**OHCHR – Engaging Men and Boys**

**in the fight against Violence against Women and Girls**

**Submission by Puntos de Encuentro – Nicaragua**

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**Context of Nicaragua in relation to this topic**

We would like to briefly mention that the context of Nicaragua has been challenging for the fight against violence against women and girls and the promotion of equal rights.

In Nicaragua, violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a social problem that affects one in every three women. According to data from the National Observatory of Femicide (2013), femicides have been growing, rising to 158 cases between 2012 and 2013. In the period 2006-2012 the cases of intrafamily and sexual violence (IFSV) have tripled. Nicaragua has the highest rate of pregnancies in girls and adolescents in Latin America, with approximately one third of deliveries in girls between 11 and 15 years old. In some departments, IFSV is the second cause of legal medical attention and an annual average of 22,253 victims of IFSV are currently registered. 24% of victims are under 18, of which 86% are girls. Spouses, partners and ex-partners are the people who most perpetuate acts of VAWG and the home is still the least safe for women. This context of VAWG has been consolidated by the historical persistence of a macho culture (hegemonic masculinity) that conditions public, private and institutional relations between men and women. This has been contributed by the lack of effective involvement of men in the construction of new masculinities and in the assumption of their responsibilities regarding violence against women, despite the fact that work with men and masculinities by NGOs has multiplied in the last 10 years.

Public policies to address these situations have not yet had the desired results. From a general perspective, the National Plan of Nicaragua for Human Development (PNDH 2012-2016) has been updated in 2016 and incorporates a policy of "fight against intrafamily, sexual and gender violence". In terms of VAWG in 2012 the Comprehensive Law Against Violence Against Women (Law 779) that subsequently the National Assembly put a number of safeguards, such as the abolition of the Police Stations of women, limiting its scope was approved and that for women's organizations they favor the impunity of the aggressors.

In addition, the National Plan for the Prevention of Intrafamily and Sexual Violence ended in 2006 and a new one has not been approved. Since Nicaragua has been a country in which, historically, the weight of international cooperation for development has been relevant, it is worth mentioning that at present, the situation is complex. The forced withdrawal of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in October 2015 was a sign of changes in this matter and the government's demands for international cooperation, and bilateral aid has significantly decreased with the withdrawal of at least 5 countries.

**1.Concrete steps our organization has taken, at normative, institutional and programme levels, to engage men and boys in promoting and achieving gender equality and challenge gender stereotypes and the negative social norms, attitudes and behaviors that underlie and perpetuate violence against women and girls.**

In this section, we recount the history of Puntos de Encuentro’s work engaging men and boys, because of the context and objectives that gave rise to this work from a feminist perspective, starting in the early 1990s, and that continues to underpin the work to this day, more than 25 years later.

Puntos de Encuentro is a feminist Nicaraguan organization, founded in 1991 by women who from their beginnings set out to build a daily life culture of equality and respect between men and women, and between adults and children/young people. Convinced that “the personal is political” and that the “political is personal”, Puntos focussed on critical reflection, dialogue, , alliance-building, collective action and movement-building for social change, from the most intimate realms of people’s lives to the most public realms of politics, policies, and mass media.

In this framework, the founders realized that women's empowerment does not exist in a vacuum, that in order for women to be able to fully exercise their rights and be able to make decisions about their own lives and the things that affect them in daily life, change was was necessary not only at the individual level for women, but also in their partner and family relations, as well as in the community, in institutions, and at the larger societal level. Because women and girls live their daily lives in contact with men and boys, Puntos decided to promote dialogue and the construction of alliances with men, for the questioning and dismantling of machismo, discrimination and violence, with a view to building relationships based on equal rights, respect and justice.

So in 1992, Puntos de Encuentro recruited a couple of men to create a men’s/masculinity program, the first of its kind in Nicaragua. We developed workshops for men on masculinity, and formed the first group of Men against Violence. We led this initiative during the first years, but as more and more local groups formed, the Men’s Association against Violence was formed.

At the same time, Puntos was developing its youth leadership development work, and a major component of that work was to work with both young women and young men to challenge sexism in their ways of relating to each other in daily life and in their own groups and organizations. This expanded to challenge other forms of oppression and discrimination (adultism, heterosexism, racism, classism, able-body-ism, etc.) to build alliances across their diversity to strengthen their communities. Before the term “intersectionality” became commonplace, we talked about “diversity with equity”.

