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SUCCESS STORY

Healing minds and hearts with culturally relevant support

By: Erin Treinen

Participants' names and some details have been changed to protect the identity of the survivors who shared their stories.

Totonicapán, Guatemala – "I didn't see a way out of this situation, except to just put up with it," shares Mercedes, a survivor of gender-based violence, indigenous woman and single mother from the Western Highlands.

Deciding to leave a violent relationship is challenging for victims of gender-based violence. Survivors may lack resources or a support network, worry about social isolation, fear for their lives, have been conditioned to think this is normal, or not know that they are in an abusive relationship. "My children and I have suffered so much. Unfortunately, I had a blindfold on my eyes but as soon as it came off, I said no. No more. No more violence," says Mercedes.

Photo by Karen Chang

All survivors of gender-based violence deserve the right to care, support and healing but accessing these services in Guatemala is not always easy.

"Sometimes, there are women who don't look for help. They say 'no, I'm too scared' or 'I'm being threatened' and they stay in that relationship," says Mercedes, who shares that she stayed in her relationship for too long and did not have family support when she discussed leaving her partner.

Psychological and legal services are few and far between in the Western Highlands, especially in rural areas. Many times, these organizations lack the resources to address the growing demand for their services. What is more, indigenous survivors hesitate to use these services — which are provided in Spanish — due to language barriers, lack of cultural relevancy, or social beliefs that result in victim blaming.

The Office for the Protection of Indigenous Women — abbreviated as DEMI in Spanish — saw an opportunity to offer culturally relevant care to indigenous survivors. Juana Tax, a departmental delegate for the DEMI in Totonicapán, joined forces with the Peacebuilding Project to incorporate the Mayan worldview into the healing process for survivors of gender-based violence, providing ancestral practices and psychosocial services to participants.

The Peacebuilding Project, *Tejiendo Paz* in Spanish, is a 6.5-year project funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to reduce social conflict and violence and strengthen social cohesion in the Western Highlands of Guatemala. Implemented by Creative Associates International

with PartnersGlobal and ProPaz, the Peacebuilding Project reaches 130 communities in 15 municipalities.

Ancestral practices leading the way

Facilitators began each session by lighting candles and holding a brief traditional Mayan ceremony to honor the day's *Nahual* — the energy, spirit or strength that brings to life and guides a person — which is a sacred moment for indigenous Maya people. Then participants learned ancestral practices and healing techniques, finding balance through meditation and acknowledging their emotions. Participants also learned about their rights and began to identify the cycle of violence through an analysis of their family tree.

Many found solace in sharing space with other survivors to support and learn from one another's experiences. "I really liked it when in one of the first sessions we got to interact with another participant," says Gabriela, another survivor of gender-based violence who attended the sessions. "That was really nice because we learned each other's stories and began to build a relationship."

After the sessions finished, DEMI conducted interviews with the participants and found overwhelming interest in additional trainings focused on overcoming guilt, managing anger, and allowing self-forgiveness. DEMI and the Peacebuilding Project responded with a five-session training, which incorporated themes of empowerment and aimed to build confidence, develop leadership skills, and provide tools for anger management and forgiveness.

"One of the topics I really was drawn to was forgiveness," shares Mercedes. "I used to go out and see people that have done me wrong and feel hate when I looked at them. Since the healing sessions I've begun to forgive them so now when I see them in the street, I say, 'good morning, good afternoon' and they look at me like I'm crazy, but I feel so much better."

"My own healing helped my family"

The benefits of the healing sessions are not limited to just the women survivors who participated, they are also impacting entire families.

Sandra was going to leave her husband because of their inability to communicate, which was exacerbated by anger control issues and unwanted intervention by other family members. Sandra spoke with Tax at the DEMI who convinced her to participate in the trainings before making any decisions. "Thankfully, we are still together and are improving the relationship with each other and my in-laws," says Sandra.

"Before, I felt like my husband talked down to me, but his attitude has improved a lot. And my communication with my mother-in-law is better now," she says.

The sessions had a positive impact on Mercedes's family as well. "I kept going to the healing sessions and when I would go home, I was so happy, and I would tell my children what I had learned. It helped us to have a better relationship," says Mercedes.

"My daughter was very shy and didn't talk in school. Her teacher would tell me that my daughter wouldn't do her homework and she needed help. I decided to help myself first and then I would help my kids," she says. "With my own healing, my daughter changed. She does her homework and talks to the teacher. Her teacher asked me 'what did you do to help your daughter?' And I said 'nothing, I'm just receiving these trainings and come home and tell my kids about them.'"

Mercedes smiles when she says, "The teacher congratulated me and told me to keep doing what I'm doing… this has helped me a lot personally."

The bright look on her face and lightness in her voice spoke volumes. "I liked it when they taught us to say 'I am me. I'm unique. I value myself. I love myself. I accept myself for who I am.'"

This has a domino effect in the communities.

"Some of these women are replicating their learnings with their neighbors and have developed the capacity to support and guide other women that are in similar situations," explains Daniela Galindez Arias, Gender and Social Inclusion Advisor for the Peacebuilding Project.

"It is precisely through strategies of cohesion and shared learning that the Peacebuilding Project contributes to the transformation of conflict in the Western Highlands of Guatemala," she says.

Responding to an increased need for services and prioritizing prevention

Photo by Karen Chang

While culturally relevant healing combined with legal and psychosocial support is important for gender-based violence survivors, prevention is even more critical.

A woman is violently murdered every 12 hours in Guatemala. According to the USAID/Guatemala Gender Analysis, Guatemala has one of the highest levels of violence in Latin America and the Caribbean. These statistics are not just numbers to the Guatemalan women, men, youth, community leaders, and ancestral authorities who see this violence playing out in their communities.

While many Guatemalans know that violence is negatively affecting their mothers, sisters, daughters, neighbors, friends and the overall social fabric of their communities, a major challenge is that intrafamilial and gender-based violence has been normalized and is often seen as a private issue not to be publicly addressed, contributing to the perpetuation of the problem.

Fortunately, through participatory, community-led processes that include dialogue and reflection, more than a 100 of the Peacebuilding Project's current target communities have identified gender-based violence as an obstacle to effective community development and have prioritized preventing and responding to gender-based violence as a peacebuilding strategy.

"Violence is a multicausal social problem with complex consequences for girls, youth, and women. The approach should be multidisciplinary and interinstitutional," explains Galindez.

USAID and Creative through the Peacebuilding Project have taken a multifaceted approach to preventing gender-based violence. They have held intrafamilial violence awareness campaigns, built capacity among ancestral authorities— like midwives — on how to report cases of violence, and trained women who experience economic violence on income-generating crafts, among other initiatives at the community, municipal, departmental, and national levels.