men that threaten dignity; and physical, psychic, moral, social and sexual integrity of women of all ages, in particular intrafamily sexual violence.

In the Network, we work in commissions in order to elaborate public politics, campaigns, political pressure, investigation, education, psychosocial intervention and disclosure. We have an annual celebration on November 25th in honor of the International Day Against Violence towards Women and children. We have also published pamphlets “*What to do and where to go in case of violence?*” and “*To live life is to live without violence*” (the last one for adolescents and youth).

The campaign “*I want to live without Violence*” in 1994’, even today is an unforgettable phrase that empowers on its own. It was successful and gave national recognition to the work of the Network, attracting the attention of many people interested in the subject. This paved the way for us to organize the National Encounter against Violence in 1995, in which 500 women participated from all over the country and 150 organizations at the national level.

At that time began the creation of a law against interfamily violence (VIF -under Spanish acronym). Later, after a wide process of consultation, lobbying and public pressure of the National Assembly, a law was approved August 13, 1996. It is known as **Ley de Reformas al Código Penal para prevenir y sancionar la Violencia Intrafamiliar (Ley 230)** (Reform Law of the Penal Code for the prevention and sanction of Interfamily Violence (Law 230)), which recognizes not only physical harm but also psychological harm.

One of the bases for this struggle, was the report *Confites en el infierno*³, that offered the first supported statistical data on the prevalence and characteristics of conjugal violence in Nicaragua. The Network of Women Against Violence supported this investigation and the results sustained the denunciations and demands of the women’s movement, pushing for the recognition of Interfamily Violence as a Public Health problem that should be recognized as such by the Nicaraguan State by ministerial decree⁴.

² All the information contained in this space arises from the publication *Funcionamiento Interno of the Network of Women Against Violence*, 2001.

³ *Confites en el infierno: prevalencia y características de la violencia conyugal hacia las mujeres en Nicaragua*, Mary Ellsberg *et al.* Red de Mujeres contra la Violencia Nicaragua, Departamento de Medicina Preventiva y Salud Pública de la UNAN-León, Departamento de Epidemiología y Salud Pública, Umeå University, Suecia. 1996

⁴ Decreto del Ministerio de Salud de Nicaragua sobre la Violencia Intrafamiliar No. 67-96.

Since that time the Network has worked in disseminating law 230 and pushing for its implementation. Furthermore, the Network has negotiated with the State to define public politics for the prevention of, attention to, and sanction of Interfamily Sexual Violence.

In the Network we work in Commissions: Coordination, Health, Psychosocial Development, Communication, Women of Faith, Commissary, Law, Methodology and Zoilamérica Commission. We meet monthly, but every commission develops its own activities in accordance with the global planning of the Network.

What does the Commission for Psychosocial Development do?

At present the commission is made up of a group of psychologists, social workers and advocates from the groups of the Network, to drive united actions of psychosocial intervention, that take into account the specificity of women's condition.

We start with these basic points of action:

- Training in the methodology of Facilitating emotional recovery, for women that work in “ Mental Health” for the accompaniment of personal and communal processes, or for women who would be working with refugees from the zones affected by Hurricane Mitch.
- Development of a program for the multiplication of methodology directed towards the formation of facilitators in the territories.
- Development of emotional recovery processes for persons directly affected by natural and social disasters.

We meet monthly to evaluate and follow-up on the planned project activities of the Process of strengthening and formation of facilitators in emotional recovery in cases of natural disasters and interfamily and sexual violence. We promote processes of personal empowerment and analyze subjects related to Integral Health.

At present we are in a process of reorganization to contribute to the strengthening of local and internal capacity of the Network Women against Violence. We are concentrating on strengthening and reaching the potential of the different leadership; integrating human, feminist and political dimensions.

We are promoting processes of debate concerning feminism, the necessity to promote the care of ourselves in order to have more resources to accompany other women (we cannot accompany processes of change in women if we carry the effects of violence in our own lives).

Women of the Network of Women against Violence who work in this area or who are interested in this subject can join the Commission.

To be a member of the Commission you are required to:

- Acquire obligation
- Political Responsibility
- Have a purposeful and critical attitude of actions, as well as have permanent articulation with the global actions of the Network.

A History Strewn with Natural and Social Disasters

It is not by chance that Nicaragua signifies “Here with the water” in the indigenous tongue Náhuatl. The collection of natural phenomena that occurs in the Central American region, is ample and varied. In this country, if it doesn’t rain water, it rains ashes or lava, the earth moves or there are droughts, among other aspects.

“The geographic location of Nicaragua, its geological youth (it was the last country on the earth to emerge), and the climatological instability of the tropics, submit the national territory to recurrent and sudden clashes of tectonic, ‘Vulcanological’, and climactic forces, for which reason environmental contingencies have been constant in the life of the Nicaraguan population.”⁵

Some of the most prominent natural disasters have been:

- The 1835 eruption of Volcano Cosigüina that hurled ashes reaching to Mexico and Colombia. In El Salvador the date was baptized as “The year of Dust”.
- The 1931 earthquake that destroyed Managua, a fact repeated in 1972, a day before Christmas, leaving 10 thousand people dead and the city in ruins.
- In 1988 Hurricane Juana destroyed Bluefields, El Rama, and Corn Islands.
- In 1992 the Volcano Cerro Negro Erupted. In that same year 250 kilometers of the Pacific coast of the country, were covered by a sea earthquake with 5 meter waves that left the land “washed” in their wake.
- In 95 floods affected Las Segovias, León, Chinandega, Matagalpa, Jinotega, Carazo, Masaya, and Granada.
- And of course, Hurricane Mitch in October 1998 rated as the most “disastrous” of the XX century, which we will address later.
- The earthquake of Masaya in July 2000.

“The principal threat is seismic activity: just between 97 and 99, the seismology Network of INETER registered annual activity at almost 2 thousand, around 5 earthquakes per day, even though they are not perceived by the population. The majority of these earthquakes arise from the sliding of tectonic plates in the pacific, due to volcanic activity and due to geological faults in the mountainous region in the north-central zone”⁶.

History in Motion

As seen by quickly skimming through the political history in Nicaragua, from this angle

⁵ *El Desarrollo Humano en Nicaragua, PNUD, 2000.* Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo (PNUD).

⁶ *Human Development in Nicaragua, UNDP 2000.*

the history has also been very rough. In the XX century, Nicaragua has lived through historical stages characterized by political conflicts and wars: a dictatorship of 49 years with the Somozas, a leftist political movement to change things (FSLN) which integrated itself into different sectors of the people in the armed insurrection that culminated with the Sandinista “Triumph” of July 19, 1979.

The revolution brought another way of life and ideas regarding social justice, community, class inequalities, culture, politics and solidarity. The relations of power changed in the public world, but not the private.

“The FSLN governmental plan talked of changing the conditions of women’s subordination, but in reality the changes were timid. And even though many women did not stay at home, and they were the vanguard and the rear guard of the revolution, this was not sufficient to change the unequal relationships of power”.

The demands of women were relegated to a second level because “ la Patria” (the Nation) came first. With discourse and proposition it was expected that they carry out the same role as always but with a different objective: “to bear children for the Nation” and to be the “partner of the new man,” for example.

