

From **Surviving** to **Thriving**

by **NILE SPRAGUE** by **SÉAMUS MACLENNAN**

ASOCIACIÓN MUJER Y
COMUNIDAD HELPS
WOMEN GAIN HEALTH
CARE, SAFETY AND
INDEPENDENCE IN
RURAL NICARAGUA.

San Francisco Libre in western Nicaragua wasn't always libre (free). After the long and brutal Somoza dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s, all of Nicaragua experienced economic depression in the 1980s. In October 1998 Hurricane Mitch swept through the area, wrecking infrastructure, land, homes and livelihoods. Out of this dev-

astation, Asociación Mujer y Comunidad (Women and Community Association), with the help of the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), came to the fore, rebuilding homes, communities and relationships.

In the years since Hurricane Mitch, the association has begun to address

Methodist Women, the association works to build and strengthen the community, healing the scars of decades of civil conflict and entrenched gender inequality, promoting women's rights and improving the health and well-being of women and children.

Health clinic

Residents of San Francisco Libre are among the poorest in Nicaragua, so despite great improvements in health care since 2007, they still experience obstacles to proper care. In 1993 the women of the association identified health care as one of the primary needs of their community and brought together funding to set up a women's health clinic.

The clinic has filled a critical gap. Today it continues to provide OB-GYN care by female practitioners. Arbelia Conde, longtime member of the association, noted that "approximately 130 people per month come to the clinic. All consultations are free. Of the 130 people who come to the clinic, 80 percent cannot pay for consultation or medication." Medication is provided with a low markup for those who do not have resources, and the clinic provides free pap smears and surgical procedures.

According to Ms. Conde, a 38-year-old agronomist, the organization began as a response to a high level of leprosy discovered in the early 1990s. The association started training health promoters, and out of this work women emerged as strong advocates for health care and quickly came to understand that diseases such as leprosy and tuberculosis were only part of a complex web of overlapping social problems that needed to be addressed. Domestic violence, gender inequality and high



A woman receives a checkup at the Asociación Mujer y Comunidad health clinic in rural Nicaragua. The association is supported by United Methodist Women.

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Luz Marina Zamora files paperwork for Asociación Mujer y Comunidad, an organization that provides health and social services for women in San Francisco Libre, Nicaragua.

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rates of unemployment all weighed heavily on San Francisco Libre.

Women's rights and health education

Women of the association explained that pregnant teens in San Francisco Libre are forced to quit school out of shame or social proscription. The as-

sociation hosts workshops on family planning and women's health education and works to decrease the shame young pregnant women experience. But it hasn't always been smooth sailing. The priest of the predominantly Catholic community accused the association of "promoting debauchery and sin" because they taught sexual and reproductive rights to women and young people. The women of the association worked with this priest and convinced him and his community of the importance of the trainings.

In 2012, Nicaragua passed the Integral Law Against Violence Against Women, ensuring the rights and sexual and reproductive integrity of women. The law provides the right to live free of discrimination and violence, the right to effective justice, the right to protection from the state and the right to redress for victims of violence.

While this is a big step in the right direction, Nicaragua continues to be a nation in which violence against women is common and abortion is banned under all circumstances, even to save a woman's life. The continued efforts of organizations such as the association are as important today as ever.

Preventing abuse

Domestic violence and sexual abuse have been chronic problems in the San Francisco Libre community for years. Minerva Salmeron, a lawyer who has worked for the association for five years, told the story of a woman who received legal help and counseling from the association that ultimately resulted in the eviction of her abusive husband. Ms. Salmeron explained, "After that experience this woman stepped in to help other women who were in similar sit-




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uations ... working as an advocate in the community and also as part of 10 mutual support groups started by the association throughout the county."

Small loans program

Entrenched social norms and gender-biased institutions change slowly, but the women of the association are not waiting. To get to the heart of what they call *machismo*, or male domination, they've established a microfinance program: They provide training and no- or low-interest loans to women to help them toward financial independence.

After Olivia Monte Guevara's husband lost his job, she was able to support him and their five children using profits from a business started with an association loan. Ms. Guevara described how she used the loan to establish several other small businesses. The experience brought her closer to the other women in her community during the workshops offered along with the loans.

In addition to her increased self-esteem and independent buying power, Ms. Guevara cites this program as radically altering the balance of power between men and women in the community. "We participate in all water committees, village committees and organizations," she said. "We participate effectively, which gives us the power to question things. If there is a problem in our community, we organize a committee and we seek a solution to the problem. We talk with the mayor or institutions that can help. We have overcome the fear and shame that we previously had about speaking. Today I can speak to the president if necessary. The women of this community now are coordinators in offices. We definitely have more power." 

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Members and staff of Asociación Mujer y Comunidad. The association provides health care, health training, domestic violence and sexual assault prevention education and microfinance programs and is supported by United Methodist Women.



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A map shows Asociación Mujer y Comunidad's program locations in San Francisco Libre, Nicaragua.

Youth Network Against Violence

THE RED DE JÓVENES CONTRA LA VIOLENCIA
IN SAN FRANCISCO LIBRE
GIVES VOICE TO YOUTH IN ENDING VIOLENCE.

by NILE SPRAGUE by SÉAMUS MACLENNAN

In the past half century the residents of San Francisco Libre in rural Nicaragua have faced a U.S.-backed proxy war, a new highway that displaced its value as a major port, runaway inflation, extensive deforestation and natural disasters (first Hurricane Mitch in 1998 then severe flooding in 2010 that left 3,500 people without homes).

