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Church programs help stem violence in Nicaragua

Liz Quirin Catholic News Service | Oct. 4, 2011

MATIGUAS, Nicaragua -- Women in Nicaragua, often too timid to speak for themselves, have been beaten and sometimes killed by their partners or husbands who were unable or unwilling to see this as a crime, as unacceptable, as a way of life that needed to be changed.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees reports that nongovernmental organizations "estimate that up to 60 percent of (Nicaraguan) women have been physically abused by a partner at least once."

Enter Catholic Relief Services and its partner agency, Caritas Nicaragua, which joined forces to reduce the violence against women by providing programming for men. The agencies' officials said they saw the potential to reduce the violence, save women' lives and promote healthy families in the process.

Women do not need to be convinced that using violence in their homes can hurt or kill them. They already know all too well what can happen when machismo takes over, said Hugh Aprile, CRS country representative for Nicaragua.

Operating from the machismo concept, men have an exaggerated sense of masculinity that promotes their courage, their virility, their dominance of women and their aggressiveness, Aprile added. When that "cocktail" is stirred, women can become the object of dissatisfaction or rage.

The two church agencies began 12 pilot programs in three areas in the central part of the country near Matiguas.

There, training began for the programs to convince men to change their behavior toward the women in their lives, especially their wives or partners.

It takes more than a village to change men's behaviors, especially when women may not be assertive enough to protect themselves or protest against violent behavior. For them, the changes were uncomfortable at first, one woman said.

Not only were the families poor and living in remote communities, they have also survived for generations by working and living in a machismo culture with a distinct distribution of responsibilities. To change behaviors, communication about the programs began with the male community leaders at meetings and spread from house to house.

The program "is a benefit for the whole community," said Hernan Hernandez Palacios, one of the men recruited for the program.

Hernandez said he had been "rough" with his wife, had no desire to hold or care for his son and never helped his wife in the house.

"I didn't feel like that was part of my job," he said.

After going through the program, he said, he sees the value for his family.

"This is a whole new idea, and I would not have thought about before," he said.

While reducing violence in families produced immediate and noticeable changes, other deeper, more subtle changes occurred as well. For instance, health workers noted that pregnant women making trips to the doctor were accompanied by their husbands.

For those living in remote areas, CRS and Caritas also support Casa Materna, homes for women in Matiguas and several other areas. About 20 such homes are scattered throughout the country. Mothers-to-be generally arrive at these houses about two weeks prior to their delivery dates.

CRS and Caritas offer technical support with equipment and supplies, said Dr. Julio Valerio.

"People at Casa Materna work very hard and do much good work with very little funding because they do it from their hearts," he added.

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