While these youth leadership camps were changing young people’s lives and radically changing the way young men and young women thought about their lives and relationships and leadership roles, we realized that this kind of work reached only a small portion of the population. So we decided to “massify” the reach of this kind of work by producing a “social soap” telenovela that would model young people dealing with the issues, problems and conflicts they have in their daily lives, and solving them with each others’ support. We also wanted to model young people overcoming their own prejudices and pre-conceptions. The series “Sexto Sentido” (Sixth Sense), which premiered in 2011 after 5 years of development, became a #1 a hit in Nicaragua, went on to broadcast in 8 other countries, and continues to be re-broadcast on local channels. Combining the TV series with our youth leadership and movement building work, we developed educational and mobilization campaigns with the slogans “We’re Different, We’re Equal” (borrowed from a campaign in Spain), and “We need to be able to talk”, to put sensitive topics like HIV and sexual abuse on the table, and to connect young people with local youth-friendly services.

From both Sexto Sentido and our second TV series, Contracorriente (Turning the Tide), we developed a number of videos and discussion guides that groups could easily use in their own workshops, including videos taken from that have discussion guides. While all the videos deal with gender dynamics, some of the “educational packs” dealt explicitly with masculinities topics, such as the pressures on teenage boys to prove their “manhood” in various ways, including having sex with women at an early age; homophobia; safe sex; different models of fatherhood; among others.

Meanwhile, we carried out research to understand more about how the pressures of social norms affect men’s desire, willingness and ability to be more egalitarian and non-violent in their relationships with women. “Swimming against the Current” (1996) is among the first “positive deviance” studies carried out with men, studying men who have chosed to go against the mainstream despite the pressures to be “macho”. Twenty years later, we are conducting a similar “positive deviance” study in Nicaragua, as the qualitative component of a two-country study on male violence in Nicaragua and El Salvador, in coordination with ProMundo and Centro Bartolomé de las Casas.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch (1998), observing that violence against women was increasing particularly in places most affectd by the disaster, we developed the first educational and mobilization campaign directed to men in Nicaragua: "Violence against women, a disaster that men can avoid", which was carried out in coordination with the Men’s Association against Violence. The objective was to both raise awareness that men’s violence against women is not “natural disaster” the way a hurricane is – that men don’t have to be violent, that they can react in different ways. In addition to the national awareness raising aspect, we organized community skill-building workshops and mobilization efforts in the communities and municipalities that had been most affected by the hurricane.

Ultimately, Puntos “mainstreamed” discussions of masculinities in all its programs. For example, La Boletina, Puntos’ national feminist magazine, included the a section called "What men don’t tell us" written by pro-feminist men so that women could better understand the underpinnings of how men think about their own roles and how to deconstruct that to create more equal and respectful relationships. Our youth-talk radio program fully integrated a gender perspective, and regularly specifically addressed masculinity issues, facilitating on-air discussions with both young men and young women listeners. Our “Women’s University” feminist skills-building and training program began to deal with issues of working with men as it became clear that women working in mixed groups (men and women) were bumping up against men’s resistance to women’s empowerment.

**Recent work[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Puntos de Encuentro continues to address the issue of masculinity from almost all its programs, working both with mixed groups and organizations (made up of men and women), and with groups of men, often at the request of other organizations.

In the last five years, Puntos has continued to carry out violence prevention work that combines communication for social change, research (mentioned above), youth leadership development, coalition building and and overall community mobilization initiatives. We have also delved further into working in rural communities.

All our work uses a systemic gender and diversity approach, placing placing special emphasis on dialogue and building alliances between men and women to promote equal rights and the fight against violence against women and girls, working with diverse social actors, including universities, religious leaders, etc. Community work includes critical reflection of machismo and couple violence, promoting behaviors of dialogue and peaceful resolution of conflicts between men. Work with youth has included promotion of girls’ leadership, with training processes on life plans, sexual and reproductive equality and rights. We work both in mixed groups of men and women, and in separate groups. With teenage boys, we develop critical reflection of machismo and how being “real men” means being in favor of equality and supporting women’s leadership. Youth groups make action plans at the local level aimed at reducing sexual harassment and abuse, teen pregnancies and peer violence (bullying) in schools. We are also part of a 4-country Central American regional training initiative, in coordination with ProMundo and ECPAT.

Over the past several years we have developed and carried out school-based initiatives. Using our second TV series “Contracorriente” as a starting point, and joining with our youth radio program, we have worked in schools in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala with students, teachers and administrators in urban and rural schools on violence prevention – particularly sexual exploitation and trafficking, cyber-violence, and sexual abuse, including the design and establishment of an alert system to prevent situations of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation.

We have also developed national campaigns, such as “Alert and Eyes Wide Open” to prevent sexual exploitation, and while it was directed primarily at girls, the school work included boys as well. Our research on sexual exploitation of boys helped us develop a storyline in Contracorriente. As part of a multi-organization consortium, we led the carrying out of the national campaign “By my example, you will know me", directed at prevention of male violence in couple relationships.

