



Special Report



Una vida diferente | A different life

Widespread cultural change is slow work: At the highest levels, laws must be in place to safeguard peoples' rights. On the ground, women and men must re-examine how they think and act. In El Salvador, the next chapter in a battle against gender violence is a broad-based education initiative.

by Chris Hufstader

How do you prevent violence against women? A coalition of nine groups working in El Salvador—including Oxfam America—has been looking closely at this question for some time. In response, they launched a public campaign in 2005 to reduce gender violence: *Entre vos y yo: Una vida diferente* (Between you and me: A different life).

The campaign began with the goal of raising public awareness about the scope of violence facing Salvadoran women and girls. A small country, El Salvador has seen disproportionate levels of violence against women: According to the National Police and the Office of the Public Prosecutor, there were 2,645 women murdered in El Salvador between 2000 and early 2009.

Some years are particularly brutal: In 2006, the government recorded 437 murders of women. By way of comparison, in 2006, 1,836 women were murdered by men in the US. Relative to their populations, that means that murders of women were roughly 13 times higher in El Salvador.

The majority of these murders are at the hands of a spouse or former spouse, according to the Center for Women's Studies in El Salvador. "Public officials are not sensitive, and there's no good application of the laws," says Yanira Argueta, the head of the Salvadoran Women's Association. "We're working to transform the policies and get more commitment to solve the problem."

Cultural change is slow work

The violence in El Salvador mirrors recent history. The country is still recovering from a civil war in which 75,000 died and nearly 8,000 "disappeared." Salvadorans remain politically polarized, the country torn between a small business elite, which dominates commerce, and the majority of people, who live in poverty. The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Rashida Manjoo, visited the country in March 2010. Although she could see that El Salvador had "come a long way...since the end of the 12-year civil war in 1992," she highlighted "the significant challenges that continue to exist in the area of violence against women and girls."

Art, music, and parades are all part of a campaign in El Salvador to change entrenched attitudes about gender violence in the country. At the heart of the initiative is education. Piloted in 53 schools, the campaign has now reached almost 62,000 students and trained more than 2,000 teachers. *René Figueroa*

In evaluating violence against women, Manjoo quoted from a 2004 UN report: "Impunity for crimes, the socioeconomic disparities, and the *machista* culture foster a generalized state of violence, subjecting women to a continuum of multiple violent acts." And the impact of this violence is widespread. Given that roughly half of Salvadorans live in poverty and that women head about 25 percent of households, the abuse of women contributes to poverty nationwide.

A campaign for change

Una vida diferente/A different life has made some notable progress:

- Over the course of several years, 360 women from 25 municipalities received human rights training. These individuals are pioneers in a national human rights network, led by women, pushing for legal reform to ensure that adequate planning, resources, and programs are in place to help prevent violence against women.
- From 2005 to 2007 the campaign trained 165 government officials (judges, police officers, elected officials, and others) to apply current laws, improve public safety, and to devote parts of their budgets to violence prevention.
- In 2008, 45 women legislators participated in a gender violence course and drafted the Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Eradication bill.
- The mayor and government of Santa Tecla, a city just outside San Salvador, the Salvadoran capital, made a public commitment to reducing violence against women by involving women in its budgeting process, establishing a shelter for women, and declaring its public park a violence-free zone.
- By launching a nationwide public relations effort, the campaign reached two million people in 2005, using billboards, bus ads, and public events to teach people about human rights and how to prevent gender violence.

The next phase: Turning to youth

Building on these accomplishments, the campaign coalition has recently expanded



"We all have the same rights and no one can violate them," says Karla Sanchez, 15. She learned about some of those rights from participating in a special course for students and watching a performance that is part of a campaign in El Salvador to end gender violence. Its slogan? Between you and me: A different life. *Claudia Barrientos / Oxfam America*

the scope of its work to ensure widespread changes in behaviors and practices across El Salvador.

Based on the premise that by changing attitudes among young people, Salvadorans can build a less violent future for their country, the campaign found a partner in El Salvador's Ministry of Education. Together they developed and tested a method to teach elementary through high school students about the rights of women and girls to live free from violence. Both students and teachers learned where and how to report violence and received pocket guides outlining their rights and the duties of the school and government to protect women and girls.

The Ministry allowed the campaign to pilot the program in 53 schools in 2007. By 2009, the program had reached nearly 62,000 students and trained more than 2,000 teachers. Participants report greater understanding of their rights. "All the people here must respect our rights as children, as girls," says Karla Sanchez, a 15-year-old who attended a performance at her school just outside San Salvador. "We all have the same rights, and no one can violate them." On a creative twist on a "suggestion box," schools installed boxes where individuals could safely and anonymously report domestic violence, harassment, and sexual assault, which are then investigated by the Ministry of Education.

In 2009, the campaign kicked off a 50-school tour designed by campaign

partner Escena X Theatre Group, which featured poetry, dance, music, and rap songs by popular artists to popularize campaign messages.

Earlier this year, the Ministry of Education and the campaign reached an agreement to bring the newest manifestation of this creative educational program—now called Ruta del Arte—to an additional 42 schools. Performances will be open not only to students, but also to local government officials, parents, and others, and events will be held in public venues to allow all community members to participate. Ruta del Arte expects to reach 28,000 students and 26,000 adults, including teachers and parents, with training on human rights and how to prevent violence against women. This could not be possible without the ministry's willingness to allow access to students and the ministry's active involvement in strategizing. What's more, the ministry is helping to fund these efforts.

Carolina Castrillo, Oxfam America's director in Central America, signed the official agreement with the Salvadoran Ministry of Education on behalf of the entire campaign coalition. The campaign's growth to date has been impressive, and Oxfam America is actively monitoring the long-term effect of our work. But day-to-day, Castrillo and others have not lost sight of the question that has driven this work from the onset: "We want to reduce levels of violence against women and girls in these communities," she says simply.