Nicaragua, being the “threat of communism” in Central America, in 1983 the United States initiated a war of military aggression and an economic blockade until 1990. The fall of the socialist block, the loss of the FSLN in the elections, the “ Piñata” (transfer of state possessions to private hands), the problem of property; political polarization, neoliberalism, structural adjustments of the economy and corruption, have all continued to squash the living conditions of the people.

The social fabric inherited by the revolution facilitated the emergence of new structures such as organized civil society, and generated aspirations of constructing other ways to make politics, especially in the Women’s Movement (which was the strongest in the early 90’s) and of other discriminated groups (boys, girls, adolescents, young people, indigenous, ecologists).

As a product of all the accumulated experience, today the State cannot ignore the work of the women’s movement, “we have achieved a level of influence – even though not as much as we would like – in the making of public politics that affect women. Also, we have fought from different confines to improve the quality of life of all people, and to change the unequal relations of power between women and men.

Between the Earth and Sky

If this conjunction of cultural aspects, economic, socio-political that conform Nicaraguan society, add to it natural phenomena, the situation gets complicated. Joining parts of history, it would not be rash to think there is not sufficient cause for the entire population to be unbalanced in many aspects.

Traumatic situations cause a natural process of grief, however, when they are not processed adequately they become unresolved grief. This situation occurs in our country commonly and the space to heal old and new wounds are almost null, apart from a few cathartic cultural traditions such as folkloric and religious celebrations (wakes, nine days of mourning, funerals, offers and payments of promises to the Saints, festivals of patron saints and that “ability” to laugh about disgraces attached to the Nicaraguan identity).

“All of these function as mechanisms of defense for so much accumulated grief, that demands a higher use of energy towards integral health to function appropriately. We see a high rate of alcoholism, suicide, psychosomatic illness and violence as ways to relieve tension and resolve conflicts. Culturally we tend not to resolve losses and this is even reflected in our popular sayings: *jodidos pero contentos (screwed but happy)*, *Al mal tiempo Buena cara (In bad times Good face)*, *Ni modo (there’s no other way)*, *Que se haga la voluntad the Dios (Let God’s will be done)*.

“This could be a culture of fortitude before adversity, although it could also be an evasion of that reality. Culturally there are mandates directed to not processing grief. We say *ya pasó (its over)*, *no llores (don’t cry)*, and finally it is not processed,” explains one of the psychologists of the Commission. It is clear that there is a need to carry out psychological intervention processes for people to achieve emotional recovery, and in that way, obtain a minimal level of necessary integral health to succeed as individuals, as a community and as a country.

The Window Frame

Nicaragua is the third poorest country of Latin America, with a population of approximately 5 million people. According to the consumption index, almost half of the population in Nicaragua is poor (47.9%), and 830 thousand are extremely poor. If poverty is measured by unsatisfied basic necessities, this reaches 72.6% and extreme poverty at 44.7 per cent⁷

Women slightly surpass the masculine population with 50.7% (2 million 551 women compared to 2 million 523 men)⁸: It is a country of women, girls, boys and adolescents. According to the Population Census, 53% of the total of people is under 18 years old.

The census of homes (Encuesta de Hogares) for the measuring of urban employment⁹ reveals that 56% of the urban occupied Economically Active Population (Población Económicamente Activa (PEA)) receives a gross income of less than 1000 córdobas (70 dollars), whether it is the formal or informal sector.

There is a profound economic inequality that women endure, whose individual income barely reaches 40% in comparison to that of men. Likewise you can observe gender differences in the access of public and private management positions, the majority of

⁷ Situación socioeconómica, Informe de gestión CCER Oct. 98-Mar. 02, unpublished

⁸ Datos de la Comisión Económica para América Latina y El Caribe, CEPAL, May 2002.

⁹ Ministerio del Trabajo, July 1999

which are occupied by men¹⁰.

In the last half century, the Nicaraguan Population has quintupled. The overall measure of fertility in women of childbearing age, is 4.4 children per women, a rate that results in the highest in Central America (3.05). Pregnancy at an early age is a factor that determines high fertility. Women between 15 and 19 years contribute one out of every 4 births annually, which places Nicaragua as the country with the highest measure of adolescent fertility in the region¹¹.

The investigation *Confites en el infierno* revealed the situation of conjugal violence in the country. Some of the results indicate that one out of every two women has been mistreated by a partner at some time, and one out of every four is currently being abused.

Mitch, the Unforgettable Hurricane

Mitch destroyed human lives, physical infrastructure and environmental conditions. All of the commentary and data coincide in that it will never be known exactly the number of victims, because many people had never been counted in a census.

“The official summary mentions around 2500 people dead. The affected population reached 865 thousand 700, and the economic loss was estimated at 1403 million dollars”¹². The most affected areas were also the poorest areas: Chinandega, Matagalpa, León, Estelí, and Jinotega.

According to Darwin Juárez, between 1892 and 1996, 40 tropical cyclones affected Nicaragua, but Mitch was the most catastrophic registered in history. It is the one that left the most marks and consequences, not just in the geography and the economy, but also in the psychology of the Nicaraguan population. In the summary of the Civil Coordination for Emergency and Reconstruction (Coordinadora Civil para la Emergencia y la Reconstrucción (CCER)), about the effects of Mitch was added, a “tendency of VIF worsening along with deterioration of mental health of the whole family group”.

The levels of precipitation were baptized as the *rains of the century* in Nicaragua: never had it rained this hard in only five days. The situation was aggravated by an avalanche that “tore apart” the volcano Casitas (400meters altitude), erasing from the map the municipality of Posoltega with a unstoppable river of dirt, rocks, and destruction. In matter of minutes “8 towns and around 2,313 inhabitants disappeared with the avalanche”¹³. The place was left as if it were a road under construction.

Why so much disaster with Mitch?

¹⁰ *El Desarrollo Humano en Nicaragua*, PNUD 2000.

¹¹ *Idem*

¹² “Mitch: el más desastroso huracán del siglo XX”, article by Darwin Juárez. Taken from the book *Salud psicosocial en un desastre complejo: el efecto del huracán Mitch en Nicaragua*. August, 2000.

¹³ *Mitch y Desarrollo Rural*, magazine from Nitlapán, Instituto de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Universidad Centroamericana and Oxfam América.

“There are a few causes that explain the transformation of natural actions into true human calamity. Among these are economic globalization, the growing economic insecurity and environmental degradation. The population tendencies raise the vulnerability of the nation in the face of dangerous situations, for example, the high proportion of poor people with unequal relationships of power in homes, communities and society in general”¹⁴.

In this context, Hurricane Mitch augmented a long chain of impoverishment and deterioration of natural resources, of the quality and conditions of life of the population. The devastating effects caused by Mitch, are intimately connected with the consequences caused by the historical development model and the commanding neoliberal economic model¹⁵.

“ While disasters like Hurricane Mitch are natural phenomena, the effects, the emergency situation or crisis are not natural (...), the effects are product of human actions and it depends on the situation of the country, this is to say that deforestation and non-sustainable agriculture, poverty and social inequalities, amplify the effects of a natural emergency(...), given that there are gender power relations, the effects of disasters depend on this, and every person experiences it in different ways”, explains doctor Sara Bradshaw in her book *Relaciones Peligrosas Mujeres, Hombres, y Mitch (Dangerous Relationships, Women, Men and Mitch)*¹⁶.

