



INDRHU
Instituto de Promoción Humana
Managua, Nicaragua



SUPPORTING & EMPOWERING Vulnerable Women and Children in Nicaragua

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1. Context

Nicaragua is facing one of the most complex socio-political crises in its history. The crisis began on April 16, 2018, when the Nicaraguan Institute of Social Security approved reforms to the social security system; these were confirmed on April 17 by President Daniel Ortega. The reforms included a doubling of the pension fund contribution period from 750 weeks to 1,500 weeks, cancellation of retirement benefits for thousands of senior citizens and reduced spending on medicines for retirees.¹ A few days later, thousands of people protested in the streets across the country and were instantly met by violent repression from Nicaraguan authorities.² Large-scale civic unrest (characterized by protests, demonstrations, and strikes) have persisted since, with a multiplication of reports of violence, arbitrary detentions, harassment tactics, intimidation campaigns and incidents of torture against opposition protesters and human rights defenders.³

The human rights situation in Nicaragua had been deteriorating as well, with a growing number of reports documenting violations of the right to freedom of expression, and repression of protests mounted by farmer communities and environmental activists (most notably against the Grand Canal mega-project).⁴ The political crisis has led to economic turmoil, and on October 1, Nicaragua formally fell into recession for the first time since the global financial crisis of 2009. According to figures from the General Directorate of Migration and Foreigners of Costa Rica, more than 23,000 Nicaraguans had requested refuge by mid-August, of which 2,464 were children and adolescents.

Due to this situation, many families have been displaced and others have fled the country. As a result, many children and adolescents are not able to exercise their rights to study, play and participate in cultural activities mainly due to the presence of police and paramilitary agents in communities and public spaces. The whole situation, including the lack of job opportunities and the danger to leave home is affecting the adult population as well as the lives of children – especially since the level of violence, at home and at the community level, have increased tremendously.

This situation has had significant effects on the project. CWS partners reported that the situation has negatively impacted the project affecting its ability to implement its activities successfully. Due to the level of violence, to the barricades/demonstrations/strikes/fear, particularly at community level:

- Project team members could not travel to work.
- Project team members could not visit the children/families as much as they would have like (same reasons)
- Activities (meetings/workshops) had to be postponed, changed or participants could not get to the venues.
- Levels of stress, both in the participating families and children, as well as in the project team members, was higher than expected therefore these issues had to be addressed during activities and meetings planned for other purposes.
- Project team identified a rise in the level of domestic violence.
- Families that usually visit prisons commented that they felt that the processes and searches they are subject to when getting into the facility got more strict and aggressive.

¹ INPRHU and [ReliefWeb](#)

² *Investig'ation* 12/09/2018; International Crisis Group 04/2018

³ Notimerica 06/11/2018; IACHR 18/10/2018; OHCHR 22/11/2018

⁴ Plaza Publica 06/08/2018

2. Project Description, Outputs and Outcomes

The project has supported and empowered vulnerable women and children in Nicaragua, with a specific focus on children with incarcerated parents, child victims of domestic violence and their caregivers. It was implemented by local partner INPRHU (*Instituto de Promoción Humana*), the only organization in Nicaragua that provides comprehensive and specific care to children with incarcerated parents and their families.

The three main objectives of the program were:

- To develop the resilience of these children and their families,
- To allow program participants to achieve emotional recovery and
- To encourage them to become advocates for their rights.

Objective 1: Provide 10-month access to integral support services to build the resilience, emotional recovery and empowerment of 50 children (including children with incarcerated parents) and their caregivers.

Psychological Support

The program provided psychological support (individual and group therapy) to 107 children and youth who have been victims of gender-based and domestic violence. The 72 girls and 35 boys range from 2 to 18 years old. Most of these children have gone through violent situations. Through conversations, artistic and recreational activities, key issues started to come up to and were addressed by the group coordinators

This process included: recognizing, identifying and sharing emotions and feelings about past experiences of sexual violence and about fears and anxiety related to the current crisis in the country. The INPRHU team have also worked with mothers and caregivers, who are the ones who usually carry the load of these problems.

"It has been a difficult process; sometimes I felt I couldn't do it anymore. Now things are slowly changing and the fact that she is feeling better gives me the strength to continue. Sometimes one thinks that this will be quick recovery but it takes time, we [moms] should remember that."

- a 35-year-old mother

Legal Services

The program provided legal advice to 33 children (mostly girls) who are survivors of sexual abuse, rape and other violent situations.

It is worth noting that many survivors in Nicaragua do not report violence that they have gone through out of fear, a lack of economic resources or because they do not know how the legal system works. The program aims to support and encourage them to take this step.

To achieve this, they receive legal advice and accompaniment, and they are supported when they are called to provide statements in court. The program also coordinates with key actors such as forensic psychologists and special prosecutors to ensure access to justice for these children and their parents. In the cases where the child has incarcerated relatives, we ensure that special effort is made to explain the judicial process in a way that the child can understand it.

Thanks to INPRHU's support, all these cases were presented to the court. As a result, two perpetrators were found guilty and sent to jail in the last trimester alone. Three are on probation and another three are in prison waiting for trial.

In Nicaragua, only lawyers can access information about the judicial cases. Therefore, although it was not one of the objectives of the project, INPRHU's lawyer has assisted the families in getting information about the legal situation of their imprisoned relatives. As an example, one mother wanted to be present at her daughter's trial but she was not able to access that information. Thanks to INPRHU's support she was able to get this info and be present at the trial.

