

Case Study:

Trócaire's work on the prevention of gender based violence in Guatemala

Sometimes hopes lives behind the most unexpected door. In Mazatenango, in the Guatemalan department of Suchitepéquez, hope lives behind an ordinary gate at the end of a dusty street. A door where many women victims of violence knock on, like Ana and Lucia (not their real names).

This is one of the four Centres for Comprehensive Support of Women (abbreviated CAIMU in Spanish), promoted by the Guatemalan Women Group (GGM, *Grupo Guatemalteco de Mujeres*). More than 700 women are killed each year in this Central American country, according to data provided by GGM. "Violence against women" offences are higher than threats and thefts.

CAIMU staff offer legal and psychological support to women living with violence.

"90% of them arrived referred from the prosecution authorities, peace courts or family courts, the other 10% come here after hearing from women we support", according to Kenia, a social worker at the centre. That was the case of Lucia and Ana, who were sent here from the judicial institutions. Lucía, 20-year-old, arrived at the CAIMU for the first time in October 2015; Ana, in January 2016. Both were pregnant before the support process.

"Before coming to the centre I was bad psychologically", Ana says while holding her baby. "My life was just tears, and I thought that there was no law for women, my husband used to beat me, insult me and he also used economic violence, he didn't give me money, I had no life plans and I just saw sunrise and dawn day after day", she remembers. Lucia's story is very similar: "My marriage wasn't going well, I started suffering violence a year after the wedding", she explains.

The CAIMU offered them free legal support for both of them to carry out their judicial process. "I was pregnant, and I couldn't work anymore, I had no money and I ignored anything to do with courthouses", Lucia says. "My husband didn't give me money for three months, so I couldn't pay for a lawyer", Ana describes. 90% of the cases they attend are for economic violence, according to Kenia.

Lucia has no more contact with her husband, but Ana keeps fighting. She got married when she was 14, the minimum legal age until 2016, and she had her first child at 16. When she dared to go to the courthouse, her husband started to threaten her with taking away the child. "You'll have nothing, like a stray dog, he used to yell at me", Ana says. "Thanks to the CAIMU I achieved a settlement, and he recognised the boy. He also committed to pay 500 quetzals (around €60) every month for child support, but he hasn't stuck to it, so I keep fighting". The Guatemalan Women Group, beyond supporting women like Ana and Lucía, takes part in national network advocating for public policies and legal tools to support women's rights.

"Usually they arrived wounded. The shame, the fear and the guilt, prevent them from telling their stories at first". When women arrive at the centre the first thing to do is to follow an active listening process. Kenia attends between four and five women every day and spends between an hour and an hour and a half with each of them. "Demand is high". Many arrive with their

mothers, but hardly ever with their fathers. “If the mother comes, we attend her separately, another hour and a half”.

“The social worker cheered me up with her words, she taught me that life wasn’t that way and she gave me ideas”, Ana explains with a smile. “Here they taught us to stand up, they talk about the women’s fight to achieve our rights”, Ana remembers. “Sometimes there were individual sessions, but sometimes there were meetings, as a school”, Lucía says, “We have nurtured our mind, they taught to respect one another, we have learnt new values, we know more about our rights”.

The supporting process depends on the case. “It can go from a few months, if we manage to settle the case, to years if we talk about fatherhood dispute”, Kenia explains. “Besides, we have had cases where women regretted having denounced and dropped the case”, the social workers point out.

That was not the case for Ana and Lucía. “These are lessons I am not going to forget,” says Lucía. “I will raise my children not to be violent, to be good men and capable of valuing women”, Ana affirms. During the months that the process lasted the Ana and Lucía’s families have been supporting them, as they are taking care of their months-old babies. Lucía studied IT, but Ana left school when she was 13. Both of them would like to collaborate in the future with CAIMU, supporting other women in difficulties.

“Sometimes people are surprised at my change before I used not to utter a word, and I almost had no clothes, but now they see an example in me” a shy Ana explains “a neighbour even approached my mother to ask for help for her daughter after having seen my change.”

“It is vital that women support one another”, says Lucía with a smile.