And she advises in relationship to the “feminine” role during periods of emergency where you run the “risk of confusing the necessities of women with those of the family such as health, housing, food, water (...), because the women are the ones who assume the responsibility of attending to these needs [in their reproductive role]”.

¹⁴ *Mitch y Desarrollo Rural*, magazine from Nitlapán, Instituto de Investigación y Desarrollo from Universidad Centroamericana and Oxfam América.

¹⁵ *Idem*

¹⁶ *Relaciones Peligrosas. Mujeres, Hombres y el Mitch: un estudio de las relaciones de poder entre los hombres y mujeres frente al Huracán Mitch en Nicaragua*. Puntos de Encuentro 2001.

The Rain that United Us *Phase I (October to December 1998)*

The First Reaction

The Network of Women against Violence, like hundreds of organizations, got to work looking for aid in order to confront this emergency situation. When CCER is formed, the Commission of Attention and Mitigation in the face of natural disasters (Comisión de Atención y Mitigación ante los desastres) was formed. The organizational experience of each group enabled a quick a response.

In order to coordinate the aid it was necessary to know what had occurred and to know whom it affected. “Women began to call the Secretary of the Network informing of the situation in their areas. Just then we realized that many lost the majority of the things they relied on, if not everything. At the same time many organizations, friends of the Network, began to ask what we needed”.

This was the survival phase, when the Network took food, clothes, cooking utensils, buckets for water, hammocks, and cots to sleep on since the ground was wet, sheets and sanitary articles to different places in the country.

At the national level some women centers were converted into shelters, and each one looked for aid for the people they sheltered. The Network prioritized the women’s groups that had their localities converted into shelters, the ones that monitored aid, conducted census or helped in different ways the people who were affected.

“We directed the aid to women because it was being given to the male “heads” of families, leaving the basic necessities of women aside. Also, due to the social construction of gender, as women we assume as our duty, to look out for the welfare of the family, and effectively, in the shelters women were the ones who began to mobilize in order to seek resolution”, explains Violeta Delgado, coordinator of the Secretary of the Network of Women against Violence.

As cited by Sara Bradshaw confirms that what was stated previously: “(...) as stated by Delaney and Shrade, after Mitch women appeared to be more occupied and involved than men in the everyday workings of emergency life and rehabilitation in the short term”.

“Everyone thought only of food, not in the necessities of women, many who had given birth, had no underwear or sanitary napkins”. To speed the reception of economic contributions, the Network opened a savings account *Emergency*, and when money was put together things were bought and distributed”¹⁷.

¹⁷ From this moment on all the quoted phrases are from the different members of the Commission of Psychosocial Development.

A collective shock

Two weeks after Mitch, during a meeting of the General assembly of the Network, the first commentaries regarding violence within the shelters were heard. “Men were angry, women were getting angry at each other: people were in bad condition”. This was a manifestation the crisis they were living. All the emotions retained were being released in anger and envy; also, there were cases of corruption within the shelters. Many men were drinking liquor and causing disturbances, and there was mention of a few sexual assault cases. That is to say, that the abuse happening before Mitch, continued within the shelters”.

Regarding the psychosocial harm “at a global scale, more than 20 % of Nicaraguan men and women interviewed in the two phases of the social hearings (Auditoria Social) (CCER), it was reported that one person in every family was left strongly emotionally affected by Mitch (...), the majority of the reported and affected people were women”, Sara Bradshaw points out.

Parallel to this situation, the Commission of Attention and Mitigation was considering aiding people emotionally and at the same time working to stop the violence against women. A group of psychologists got together to prepare and carry out a workshop of crisis intervention and processing grief.

“We are used to people going to psychologists and not to the contrary. That perspective and practice began to change. That is how we came together in a group formed by Alma Garcia, a psychologist with experience on the subject of care during a natural disaster crisis. She gave us the first clues of psychological intervention that helped us carry out the first workshop in November, which we named *Taller de intervención en crisis* (Crisis Intervention workshop). Two generations participated in this experience, Xochiquetzal and CAPRI. 85 men and women who worked directly with the people in the shelters participated. We were told that during this workshop there were moments where they did not know what to do and they started crying along with the people injured”.

“It was the first time we could talk about how we had experienced the tragedy, and to cry and cry, get out what we felt, which we hadn’t done, since we had to be the strong ones who helped those who were not doing as well. The people helping also needed to let out their emotions”.

The workshop was a complete catharsis and at the same time specific techniques to care for the people in crisis were given: listen to her get her emotions out, validate her feelings, see what could be done and what could not, and try to refer her to better services whenever possible.

It was a mixed group in all aspects; nurses, organized women, doctors, people from the red cross, teachers, educators, psychologists, community leaders, and people from different ecclesiastical based communities. They came from Chinandega, León, Estelí, Matagalpa, Jinotega, San Francisco Libre and from Managua (those who would care for

the survivors of Posoltega). The experience was repeated with 45 more people in the same month. “ Mitch was a collective pain and it wasn’t the only one, much repressed grief came out”.

Emotional support after tragedy

The echo of solidarity on the national and international levels multiplied, as well as the type of aid. In November the Puntos de Encuentro foundation received mail from Gilbert Brenson and Mercedes Sarmiento, social psychologist and clinical psychologist of the Fundación Neohumanista de Colombia, to offer training in emotional recovery as a contribution of solidarity in this situation.

The Fundación Neohumanista is a non profit organization, dedicated to the formation and assessment of facilitators in synergistic and participative processes of psychosocial development in Latin America since 1991¹⁸. They had confronted the occasional tragedy due to the eruption of Volcano Arenas del Nevado del Ruiz that buried the town of Armero (Colombia), in 1985. Brenson and Sarmiento have created a support program for the institutions and professionals that provide direct aid to people in crisis and disasters.

The psychologist Vilma Castillo (Puntos) and Lorna Norori (Network), created a project to obtain financing and to assure the realization of the first workshop in December. This Commission of CCER attempted to invite a large number of varied organizations.

A Chain for Emotional Recovery

When the team of the Fundación Neohumanista came to Nicaragua before Christmas, Brenson and Sarmiento proposed to begin with a six workshop training to form a Network of facilitators in Emotional Recovery. The idea was to create a certificate program that would be carried out in meetings during the course of a year. The offer was accepted and a group of 26 people was formed, of which 16 came from the Network of Women against Violence. The experience was named: “Training of Facilitators in Emotional Recovery”.

To achieve this objective a cascading methodology was chosen: each person that attended the workshop was to teach what was learned to 25 more people, and these in turn taught in their communities, until a Network of facilitators of emotional recovery was formed.

Brenson and Sarmientos’ proposal was to simultaneously realize fast processes of personal and group healing, and to promote organizational processes in communities. One of their principles is to take advantage of the crisis generated by tragedy, as an opportunity to change and to start life over. The first workshop was carried out in December, and the rest was during the year 99: February, April, June, September, and November.

“Everything revolves around improving health and the quality of people’s lives from an

¹⁸ For more information consult the webpage: www.neo-humanista.org

integral point of view. It requires facilitation of synergic processes in people, that is to say, catalyzing and reaching the potential of people in the same objective. It was to learn that everything a person knows is useful to improve their own quality of life”.