The resilience of the people of San Francisco Libre lies perhaps in their strong sense of cohesiveness and “make do” approach to the hardships they’ve encountered. Years of economic depression — the cotton booms and busts in the 1950s and 1960s then a cattle bust in the 1980s — and the horrific violence of past decades of war have left their mark. Unemployment, domestic violence and the incidence of teenage pregnancy are chronic problems that San Francisco Libre faces.



Jimmy Rivas, member of Red de Jóvenes Contra la Violencia. He credits the group with helping him live his life fully even while facing discrimination because of his sexual orientation.

Youth work for change

Within this context, the Asociación Mujer y Comunidad (Women and Community Association) has been working in several programmatic areas. In order to enact permanent change, the youth of San Francisco Libre felt that their voices needed to be included. Thus the Red de Jóvenes Contra la Violencia (Youth Network Against Violence) was formed, accompanied and supported by the Asociación Mujer y Comunidad and partially funded for several years by grants from United Methodist Women.

Elder Garcia, coordinator of the youth network, explained that early members coalesced around the idea of creating a community radio station. The lack of funding for a radio station didn’t stop them from making radio spots addressing violence and nonvio-

Members of Red de Jóvenes Contra la Violencia discuss a training campaign. The youth work together to empower other youth in their community to make positive choices for their lives.



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lence, teenage pregnancy and contraception methods.

Addressing violence

The youth network grew organically and in 2009 began to focus its efforts on addressing the impact of violence on the youth of San Francisco Libre and on giving young people a venue for their voices to be heard. “Being left out of the decision-making process is another situation,” Mr. Garcia said. “The municipality has the idea that the young ones are a group of bums. . . . We are not involved in the plans of this authority.”

The organizational structure of the youth network is set up so that each person who receives training goes on to train others, thereby multiplying the knowledge. “Before we were only a group of young people with scholarships; 18 members who only received

training once per month,” said Gema Jimenez, 25, vice coordinator of the network. “Now the network is made up of 45 members. We receive training, and after we have learned the information, we transfer it to others in our communities. We become facilitators and promoters of the network. In my case, I have the responsibility to transfer the information to 15 youth. Forty-five are direct beneficiaries of the network, but we total around 800 young people. It’s one of the biggest networks locally and nationwide.”

The work of the youth network is lively and varied. To demonstrate some of their concerns, such as the harmful effects of machismo, they use theater. The sets are simple, and the delivery has a rough edge to it that only those with personal experience of the subject could portray. These are young people

stepping away from generations of entrenched social dogma, one radio spot and one act at a time.

Empowering youth

According to Edwin Urbina, secretary of the youth network, their work has had wide success. Condom use, for example, used to be a topic that youth were reluctant to speak of, a matter of shame and confrontation, or even a topic that could get a person labeled as “vulgar and depraved” by religious and secular authorities in the town.

But now there is recognition of these issues by youngsters in the area. Condoms and other forms of contraception are central to their workshops to combat teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. The youth network has also organized a youth festival to get the safe-sex message out. Mr.

Urbina feels that this made a significant impact. “Now we observe how young people see the issue of condom use not as sinful but as an instrument of protection against different diseases that exist today,” he said.

Not everyone in San Francisco Libre agrees. “Following that [the festival], the Catholic Church criticized our work,” Mr. Urbina said. “They even sent a letter saying that we were acting in a degenerate, shameless way, and they

strained organizations might shy away from. In the predominantly conservative Nicaraguan society, the youth network has even been able to incorporate education regarding gay rights and gender identity into its programming.

A young man named Jimmy Rivas retold with great emotion how he came out to his family and the role the youth network played in combatting discrimination against him in his community. “I had to go to school, where

sexuality in Nicaragua could be imprisoned up to three years. Though gay rights are expanding in Nicaragua, the work of the youth network to support these marginalized youth is far from done.

Despite social stigma, its uneasy relationship with the Catholic Church and lack of resources, the youth network is producing results. An analysis among young women found that prior to attending workshops, 85 percent were not using contraceptives, while after the workshops, 89 percent were using contraceptives and going for regular checkups.

Marlin Berrios is a 21-year-old facilitator in the youth network. She described the network’s recent youth festival: “This year we had a festival and the theme was ‘A pregnancy during adolescence limits your dreams.’ We spoke about being pregnant and about HIV. I shared my experience [as a teenage mother] with more than 400 young participants that day — how hard life becomes when you have a child.”

Domestic violence is another social problem affecting the youth of San Francisco Libre. A socially conservative country, Nicaragua has persistent problems with gender-based violence, particularly against girls and young women. While the Nicaraguan government has taken steps to address violence against minors and women in policy and legislation, organizations such as the youth network fill a crucial gap in communication and education with small rural communities. 

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Elder Garcia (right) and Edwin Urbina edit a video project as part of Red de Jóvenes Contra la Violencia’s community outreach.

could excommunicate us from the church. They said that we were a satanic group for addressing such issues with the youth.”

Such is its popular support among youth in San Francisco Libre that the youth network has been able to address topics that larger, more politically con-

they teased me about homosexuality,” Mr. Rivas said. “Just as I have been an example to some, I have also been seen as a perversion by many others and the church. ... I think my sexual orientation has nothing to do with my friends, and they have taken it very well, so there isn’t even momentary discrimination.”

Prior to March 2008 anyone “practicing” or even “promoting” homo-