All these families and children were enrolled after the community survey and families' characterization process carried out in different communities of the greater Managua. This was the tool used to collect the information.

Meeting with Families

Two meetings were held with families from different communities during the year. One was held on October 18. A total of 63 children, parents and tutors participated. The second meeting was held in March and was attended by 47 participants. During these meetings the families highlighted that these spaces where they can share and get support have helped them in the midst of the anxiety and violence that the political situation is causing in communities.

Objective 2: Build the skills of 30 children (mostly youth who have or have had an incarcerated parent) and their families to defend and promote the rights of Nicaragua's vulnerable children, including children with incarcerated parents.

There are no other groups in Nicaragua who address the specific needs of children with incarcerated parents. That's why the initial program sessions focused in helping the children understand the justice and penal systems; naming and identifying the negative consequences of having an incarcerated relative; and sharing feelings related to the situation.

During the project, 36 children with incarcerated parents (21 girls and 15 boys) and 27 caregivers (all women) participated in the activities that included:

- Cultural workshops
- Recreational activities
- Writing workshops: During these sessions, the children were encouraged to write letters to their imprisoned relatives. The women decided to write to judges and justice authorities. Some of those letters and pictures of other activities implemented during the project can be seen [here](#).

Objective 3: Increase community support and protection mechanisms to Nicaragua's children with incarcerated parents and their families, especially those who are survivors of gender-based violence.

A Particular Request

In January, INPRHU project coordinators received a letter from an imprisoned mother. Her request: support to be able to finish her sentence in home detention. She argues that she is the mother of five children (three of them minors). The younger one is sick so she wants to be there to support her.

INPRHU is now collecting information to present the case using "the best interest of the child" as one of the key arguments.

For these children to exercise all their rights, they need to leave in safe and welcoming communities. Therefore, besides all the direct services provided to these children, INPRHU has also organized several awareness raising meetings and workshops with community actors, partner institutions and coalitions:

Some of the key activities organized during the year have been:

- Mapping organizations.
 - This was done at the beginning of the project. The final document can be read [here](#).
- Developing a media plan.
 - This [media plan](#) was developed at the beginning of the project but unfortunately, due to the country's political crisis, it could not be fully implemented.
- Signing a strategic alliance with the Fabretto Foundation, who has added working with children with incarcerated parents to their agenda.
- Presenting the initiative to the National Coalition of Children's Rights Organizations, which 17 organizations who work with children nationwide participated in.
- Presentation at the Nicaraguan-American Cultural Centre.
- Presentation for the INPRHU Masaya office staff.
- Facilitating community gatherings - with 41 total participants - at Las Torres Neighborhood and the Roberto Huembes Market to raise awareness and create empathy with children with incarcerated parents or relatives.

"I know I was invited to come here because my dad is in jail," Kevin says. He's a smiley and active child who loves to play with his friends in the neighborhood where he lives with his grandma, Jazmina. "In the beginning I felt bad," he says. "I stopped going to school because I missed my dad - he used to play with me and buy me clothes... Now I visit him twice a month. I write letters to tell him that I have done well." Along with his grandmother, Kevin participated in a meeting for families in the program. He is proud of the doll that he created "to remove everything bad".

Gladys, age 9, is the oldest of three siblings. She was separated from her mother and grandmother at an early age. Her family was split up because there was no one who could afford the financial expenses and special attention that the three children needed. Now Gladys lives with her aunt, little sister and cousins in the Las Torres neighborhood. She misses her mom because she was the one who would put Gladys to bed every night when she was a baby. It will be another two years before Gladys can be reunited with her mom, who is in prison. For now, she's participating in the meetings for children with incarcerated parents. She's shy and doesn't talk much, but she recently told us about her quitamiedos doll. The dolls are a therapy tool to help children find comfort in the face of fear. "My doll represents my aunt, who is the one that has always been there for us when something bad happened," Gladys says.

3. Accountability

Not many project plans include activities where the implementing team present the results of the work undertaken to the families and children that participated in it.

INPRHU, as an exception, did that and presented these results to the families during the last week of March. Many families participated in this presentation and they all showed their appreciation for the work done and for the report that was presented.

4. Sustainability

Besides the fact that Week of Compassion support has finished many of the products that were produced thanks to this project will be used by the INPRHU team in the future to create awareness about the issue and to address the needs of more families and children that are facing this situation.

Some of these products are:

- [The documentary](#).
- The “[Emocionario](#)”
- The “[color](#) your feelings” tool.
- The [guide](#) for psychological interventions

5. Closing Remarks

- The support from Week of Compassion has allowed the INPRHU team to get a better a deeper understanding of the children with incarcerated parents issue. Therefore, they have been able to better assist and provide support and accompaniment to this invisible population.
- The team, during this process, has confirmed that once a member of the household is arrested, “the prison” impacts the lives of all the members of that family, including the children.
- Due to the lack of offices, projects or initiatives that support and respond to the specific needs that these families and children have, this project became a unique respond to this particular issue.
- While the political crisis brought several added challenges, the project team was able to implement most of the activities that were initially planned.
- For some of these families, particularly for the caretakers, this project gave them the chance to share their challenges and struggles with other families that are facing a similar situation.

As a final note, CWS and the INPRHU team want to thank Week of Compassion and CWS for their support to implement this project that definitely marks a milestone in terms of the commitment and knowledge about the issue of children with incarcerated parents for the whole INPRHU family.