Learning along the way

“That is how we joined forces, because before, everyone worked on their own and this training brought us together. In this training phase we began developing new skills and reaffirming skills from our own experiences and education, exchanging and creating new proposals. We learned by doing, we were taught in an interactive way, by watching ourselves, because they taped us on videos and we saw how we did things. When it came time to facilitate a process, we did it in pairs, and the others evaluated.”

“Seeing our reactions during the trainings, we realized that we were not facilitating a process but we were stuck in our personal experience; at this moment the methodology suggests to first review our personal experience in order to be able to facilitate a process with people. So, we continued working and applying. When we got to the subject of grief, we were asked first to review our own unresolved grief in order to begin work there.”

“All of us were working on Mitch. With the new methodology we enriched what we were already doing. It gave us more security because we were reading and looking biographies about grief and death.”

The work was just starting at the end of ‘98. The results of the social hearing (1st phase) carried out by CEER, revealed that one in every five families affected by Mitch, reported one or more members with expressions of weeping, fear, sadness, desperation and urges to run away, insomnia, nightmares, memory loss, fainting, mostly when it is rains or is cloudy. Other manifestations found: excessive fear of water and sounds from the river.

The most affected people were between the ages of 20 to 40 years old, followed by people between 41 and 60 years old. Also, 60% of the people polled mentioned an increase in interfamily violence.

A project was urgently needed that would sustain the work in the field of emotions. The challenge is just beginning.

Healing Wounds in order to live Phase II (January 99- December 2000)

The Psychosocial Commission is born

The Network of Women against Violence created a commission to work on the emotional recovery of people affected by Mitch. Before this time, the aspect of mental health, after a natural disaster, was not included in the agendas of women's organizations.

In January of 99 we gathered, and in February the Commission of Psychosocial Development of the Network was officially created as an autonomous group of the Comisión de Atención y Mitigación (Commission of Attention and Mitigation) of CCER. In this new stage of our rebuilding work, we initiated a process of strengthening local capacity, from the perspective of human resources, in the training of facilitators in emotional recovery post-Mitch. Since this date we developed a training strategy for the different groups of the Network, in order to guarantee the strengthening of the institution, in order to improve the quality of services; and personal development and growth of the people involved," explains the Commission in one of their reports.

This is how a space was opened "to exchange, discuss and contribute knowledge and experiences on the subject of Mental Health within the framework of women's rights". In the year 99 one of our goals was join forces to construct a methodology that could be applied by the Network groups.

Given that the subject of violence (conjugal, interfamily, sexual) was present in all the groups where that workshops were conducted, the incorporation of this subject was fundamental in terms of the emotional recovery of all of the participants.

The participating organizations were:

In 1999

- Centro Dos Generaciones
- Instituto de Promoción Humana INPRHU (Estelí)
- Fundación Puntos de Encuentro
- La Cuculmecca (Jinotega)
- ODESAR y Grupo Venancia (Matagalpa)
- Ixchen Tipitapa y Ciudad Sandino
- CISAS de San Francisco Libre
- Centro Ecuménico Antonio Valdivieso Posoltega y Managua
- Fundación Xochiquetzal
- Fundación Entre Volcanes de Ometepe

Individual participants were: Chepita Rivera, Mary Bolt, Patricia Lindo, Lisbeth Delgado, Rosa María Mendoza and Damaris Martinez.

From 2000 until 2002 the following organizations and alternative centers integrated to the Commission:

- AMIFANIC (Managua)
- ASINPAVI (San Rafael del Sur)
- Centro de Mujeres y Colectiva de Mujeres de Masaya
- Movimiento de Mujeres Lucrecia Lindo (Chinandega)
- XIPALTOMALT (León)
- AMNLAE (Granada)
- Movimiento de Mujeres María Elena Cuadra (León)
- Centro Acción Ya (Estelí)
- Mujer y Comunidad (Ciudad Rama)
- IXCHEN León (Masaya)

The “other” hurricanes

“When we started doing the workshops with women, we saw that the problem was a lot bigger than Mitch. It had to do with poverty, abandonment, interfamily violence, the war..., so we exchanged life experiences and knowledge in order to have an integral vision”.

The Commission focused its work not just on the subject of natural disasters but also on social disasters that are constantly present, such as violence in its different expressions. All the participants in the course of training went through a parallel healing process. If the subject caused grief among the members of the Network, even though they are organized and with years of working in this area, when we did the workshops with other women, they would find themselves in Pandora’s box. “In order to help other people, we started with ourselves”.

“It was a new way to do psychology, respecting the processes of each person, confirming what we learned from the Network: that respect and the fight for women’s human rights is also a form of healing. Also, the people who helped were deteriorating emotionally, and that is where the concept of selfcare comes from.”

The Emotional Recovery workshops began giving individual attention and principally group services in Posoltega, Estelí, Matagalpa, Chinandega, Ocotal, San Rafael del Sur, Condega, Jinotega, León, San Francisco Libre and Managua.

The reactions were similar in all places: the majority of women began to talk of their crisis under the effects of hurricane Mitch, but also of the blows and humiliations of their partners, unresolved grief, rage, much depression, a constant feeling of hopelessness due to violence in the home; and for the first time, many talked of their experiences of sexual abuse from their childhood. A tornado of emotions and feelings which were frozen in their bodies, minds, and hearts.

“In Posoltega a woman’s husband died because of Mitch and she told us: *I don’t know why I feel so tranquil now, he used to hit me and now I can go out.* But at the same time

she felt guilty for feeling well, since she expected to only feel bad. At the same time her children died and that hurt her soul. She had strong ambiguous feelings.”

“There was also a case of a seventy something year old who was abused as a child. We had to find a way to treat her, tell her that it wasn’t her fault and that the crisis she lived was normal. At that time we realized that we had to adapt the methodology to the needs of the people.”

“In El Rama the women demanded more workshops and individual attention. We facilitated the elaboration of peoples’ grief with Mitch, but also past traumas, because if we stuck to a plan of talking about grief from natural disasters, we would have stagnated there.”

“That is why we incorporated the learning of other techniques such as massages, energy..., to deepen therapy in the following aspects:

- Sexual abuse/incest
- Physical and systematic psychological violence
- Unresolved grief

“It was necessary to apply techniques or therapies that we could implement in a short time. An option was EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing), which is an effective technique to work with deep traumas in short periods of time.” This technique was offered to the Commission by three professional members of the Institute EMDR in the United States. It included two people from the United States and one from Guatemala (Bárbara Zelwer, John Hartung y Ligia de Piedrasanta) that taught in two levels.

“Because it is a delicate technique, only psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers were trained, because past traumas are relived and other special techniques of psychology are needed to assist this psychosocial intervention and to contribute to the emotional recovery of people.”

The feminist touch to the methodology

The advantage of many of the members of the Commission is that they have feminist formation and work with a focus on gender, human rights, prevention of and attention to violence, and different subjects about women’s subjectivity. There is also the fact that many are involved “in body and soul” to live their own processes.

“We the psychologists needed the specialized therapeutic tools to carry out our work, but also the advocates needed the simple or complex tools to better accompany and follow up with women.”

