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Gender equality: Where do we stand 25 years after the historic UN World Conference on Women in Beijing?

The work of the Swiss Red Cross on gender transformation in El Salvador

#WeMustTransform

By Laura Martinez Dominguez

In El Salvador we asked the following question to the population: "Why do we never ask ourselves if we can transform the way in which women and men relate to each other on gender roles?" The Swiss Red Cross has joined the effort of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in achieving the goal of meeting the needs, promoting the rights and strengthen the capacities and resilience of people of all ages and every background, without any gender discrimination, and with respect for diversity.



The Salvadorian Red Cross faces of our gender campaign. Photo © <http://www.estudionodd.com/>

An important tool to discover gender inequality

In 2001 the book “**Carlota's Violet Diary**” was published (Gemma Lienas 2001). A book for teenagers on the feminist view of everyday issues. The author - Gemma Lienas - invites Carlota to “**put on the purple glasses**” and to observe the world. *What a challenge for a teenager, right?* But she did it, Carlota started to realize that situations that seemed unquestionable were unfair and discriminatory. For instance, *Why does blue have to be the boys' color and pink the girls'? Why is it frowned upon for boys to cry? And why can't they show that they are afraid?* This book is a great work tool, highly recommended if your goal is to discuss gender inequality with teenagers. But it's also a book that refers to the undoubted metaphor that every aid worker has used in the field at some point, to sensitize the population on the importance of looking at the reality in which they live from a critical gender perspective. This way they can be aware of the inequalities between men and women that are manifested daily in their communities, in their family, in their work - in short, in their lives.

How many times, as humanitarian actors, we were putting on those glasses, in front of the community, inviting men and women to do so as well? And between smiles, disbelief, shame, and amazement, in the end, they finally do so: They put on those glasses that start the transformative change to discover unfair situations with women and to detect when we act according to imposed models.

But before we continue, I think it's time for me to ask: **Are you wearing your glasses?** Then perfect, let us move on!



Eloisa Melendez is welcoming you in the Salvadorian Red Cross's project office in San Vicente, El Salvador. Photo: © Juan Carlos, photographer. www.juancarlosphotos.com

A zone - outside of conflict zones - of great violence against women and girls

El Salvador is a regular on the lists of the **most violent countries in the world**. Nearly 20,000 Salvadorans were killed from 2014 to 2017 (International Crisis Group 2018). Suddenly, in 2020, the number of homicides between January and July has dropped to 59.6% compared to the same period in 2019. As of today, we still don't know the causes of the decreasing figures, but we know for sure the **outcome of the violence**: 54,300 Salvadorans that requested asylum in different countries in 2019 (UNHCR). 246,000 were internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 2018 while in 2019 the figure increased to 455,900. Of these, 1,900 cases were due to disasters and 454,000 due to situations of violence, according to a report by Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). Although the IDCM data is not disaggregated, the trend is that the populations most affected by this scourge are women (50%), girls, boys, and teenagers (40%) (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2020).

The UN has described **Latin America as the most violent region in the world for women outside of conflict zones**. When researchers asked Salvadoran female refugees why they fled, most cited rape, gender-based violence, and fear of sex trafficking (Kinzer, 2018). That is likely because the country ranks globally to have one of the highest rates for violent deaths of women, the highest rate of femicide in Latin America, and the third highest in the world (Donovan, 2019). Rates of **sexual violence** in El Salvador rose by a third last year, with most cases involving teenage girls. More than 60% of the 4,304 cases of sexual violence recorded in 2018 involved 12- to 17-year-olds, according to a report published this week by ORMUSA (Donor direct action. A fund for women 2019).