**Networks**

Following up on the early Men’s Group against Violence and the Men’s Association against Violence, Puntos has played key roles in developing current networks:

*Masculinities Network for Gender Equality (REDMAS)*

Puntos de Encuentro has played a leading role in shaping and developing REDMAS, a network that brings together more than 20 organizations, which share experiences, coordinate activities, and joint projects, to promote critical reflection and self-criticism of machismo, masculinity and gender relations, particularly among the young and adolescent population of the prioritized municipalities. From this network, several campaigns directed to adolescent and young men have been organized, such as: "It’s cool to not be machista”, “Ganale a las ganas" (roughly: "You can control your hormones”), and "You’re my dad”.

*The MenEngage Network*

MenEngage is a worldwide network of organizations that mobilize research, campaigns and public policies that promote the active participation of men in the construction of relationships of equity in all areas of life, such as sexual and reproductive health, prevention of violence, in the committed exercise of fatherhood, etc. Puntos de Encuentro is part of the Global Board, and Co-Chair for Latin America.

**Impact**

*Overall social impact*

In the 25 years since we began doing work with men and masculinities, this work has multiplied in Nicaragua. Just in the Masculinities Network for Gender Equality (REDMAS), there are more than 20 organizations working together on initiatives and projects of masculinities, and there are many more.

One of the results of this work is a change in social norms, including men’s discourse with regards to violence. Recent studies show that more and more men no longer see men’s use of violence as “natural”, and 44% agree that “real men” do not need to behave violently.

Men’s knowledge and acceptance of the law against violence against women is now quite widespread. The same study reveals that 87% agree with the statement: The Law 779 contributes to women's rights being respected. And over two thirds agree that this law has helped to reduce violence.

Equally importantly, the fight against violence and for gender equality is no longer seen as only a “women’s issue”. Many more men participate in the marches and public demonstrations for women’s rights than twenty years ago.

Young fathers (under 30) are more involved in the care and upbringing of their children, from accompanying women to their pre-natal controls, to caring for their newborns. Of course, there are still major challenges to achieving responsible fatherhood, and issues such as men paying child support continues to be an obstacle.

*Institutional impact*

From external evaluations of Puntos’ institutional work, we can report that a [2014 national survey](http://www.asamblea.go.cr/sd/Documents/Estudio%20de%20poblacion%20sobre%20derechos%20de%20las%20mujeres,%202009-2014%20(Resumen).pdf) of over 6,000 men and women 13 years old and up revealed that:

* 70% of 13-24 year-old men (and 48% of men of all ages), and had seen the TV series Sexto Sentido
* 27% of young men 13-24 years old had heard DKY-FM, up from 9% in 2009.
* 26% of 13-24 year olds had seen Contracorriente and 40% had commented on its contents with other people.
* 24% of 13-18 year old boys had seen the campaign “Ganale a las ganas”.

The percentage of men who talked with others about preventing unwanted pregnancies rose from 59% in 2009 to 73% in 2014, with an even greater increase with regards to talking about intimate partner violence (from 59% to 73%).

Among the impact in attitudes and opinions linked to exposure were:

* Greater recognition that women’s and children’s right to live without violence is a right that is not currently being respected/fulfilled.
* Greater recognition that it is pimps and customers who are responsable for perpetrating comercial sexual exploitation (i.e., that it is not the girls’ fault).
* Greater agreement that a woman has the right to not engage in sex with her partner if she doesn’t want to.
* Greater agreement that mothers and fathers should support their children with regards to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity rather than try to change them.

An [earlier impact evaluation of Sexto Sentido](http://www.endvawnow.org/uploads/browser/files/sexto_sentido_impact_evaluation_english.pdf) revealed that the greatest impact, in terms of changes in attitudes towards greater gender equality, was in 13-17 year old boys in conservative areas, suggesting that boys are open to new ideas if they are exposed to them in a way that speaks to them.

**Current initiatve and logic:**

Puntos de Encuentro is currently developing a new 4-country violence prevention initiative in Central America, aimed to bring together organizations and communities who are working to end violencie against women, violence against children and youth violence to develop joint strategies that leverage the specialties and expertise of the different fields to address the common risk factors for all these types of violence, including the gender stereotypes and negative social norms, attitudes and behaviors underlie and perpetuate violence against women and girls.