“There is an anecdote that happened to two women in the group, in one part of the grief workshop, after a farewell ceremony to what is lost—we send off the pain without obligation to forget --, a woman of the rural zone said goodbye to a difficult relation with a man who she felt attached to.

“Days later she saw the man and she told us that it was strange seeing him and she said with surprise: *Ideay?*, I thought I was never going to see you again, I already said goodbye to you; and she said this to us happily, because seeing him did not affect her as before and she felt very tranquil.”

“The most useful part of the first grief workshop is that we meet with a woman (she was not a psychologist, but an excellent facilitator), she was the trust in which both of us could contain the emotions of the group. It was emotionally heavy; it is not easy to hear various women talking about crisis that led them to think they should take their lives. And later make a big list of reasons to live, such as, to see their children grow.”

“This is the most beautiful part, sharing experiences, discovering the importance of crying, of not keeping quiet, of not isolating oneself, of caring for yourself, not just for your children but because as people we are worth something and we deserve to live in tranquility, fighting for a better life.”

We saw that many women couldn't move, touch themselves, sit on the floor for fear of someone seeing their underwear or a little part of their leg, or their feet when taking their shoes off...”

During the year 99 there was much emphasis on having permanent training aside from the certificate program with the Fundación Neohumanista. The corporal work became integrated as the methodology was validated for emotional recovery with the concepts of gender and violence as central themes.

As part of the learning that this practice left us, the Commission also changed its focus around mental health to integral health, because if a person is emotionally sick, their body falls ill. You would have to work on the physical aspect, psychological, social and spiritual in an integral form. To talk only of mental health is to isolate a part from the rest and not to see it as an effect of various aspects, which are connected to each other.

“In a business you may have the best machines, but without good human resources it doesn't mean a thing. With Hurricane Mitch food was supplied, but the people were left without the desire to cook or eat, with illness as a effect of the same situation. We have to consider people as subjects, not objects. In offering psychosocial attention, this helped them to find energy and hope, and to begin life again, in a new way.

Emotional Recovery to attain Integral Health

It was important to sum up the aspects you must take into account in the face of traumatic experiences due to previous mentioned causes. A few of them are:

*A person that has unresolved pain does not enjoy life, they live remembering and reliving the past and have less energy to live.

*A person that relives their crisis, functions at 50% of their capacity. Their creativity, energy, and will to overcome, is limited.

*A person who does not resolve their crisis does not enjoy their social relations, they isolate themselves or becomes dependent or aggressive; it can lead to dependence on drugs, alcoholism, or drug addiction. They can become physically ill due to pent up emotions. Spiritually they feel incapable to believe even in themselves, they can become sad and embittered, and give up everything thinking that “nothing would be lost” if they died.

*It is important to recognize individuality in the paths that people take in crisis, not everyone reacts the same way.

*Finally, a person that does not resolve their crisis, hides them, they are incapable of producing or building. With what desire are they going to work? What positive feelings could they transmit at home? If they avoid talking about their problems, how are they going to resolve them? How could one avoid talking about oneself? How could they contribute to this world?

“As people we need the conditions to develop mind and body, have safe spaces—or close people—with whom to share what happens to us, communicate positively, who recognize our qualities and who make suggestions for change that are good for us—but through constructive criticism. We need time to rest and also to move, to work with dignity, have access to various free or accessible health services, an education that does not discriminate based on class or sex, among other things”.

“It is evident that disasters that occur due to natural phenomena produce material losses. However, the psychological harm is imperceptible, unintelligible, misunderstood, and even distorted. There is still no social conscious regarding the importance of Integral Health for the development of the country.”

The public declarations of the ex-president Arnoldo Alemán are an example of this, as he affirmed to the media that those injured by Mitch were “lazy” because of refusing to move immediately to Jinotega after the catastrophe, and integrating to the coffee harvests.

A marathon of aid techniques

Responding to the necessity for more alternative therapeutic tools, in July 99, Wisconsin Coordinating Council on Nicaragua (WCCN), offered a series of workshops on stress management.

After Mitch in 1998, the Network of Women against Violence began a relationship with WCCN, an NGO in solidarity, based in the state Wisconsin in the United States. Their objective is to “develop and promote positive relations, healthy and equitable between citizens of both countries”. Moreover they administer a lending fund to entities working in alternative credit”.

Through the *Women's Empowerment Project*, WCCN offered their aid to the Network of Women against Violence. This coordination consisted of direct collaboration through the volunteer Julie Knop, a specialist in trauma from WCCN, who worked for nine months with the Psychosocial Commission, with the Women's Movement Lucrecia Lindo and ASINPAVI, providing individual and group psychological attention, and Kristin Hoffschmidt, who collaborated with the process of systematization during 5 months.

The two organizations jointly carried out meetings in July 1999 and June 2000 with participants from all parts from Nicaragua.

For the first encounter, Julie Anderson organized a brigade of professionals in alternative techniques for emotional catharsis, with the idea of exchanging materials and experiences in an intensive and simultaneous manner for two days. Many people were invited and it was well responded: 120 women participated from areas of Jinotega, Matagalpa, Estelí, Condega, Bluefields, Puerto Cabezas, Chinandega, León, San Rafael del Sur, Ocotal, Rivas and Managua.

In order to create the Network of facilitators, women leaders of different organizations were contacted and the Commission held workshops in different cities at the same time. This is how the Network socializes and enriches experiences of each one of us in a space created as a process of learning.

After receiving training, in San Rafael the women formed a self-help group, to share how they were doing and to do thought field therapy exercises, a technique used to lower stress levels, this was facilitated by a group from WCCN. Each one replicating what they had learned at these workshops in their homes.

“During the massage workshop and aroma therapy workshop, one woman thought that a part of her body was paralyzed, but she recovered some sensitivity after working with her body. Another woman obtained relief from her strong abdominal pain and constipation.”

“These healing processes have caused us as facilitators and the women who received training, as well as others who benefited, to think about a plan of self-care, as prevention and promotion of women's health in all dimensions. They have generated the creation of a permanent process that permits emotional recovery, for women of all ages that are experiencing or have experienced violence. And in that way guarantee the recovery of self-esteem and empowerment, in order to orient ourselves in a search of alternatives to reduce violence as a way of life or living together.”

The work of the Commission has been recognized in other spaces such as Ministerio de Salud (MINSA), the Organización Panamericana de la Salud (OPS), and the University. They were also invited to México, Honduras, and El Salvador to share their experiences.

The cradle of folklore trembles: the earthquake of Masaya

While the Commission continued with its training process, there was a natural event that once again affected the nation. The 6th of July 2000, Masaya was shaken by an earthquake with the epicenter at Laguna de Apoyo, principally affecting the towns in the

eastern departments (El Valle, Dirombito, Pacayita, Pacaya, Quebrada Honda a part of the historic indigenous district Monimbó, among others...). The following day there was a new earthquake that impacted the northern zone of the city Masaya, and finally there was continued seismic activity with low intensity tremors that did not stop until September.

In the presence of the alarm and the initial emergency, the Masaya Collective, member of the Network and the Psychosocial Commission, responded by doing a census in seven areas in order to assess the situation of women they worked with in the rural and urban area of the department.