The "macho" culture in El Salvador

In El Salvador, diverse forms of masculinity are reflected and evident, but the hegemonic one is particular to the socio-cultural aspect. **Machismo**, a term that is distinctive to Latin American language and culture signifies strong or aggressive masculine pride (Novas, 1994). *“Machismo culture reveals itself as a form of structural violence in the same ways as patriarchy (...). Women are expected to preserve their virginity until marriage, take instruction from the male head of household, tend to the home, and remain obedient in the eyes of the family, church, and law”* (Colbert 2019) (Alves & Tamez, 1987, Blossom, 2018; Quinones-Mayo & Resnick, 1996; Sugihara & Warner, 2002)*. El Salvador has made significant strides to reduce **poverty and inequality** in recent decades, but gender gaps persist in women's political participation, employment, wages and financial inclusion, and other areas (Equal Measures 2030).



Inter community meeting in gender and new masculinities: José Ernesto Zapata (center), Mario Dubón (right) and Santos Adilmar Valladares (left) are sharing with the rest of the group their poster that says: “**Neither defenseless, princesses nor violent macho men**”. Photo: © Jose Hernandez – Salvadorian Red Cross’ member. Tecoluca’s municipality

The Swiss Red Cross is working in El Salvador since 1986. Although we have supported the Salvadorian Red Cross with different health, Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), and humanitarian aid projects, with the “Health and Social Integration” project (2017- 2020) we have made a step forward in our commitment on wearing the gender glasses and mainstream the gender perspective in our structure, projects, speech – and life! We have tried hard to be able to reach all vulnerable people effectively and in a non-discriminatory and equitable manner, as IFRC promoted in the *Strategic Framework on Gender and Diversity Issues 2013–2020* (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2017).

In the end, they finally do so: They put on those glasses that start the transformative change to discover unfair situations with women and to detect when we act according to imposed models.

The three-year project covered trainings in gender, sexual and reproductive health, rights, and new masculinities, included gender sensitivity in actions such as building latrines, support health communities in hygiene promotion and access to water. We had long discussions with community leaders, men, women, elders and youth, and we gave trainings on the difference between gender and sex. At the beginning, there were misunderstandings about the difference of masculinity and virility (our men beneficiaries were thinking that they would lose their masculine qualities when participating in these workshops). We discussed what a stereotype is and had a closer look to the term of machismo. We used a pyramid for easy understanding: In

its highest point, violence and murders, right below the sexual assaults, further down the labor discrimination among other types, and at its base, the street compliments, something that is REALLY common practice in El Salvador and unfortunately, women are too much used to it.

A successful campaign on gender transformation

I'm sure you will agree with me, that discussing these kind of topics in a patriarchal society is not easy. And one barrier that hasn't been overcome is the **triple role of women** (reproductive, productive and community managing work) [1]. We therefore decided to put on again our gender glasses and developed a campaign on gender transformation together with the Salvadorian Red Cross, the Gender focal point of the Red Cross Movement, local communication experts and community members. A non-easy process based on a gender gap analysis that identified barriers and motivators for behavior change.

We were motivated, we understood our context, so we went through an analysis of the following categories through focus groups discussions and semi structured interviews:

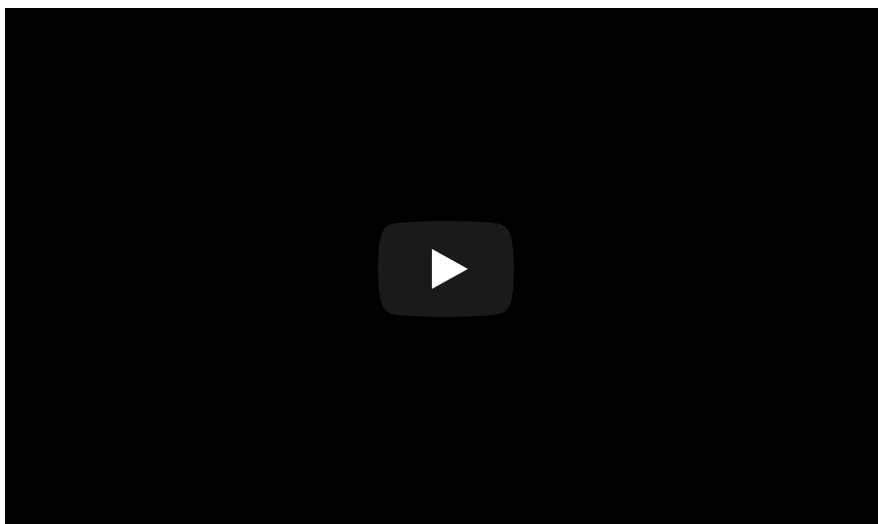
1. **Social construction** – to analyze gender stereotypes
2. **Gender violence** – to transform the naturalization of violence against women
3. **Patriarchy and machismo** – to transform the macho performance
4. **Power relations** - to transform the concept that being a man is related to aggressiveness, competition, dominance, control, possession, and power
5. **Sexual and reproductive health**. - to transform stereotypical roles that are naturalized in the society and the myths and beliefs regarding sexual and reproductive health