**2.The challenges that your organization faces, at normative, institutional programme levels, in engaging men and boys in promoting and achieving gender equality, in particular efforts to challenge gender stereotypes and the negative social norms, attitudes and behaviors that underlie and perpetuate violence against women and girls**

Although there are many more men now who agree that violence towards women is not a natural attribute of male-female relations and that it is wrong in most cases, there are still many men who justify the use of violence in a relationship if he discovers the woman has had a romantic or sexual relationship with another man. In other words, for a large sector of the male population, the appropriateness of the use of violence depends on the situation, not on whether violence is an acceptable way of relating to another person. Men still seem to hold on to a sense of ownership of the bodies of women with whom they’re in relationships.

Most men continue to identify being providers and heads of households as the main characteristic of manhood, despite the increase in women’s economic role in the family. And while they seem to be happy to let women administer the daily finances for basic needs, they still show little openness to sharing resources and major decision-making processes. Often, as women’s financial contribution to a family increases, men withdraw support and use their money on themselves rather than on the family.

Homophobia continues to be one of the main obstacles for men wanting to renounce machismo. For example, a qualitative study with young men revealed that "We do not want to be machista, but we still want to be men, not queers.” Similarly, many heterosexual men –even those who recognize and respect women’s rights—are not open to recognize the right of gay men to form families.

Finally, there continues to be a high degree of acceptance of the use of violence in the upbringing of children. 60% agree that "It is OK to hit a child who challenges his father". This is a major problem, as the evidence shows that boys who have suffered violence themselves or witnessed their mothers being hit by their fathers/step-fathers are more likely to use violence later in life, against both women and other men.

In the political realm, there are important challenges. In the ‘90s and 2000s, the Men’s Association against Violence was a key actor not only to raise awareness, but also to speak out publicly on women’s rights, against machismo and violence, and around specific issues or cases. In recent years, although there are more men accompanying marches and public initiatives, the public voice of groups of men who accompany the struggles for equal rights, has disappeared.

This is part of an overall trend with regards to social movements and political advocacy in a time when the government refuses to listen to the demands of women's organizations and their allies.

It’s also important to point out the constant methodological challenge in this work with regards to “quality control”, especially with more novice promoters and facilitators, to assure that work with men maintains a women’s rights and gender equality perspective.

**3.Are women and girls, including women’s rights organizations, involved in the efforts by your organization to engage men and boys in promoting and achieving gender equality, in particular efforts to challenge gender stereotypes and the negative social norms, attitudes and behaviors that underlie and perpetuate violence against women and girls?**

Puntos de Encuentro is a mixed organization and all its projects are formulated and carried out with the participation of men and women. We see working with men and boys on masculinity as a strategy to transform gender relations, not as an end in and of itself. We are wary of men-only strategies, and most of our work with men is done as part of an overall “mixed” strategy that includes both men and women.

The REDMAS network is also a reference at the regional level because in no other Central American country is there a masculinities network that brings together so many diverse organizations, and that includes men and women in their membership. REDMAS also promotes among its organizations a policy of accountability, which includes the dialogue between men and women to check whether people are being consistent in their personal lives and activists with the proposal of equal rights.

This [blog](http://menengage.blogspot.com/2017/01/key-experiences-in-contextualization-of.html), co-written by Douglas Mendoza of Puntos de Encuentro and a feminist colleague, highlights how personal and political accountability has played out in real life.

**Lessons learned/recommendations:**

* Work with men should be part of an integrated strategy, not a stand-alone action. That is, engaging men and boys is a strategy for an overall systems transformation of gender relations, not an end in and of itself. More than being “accountable” to women’s groups, the work should be joint work, not two separate things.
* Important for men to understand how traditional masculinities hurt them, but also to understand the privileges they have as a result of being men.
* Important for men’s work to go beyond individual awareness raising to include political positioning with regards to women’s rights and equality. Men need to take a stand in favor of women’s rights and speak out when there are violations.
* Without minimizing male violence and male domination, men (and women) need to see positive role models of men. Image and narrative are important.
* Working with boys and young men is particularly important – to create conditions that help to prevent them from becoming aggressors. Work around responsible fatherhood is related to this, as boys’ relationships (or lack thereof) with their fathers, and how they see their fathers/male caretakers treat their mothers, is a very important factor in male socialization.
* Empathy is an important characteristic/skill to nurture. Also, emotional intelligence and problem-solving and conflict resolution skills.
* Youth violence programs that work with young men who are at risk of being violent or who are already involved in violent practices, should incorporate aspects of gender socialization/gender relations into the work. For job training and recreation programs (often the most common) to be successful in reducing male-male violence and male-female violence, they need to deconstruct the connection between violence and “manhood”.
* It’s important to bring together the fields of ending violence against women and girls, and the field of youth violence prevention/intervention, as they are interlinked.

1. Projects include: *Building Communities free of Violence, Masculinities and Culture of Peace, Consolidating Teen Leadership for Violence Prevention, Youth leadership for Local Equitable Development, Safe Schools, among others.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)