The collective has three work programs for women: Literacy, feminist reflection, and services to victim and survivors of violence, also self-help groups and the program of internal work group. Women from Quebrada Honda, Santa Teresa, Las Pilas orientales, and the zone were the Collectives' headquarters is were some of the most affected areas.

“We saw ourselves unarmed because we were included among the injured. We thought we had to look for all kinds of financing and aid, that is why the first thing was to know how many women had lost their homes, how many were outside because their homes were damaged, and the situations of each, because it wasn't enough just to see the physical part of the damage, we needed to see how affected these women had been and what personal help they needed,” tells a member of the Collective.

The Network offered immediate aid to the most urgent necessities, also the Grupo de Hombres contra la Violencia (Group of men against Violence) offered to attend to emergencies. The Collective obtained financing and began to distribute packages of food and plastic sheeting for provisional tents and later distributed zinc.

“We saw the importance of emotional recovery beginning with ourselves, for the hour of the first earthquake, the fellow women paced from one side to the other. Now more so for the second effect because it literally moved the floor, and when the floor moves right from under you everything moves. That is why along with handing out packages we asked, how do you feel, how are your children, in order to know the psychological impact of the earthquake.”

Taking into account the experience of the Psychosocial Commission with Mitch and seeing the needs in this area, they decided to initiate emotional recovery workshops. “The more formal training process began in August and we did it ourselves, because we saw that it wasn't valid to take a message of tranquility to the outside if you were not tranquil, because the earthquake affected us also: half of one member's house fell in; a lamp fell on another, even the building housing the collective was damaged with cracks on the walls, we continued to feel nervous because the earthquakes continued.”

Along with other organizations of civil society we formed part of a local commission to deal with disaster but there were a few discrepancies in terms of the field of emotional work. “We wanted to work on emotional recovery with women and because of that we had differences in the focus because we prioritized the matter of gender and other organizations bypassed it, and so we began our own process with a feminist focus”.

The psychosocial commission in conjunction with the Collective began to carry out the workshops, to prepare the first team, and then with leaders and those who taught literacy so that they could replicate the experience and would be prepared to intervene in crisis situations.

Similar to the experience with Mitch, they discovered that the earthquake had revealed traumas and previously unresolved grief, especially caused by violent situations.

“Since then we decided to include emotional recovery as a central idea in all the programs of the Collective.” From this moment we also began to replicate what was learned with the personnel of the Ministerio de Salud de Masaya, and in other parts of the country: Bocana de Paiwas, Nueva Guinea, and El Arenal (town of Masatepe), among others.

Help us so that we may help others

The Facilitators of the Commission speak

When the rains began...

- “In Managua you could feel the rains but they continued to grow and my mother was in El Viejo (Chinandega), and she was trapped because all the bridges had collapsed, there was no way to cross with the rivers too high. I wanted to go to my town to help out, and I felt injured but divided: it was a strange feeling, uncomfortable, because my room was dry and my family inundated.”
- “We planned a workshop and the people did not come to Matagalpa, so we said to ourselves: *uh! They didn't show up because of a little rain.* The people began to come looking for help and the work center became a refuge. I was in the phase of denial, thinking that nothing would happen, that it would stop raining and people would return to their homes. But the channel closest to the office overflowed and the people kept coming.”
- “That is when I began to feel anguish, the majority of women in the group started working: some attending to the refugees and others doing projects to find funding. Then I was directly affected because my house flooded and the women from the group came to rescue me.”
- “When they began to talk about Posoltega on the news, I felt that it was national grief. At work they asked us to join a brigade and I said: *I don't want to go* because it was affecting me and I felt the need for help. Also, I did not find it appropriate to go to the shelters as a *tourist guide* in order to prove the damage, if we did not take a concrete proposal, without preparation. At this moment I became immobilized.”
- “A group of the Network was doing an apprenticeship with CEFEMINA in Costa Rica. In the television we saw that there was rain and that's it, until we began a

solidarity trip to aid the people in the border did we realize the magnitude of the problem. We were longing to return to Nicaragua.”

- “I started to help a group of women and men in Tipitapa, but the line of work did not include emotional help, and I felt a moral duty to support those people, so I looked for the documentation that the Commission had on this subject in order to gain the tools and apply them.”

During Our Learning Process ...

- “The beginning of training was a relief for me, because the prior experience in the Crisis intervention workshop we offered, there was a part where we asked everyone how they were affected, and since I was a facilitator that meant I had to swallow everything and listen.”
- “I had the myth that psychologists could not cry in a situation such as this, and with this lump in my throat I asked myself: *should I cry or should I not cry?* And I said: *Better not*, because here there are only professionals, doctors, people that expected something different from us, not that we would just sit down to cry. I did not feel prepared, my legs were shaking, my body, my voice, I felt insecure and in horrible defenseless state.”
- “Being inviting to training I felt a great relief because I needed these tools in order to help. With that I felt more secured to work with grief and then to begin regaining my confidence, improving social relations in order to overcome the crisis.”
- “When I saw how hard people worked to give food, I was conscience that there was also a need of psychological assistance. When I heard about the Brenson and Sarmiento course I wanted to join, but I couldn’t because they had a lot of requirements. However, I did manage to read all the pamphlets they were giving out, and that helped to facilitate a process with other people.”
- “As a psychologists I had experience in accompanying young women in situations of interfamily violence, and concerning Mitch, I confronted a process that brought together many pains. That challenged me to aid, help, support..., but I was insecure, I was scared, that is why the process of training with Brenson and Sarmiento helped me find ways to know what to do and what not to, and to be brave, discover in myself the resources that I had not paid attention to.”
- “We have to give importance to peoples’ feelings and life experiences, this comes from Popular Education. The analysis of women’s situation from a feminist perspective, and the theoretical and practical concept, takes into account that we are socialized in a different manner according to gender and this has consequences in real life.”

“ We are in a society that does not permit the expression of feelings of men and women in such as way that people look for solutions. To go from relief to action,

requires people to go through a process of reflection in order to see what affects them and find what to do in order to overcome it. There are people that never talk of what they feel. Women learn envy or fear instead of solidarity and trust, and this makes them live in solitude through experiences of pain, fear, blame, and sadness”.

- “Through methodology of emotional recovery comes the need to work in leadership positions. Many women feel guilty of not resolving, that is why we had to analyze personal problems, of the community to work with specific needs. Also, there was the fact of finding a limit, in order to take care of yourself and not to mother the whole world.”

Commenting on grief caused by natural phenomena and violence

- “We learned that grief cannot be touched on in one single workshop of 8 hours (such as the one planned by Brenson and Sarmiento), we gave more time to the process of pain.”
- “The principle is to believe that people have the capacity to know what is right for them, that each one is an expert on themselves and has the capacity to make important decisions about their lives.”
- “In cases of violence what we do is facilitate the process of reflection in so that she can make a decision, give her information and accompany her, but not decide for her. Sometimes a woman tells you: *if I denounce him and they put him in jail, when he gets out he is going to kill me*. That is a great responsibility, I can’t tell her *put him in jail*, but I can tell her that that is a way men intimidate women to keep them at their side.”
- “When it is grief because of a death and the person is in agony, the person converses in a state of dying, they can say their goodbyes and leave, it is much easier than to recover emotionally; but in cases of natural events made into disasters it is difficult because there are feelings of guilt; and when there is violence it is even more difficult because there is a threat in the middle, even if she is no longer with the man.”
- “Culturally there exists a way to live through grief, just the fact that the family feels accompanied in the wake, the burial, the 9 days..., and the one year anniversary mass is a closure for me, it is like a natural process but it’s cultural. In the wake people have the opportunity to cry and talk about the deceased person and in all those days people comment about the emptiness it leaves in the family, work and the community.”
- “The most difficult moment is when the accompaniment is over and everyone returns to their normal life. But that does not signify that people remain frozen in grief, everyone has the means to confront pain, what happens is that sometimes those means get blocked and sufficient accompaniment does not exist.”