After few weeks, we had lots of information to digest. As part of the diagnosis, the focus groups at community level received pictures that exemplified roles not established for the gender of the person in the photograph, so they were asked to discuss and to come up with a story around the picture. Both, men and women were saying: *We can do the same. I can do this, too. It may be different. There is another way to do it. She feels good doing it, too. I have to help or can I help. It is not just her thing.* , “*Today, I do it, me too.*” We took those sentences and those commitments and step by step we developed our main message of the campaign, **MEN AND WOMEN, EQUALLY**, a sentence that truly represents what our beneficiaries were sharing during the focus groups.



The faces of our gender campaign. Photo: © <http://www.estudionodd.com/>

During the process of developing the campaign we were repeating to ourselves: **Don't disseminate – communicate!** We wanted to come up with something based on the *“understanding of and engagement with people and communities and help them address unhealthy and unsafe practices, maximizing the Red Cross Red Crescent’s unique relationship with the community to help them speak out about the issues that affect them and influence decision and policy makers to implement positive changes”* (IFRC 2017. A Red Cross Red Crescent Guide to Community Engagement and Accountability - CEA).



As a result, we made this VIDEO that I hope you will like it:
<https://youtu.be/vgMkADP8uac>

For community members - as Maria Estela Cortez Gomez, one of our female faces in the campaign – the video is *“something important because we haven’t had to go to another country to make the video, it was made in our communities”*. And only because of that, all the effort and challenges were worthwhile.

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[1] The national survey in the use of time (2017) showed that women dedicate 5 hours a day to domestic work and care for household members, while men dedicate only 2 hours to these activities. This is already a huge unbalance but, due to the home quarantine of this year 2020, with the children out of school, the intensive care needs of the elderly and sick relatives, the demand for care has intensified, reinforcing traditional gender roles, with an unequal impact in domestic cargo (UN Women,2020).



Laura Martinez is the Country Coordinator of the Swiss Red Cross in El Salvador since 2017. She has been working with the Red Cross Movement since 2006 in different countries and positions. Although she studied psychology in Spain (the country where she was born) she dreamed of going to Africa from a very young age. She started as a volunteer in Botswana, in an HIV/AIDS awareness project. Her first job as an international aid worker was in Sudan, a country that allowed her to discover her ability to manage projects and Non Food Items distributions (NFI) in IDPs camps.

Since then, more than 15 years ago, she has not stopped traveling and working in different countries in Africa, Europe, and Latin America. She has different specialties, including an expert in "Humanitarian aid" from the University Comillas of Madrid, a diploma in "Mental health in political violence and catastrophes" from the University Complutense of Madrid, and a diploma in "Cultural Management" from the Catholic University of Chile. In a few days, she will begin her studies in "Forced Migration" with the IECHA (Institute of Studies on Conflicts and Humanitarian Aid). What she likes the most is packing her suitcase and discovering new places around the world with her 12-year-old daughter - Nikita - who lives with her in El Salvador. Email

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