- “In the cases of violence many women do not communicate what’s happening to them, they live in solitude, without sharing. Maybe they let it out, but they can’t see a way out of the situation. In cases of natural phenomena, it is an impact because nobody is prepared for an earthquake, consciously you say: *its already happened to me and what I would do would be this and that*, that is why people rehearse how to get out of their house. A natural disaster causes a great impact, that is why the first reactions is not to believe what is happening, later to feel scared and have a bunch of physical and emotional reactions, in character, in your beliefs, in your life, and in your future.”
- “What helps in cases of natural disasters is that you are not the only one experiencing it, there are many affected people. And even though they say “mal de muchos Consuelo de tontos”(bad of all, consolation of fools), the fact of sharing the same reality helps to lessen the pain. With some women who live severe violence we can help them with a plan of leaving home, how to send the child to inform the neighbors... ,but the great majority are not prepared for that.”
- I think that in cases of violence you have to see the fact that it is not that easy to leave this stage, it is easier to grieve someone’s death because you have company, the solidarity of people, the prayer; but when you are living with violence, you have the attachment, the dependence, the social mandate that asks how are you going to leave your husband, the father of your children, or how are you going to allow yourself to leave, or if you leave the people are going to talk about you, they are going to think you have another man... these things are all so terrible and they tie you to continue putting up with it and its hard to break.”
- “The recovery is hard when the woman is living with violence. And time has something to do with it. If a group goes through a natural disaster and you immediately work on what happened, the recovery is easier unlike working with it years later, because it is possible that you have frozen those feelings and it is much harder to bring them back, to relive them with all the emotions involved. It is best to work through the grief caused by natural disasters immediately. Violence is something that has been maintained over time and can still be occurring, it is a different situation.”
- “In relation to the learning and reproduction of violence, we have to revise what is the most healthy for the family when one person mistreats others. There are women that say: *I will not separate because I don’t want my children to grow up without a father*. So I ask them: *what type of father do your children need? What are they learning? What are they seeing at home?*”

“Society tells us that as women should value ourselves by our ability to attract a man and keep him at our side as much as possible, even though he might be the worst man, *it is better than no man*. We have to get this idea out of our heads, the family can survive, because many times it is women that maintain the household

economically and emotionally.”

- “Something that has helped us to survive so many disasters has to do with solidarity, culturally we are a nation of solidarity. When someone dies, friends will be around, and in a natural disaster they won’t let you die... , but in cases of violence the recovery is much harder.”
- “However, women embrace these beliefs and the social representations are a support or an internal resource to give us understanding. This is where religion plays a decisive role, because in a workshop we saw how women feel they are doing the right thing and they feel strong, because they are doing good by God, because God said that woman came from the rib of Adam and she has to obey him, and she is of his flesh, and of his bone, and this gives them strength to feel good with God.”

The resources that helped the Facilitators

The facilitators tell that before Mitch they counted on some technical resources for psychosocial intervention, for example: Relaxation techniques and corporal treatments such as pressure points, bioenergy; management of subjects such as violence and a few techniques of crisis intervention, techniques of body expression, of transformation of conflicts and effective communication. All these techniques come from diverse sources of theory and methodological proposals.

They also counted on methodological resources such as emotional management, popular feminist education methodology, participative methodology and facilitation processes. They had knowledge of relaxation, the methodology of psychosocial intervention, putting together psychosocial aspects with intervention during crisis, follow up, monitoring and systematization and community intervention that creates a vision of solidarity among women.

In terms of personal resources they stated that they relied on their own knowledge, abilities, and experiences; their desire and willingness to help, sensitivity to situations of violence and gender, their self-esteem, charisma, personal confidence, ability to work with groups, creativity, dynamic nature and processes of personal self-growth.

The facilitators participated in training on psychosocial crisis intervention, in the formation of facilitators in synergetic processes, techniques to manage stress, Callahan and EMDR. Other subjects were Crisis and change, psycholinguistic techniques of empowerment, active listening, Management of grief and pain and self-care.

The techniques that the women considered most efficient were Bioenergy, body work, body-mind, circular breathing and neurology, simple acupuncture, projective techniques, dance, games, creativity and imagination, ritualistic and symbolic acts, effective communication, empathy and personal growth contracts.

The selection of participants in the workshops

There was a lot of interest in doing emotional recovery work in several cases, the groups were already organized and there was no need to select participants. In other cases, we had to define a few criteria as well as establish quotas for representatives of each organization, making use of the previous work of the Emergency Committee for services to affected people. Also, women from small towns, cooperatives, facilitators that directed their processes of training in the methodology of Popular education. In other cases quotas were established by territory (11 territories) and as multipliers of 22 groups and people involved civil defense work or the case of work development by the Grupo Venancia in Matagalpa.

One decision of the commission was to clearly establish selection mechanisms which would guarantee the psychological conditions of the people participating, so that they would be able to fulfill their obligations to the project. For example, people that did not suffer losses, prioritize people connected to organizations that work in the affected zones and insure continuity, balanced with professionalism, involve two people of the Coordinadora de la Infancia and Coordinadora Civil.

Several of the participating organizations established other criteria such as:

- Experience with community work and community health
- Leadership capacity and community advocacy
- Established in their community
- Dynamic persons, active, ability to relate to others, solidarity, willing, dedicated to attend and to follow up, as well as carry out personal work, with ability to facilitate processes of replication and that they have carried out actions for the wellbeing of their communities.

In other cases the invitation was more directed towards women of the communities. Heterogeneous groups were made, according to characteristics such as literacy, leaders and promoters, population affected; and their time flexibility.

The workshop themes were selected according to the needs of the group or community, taking into account what challenges they confronted. Other organizations used the logic from the *Manual de Recuperación Emocional* by Brenson and Sarmiento (which was reprinted for distribution in Nicaragua). Similarly, the number of session was determined by availability, needs and the rhythm of the participants, including lived experience.

The facilitators stated that in order to have an effective process, it was necessary to have a sequence and system that was short in duration of time between workshops, which include between six and eight sessions.

Techniques were used during the trainings of working in groups, personal and group reflection and analysis, symbolic acts, co-listening, active listening, empathic listening, psycholinguistic empowerment, living exercises, relaxation, emotional management, a few games and active dynamics. All were effective. These techniques were selected depending on the characteristics and interests of the group and the stated goals.

What happened with follow up?

Several Organizations carried out follow up and others did not. One of the organizations that did follow up was the Grupo Venancia and the Asociación para el Desarrollo Integral Comunitario (ADIC) de Matagalpa, work that was inserted into the process of community organization. There are groups of women and youth that have established reflection groups, so these spaces were taken advantage of in order to do follow up and training in an integral manner.

With the follow up, a few organizations believe that they were able to validate and what had been set in motion and modify the methodology, thus, adapting the process to the characteristics of the population they work with.

In general the achievements of this follow up were to strengthen the existing local capacities, improvement of the focus and inclusion of new techniques for the management of grief and crisis. Also, being able to get to the affected people, and that these people could recognize violence as a disaster. A very important achievement is that people have access to process their grief and learn to ways to take care of themselves.

Some difficulties were that some men did not get involved in the process and/or did not want the women to participate. Also, that we did not learn tools for working with girls and boys. Another difficulty was that a few people did not continue the process, or distractions during workshops due to the fact that some women with small children had nowhere to leave them and so took them to the sessions.

Another obstacle was not having continuity of processes, because a few groups saw the processes as separate from their daily lives. There was also the fear of speaking up, even though in the workshop we stated certain golden rules, one of them being confidentiality, but a few women did not dare talk about their lives for fear of being judged, feelings of shame, or fear of the rumors.

Process of Selfcare

Some women personally applied what they learned during the formation processes, and have a self-care plan, integrating themselves into a process of personal healing; others have not achieved this. In several organizations space for personal growth exists, although the obligations are personal. In other organizations these spaces do not exist.

Likewise, several facilitators have applied at personal level what they have learned and can count on a process of self-care, although others do not. The majority express that they have integrated themselves into a process of personal healing.

Pointing out the Achievements of this Work...

- The Network of Women against Violence occupies an important position in organized civil society; the Commission has been strengthened, they are taken into account as important spaces to contribute to the subjects of disasters and gender. There is much projection and public recognition.
- The psychosocial subject has been put on the table, contributing to a sensitive subject on the national agenda, giving evidence of the ever present issue of violence toward women and children.

- Emotional Recovery workshops were carried out with 1157 women (1998-2000), focusing on gender and women's empowerment for the defense of their rights.
- Self-care of women facilitators has been initiated, promoted and developed, women and the target populations have benefited because of this process.
- Learn a methodology for psychosocial intervention integrating the potential of the participating communities.
- Learn to manage groups and facilitate community organization.
- The convocation was effective because there was national participation of groups working in emotional post-trauma recovery. The objectives and curriculum were achieved; in terms of time and form, and the participants clearly understood the goal of emotional work to be done. Because of this the facilitators came out motivated to continue working.
- The representation of the members is autonomous and the Commission and the organizations have the ability to make decisions.
- The Commission on Psychosocial Development has grown due to the access of other women to participation in the Net, who are not necessarily psychologists.
- The organizations represented are dedicated to the Commission and the Network.
- There are indicators and verifiers, lists and acts of the Commission where the duty of the Commission is reflected.
- We look for a way to nourish, consult and make decisions in a horizontal form, we decide by consensus.

A few recommendations

For the facilitators the basic elements that must be a part of a model of psychosocial intervention are:

- Focus on gender, human rights, integral and integrative participation.
- Violence analysis as a disaster that women experience, of the situation of poverty and the lives of women, and their relation to crisis.
- Emotional recovery methodology with a psychosocial focus.
- To have a self-care plan, psychosocial prevention plan, psychosocial encouragement, community prevention, levels of coordination.
- Preventive intervention in the community, an integral and mixed ecosystem model, ecological model.
- Accelerate the process of edition and production of Workbooks which can be used in psychosocial work and a proposal of a psychosocial intervention model.
- Apply a methodology differentiating by age.

This model is applicable to all groups, whether they are organized or not, so long as it is adapted to their characteristics. It could be applied to the family, school, social service centers for girls, boys, and adolescents; and most of all to women. In the different processes that have been facilitated, there have been cases when men, and on rare occasion women, have identified themselves as causing violence, but the Commission only serves women, not perpetrators.

In the future it is necessary to integrate several technical, methodological and personnel elements for psychosocial intervention in the situation of a traumatic event, for example:

- Techniques for emotional management, enrich the use of emotional accountability.
- Recognition and validation of emotions.
- Reflection on the consequences of violence and alternatives.
- Use of empathic communication and introduce it, listening techniques. Importance of the model from social communication to the family.
- Prevention plan in the face of natural disasters and traumatic effects.
- Attention and personal care plan.
- Personal and group healing techniques, massages.
- Theoretical-practical elements with a focus on gender, systemic and ecological.
- Community intervention and from schools.
- Management of laws for the benefit of women, girls, boys, and adolescents.
- Take into account illiteracy in order to multiply the trainings.
- It is recommended to work as a team, or at least as a duo.
- Detect and make referrals in cases of violence in the groups.

Necessary or Desirable Elements of a facilitator of psychosocial intervention

According to experience you must gather the following technical and personal elements:

- Do personal work first, desire to overcome personally.
- Ability to listen.
- Knowledge of actualized methodology of psychosocial intervention.
- Empathy in the face of human pain and a vision of gender.
- Desire to support, dedication, own will, self-esteem.
- Tolerance.
- Training and experience in working with women.

A few difficulties found...

With participation at the individual and organizational level:

- Non fluid coordination with other organizations.
- The work of personal growth is difficult, as well as working on ones own losses. We believe that is a reason that some people did not want to continue their process and failed to attend the workshops.
- In terms of the system of follow up and monitoring of the processes, the remoteness of geographic location did not permit more systematization of the experience.
- To participate in the workshops, some women experience emotional blackmail by their partners, because they see the trainings as a space where women have a change of perspective, and that does not suit them.

To find Support:

- There is a lack of financing for a prioritized topic such as emotional recovery and it is necessary to convince the agencies to introduce a focus of psychosocial intervention in their platform of support of projects.

Within the Commission:

- The self-care process proposed by the Commission as of yet is not totally accepted in the Network as a fundamental strategy in work on the subject of gender violence.
- We must have a discussion of practice and come to formal consensus of theoretical aspects.

Internal Communication:

- Not all the members have access to email or telephone.
- The follow up of decisions is delayed.

Our discoveries and learning

- “I think the themes that we developed in the Commission came to reaffirm us, it gave us guidelines for working with a focus on gender. We saw that we couldn’t begin processes and leave them like that. It is not sufficient to have theory and a few steps, but to have a integral theoretical-practical concept.
- It is important to work as a duo, because it is not possible to do this accompaniment by oneself in situations as intense and difficult as these. Working with another person gives strength, confidence and security”.
- “To go through an experiential process of grief in order to nourish other people, to do self-care. Necessity to work your own emotions comes first.”
- “It is possible to come out of a crisis and recover as a person”.
- “It is necessary to talk about violence.”
- “Importance of setting limits for professionals and groups of multiplication.”
- “Recognize and validate people’s strengths.”
- “It is necessary to prioritize the emotional health of the nation, of integral health programs for the long term.”
- “Learn to open our perspectives as psychologists and develop non-traditional therapies.”
- “Importance of coordinating among different organizations in order to confront emergencies and situations of violence.”
- “Take into account the care and protection of the environment.”
- “Focus with a preventive and communal characteristics; work in mixed groups that take girls, boys, adolescents, and women into account.”