

# A psychotherapeutic approach for creating safe and protective domestic spaces for children

## National Association Against Child Abuse (CONACMI), Guatemala

### THE CONTEXT IN GUATEMALA

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- In Guatemala, domestic violence is transgenerational and normalised through generations. Parents repeat the parenting patterns that they inherited from their parents and due to the levels of violence that exist, this becomes invisible and normalised. Violence is experienced between partners, towards children and adolescents and between siblings.
- Girls and adolescent women<sup>18</sup> face constant violence: physical, sexual, psychological, economic, structural, symbolic and, in the worst cases, femicide. Women are subordinated and discriminated against, normalising and making the violence against them invisible. They are often limited to the domestic domain, to household chores and reproductive functions.

- Nearly five per cent of women report having experienced sexual violence in their childhood and girls and adolescent women are most likely to suffer sexual and physical violence. While sexual crimes against girls aged 0 and 6 years are almost at the same level as those committed against boys of the same age, the sexual violence suffered by adolescent girls (13 to 17 years old) is significantly higher than that suffered by adolescent boys (PDH, 2017).<sup>19</sup>
- Many of the families with whom CONACMI works rely on the informal economy and received no economic support from the government during lockdown, which had a devastating impact on families' livelihoods and their ability to survive.

### THE PRACTICE: WORKSHOPS FOR PARENTS TO CREATE SAFE AND PROTECTIVE DOMESTIC SPACES

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Lockdown restrictions and reduced staff capacity forced CONACMI to stop its face-to-face therapeutic work with children, adolescents and parents. It wanted to continue to provide parents and caregivers with tools and knowledge to create safe and protective spaces in their

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<sup>18</sup> [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/GTM/INT\\_CRC\\_NGO\\_GTM\\_29869\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/GTM/INT_CRC_NGO_GTM_29869_E.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/GTM/INT\\_CRC\\_NGO\\_GTM\\_29869\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/GTM/INT_CRC_NGO_GTM_29869_E.pdf), p.3.

families. It carried out phone surveys to build an accurate picture of how COVID-19 was affecting children and their families and identify how to adapt existing activities and good practices.

CONACMI decided to hold therapeutic workshops for parents and caregivers. A weekly session was held in a virtual mode while face-to-face interactions were not allowed. Parents and caregivers were given the tools to identify situations that presented a risk. Gradually their capacities were built to enable them to protect the children and adolescents in their care. Weekly workshops also meant that CONACMI was able to monitor how COVID-19 was impacting vulnerable children and families.

## **HOW THE PRACTICE WAS IMPLEMENTED**

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Two open calls were made in February and June 2021 through social networks inviting parents and caregivers to take part. This included parents referred by the courts through legal processes or referred by institutions that work with children and adolescents. The families are typically large and from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Not all of them have internet access, so CONACMI provided mobile data recharges so that they could connect to the internet to attend the workshops. The virtual nature made it possible to reach people from different regions. Zoom, WhatsApp, Google forms, Quiz and YouTube were all used.

For each course of workshops, eight virtual sessions were conducted via Zoom and eight feedback sessions were undertaken using WhatsApp. The workshops were led by two psychologists from CONACMI's Psychosocial Support Centre, supported by university students majoring in psychology. Themes included family issues, self-esteem, communication, conflict resolution, child rights and good treatment. Parents and caregivers were supported to change their patterns of parenting and re-learn new ways based on nurturing. Parenting that establishes non-violent ways and norms, develops trust,

and provides support and affection to children and adolescents was encouraged.

The first cohort included 60 participants per workshop divided into two groups, and the second cohort had 85 participants per workshop divided into three groups. A package of materials was given to each cohort at the start, including teaching and reading materials used for the different sessions. One week after the workshop a follow-up was carried out through WhatsApp using a Google form. This explored what participants had learned and how they applied it in their day-to-day life.

At the time of writing, the workshops are still continuing remotely. CONACMI plans to continue virtual sessions with families and children even when face-to-face work resumes. Working virtually makes it possible to support families who struggle to travel to the Psychosocial Support Centre.

## **HOW THE PRACTICE WAS CONDUCTED IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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Workshops took place virtually through the Zoom platform and feedback was carried out through questionnaires via WhatsApp. Activities were sent through the WhatsApp group. The methodology of popular education was applied, which is a strategy for reflection, participation and interaction between parents, caregivers and facilitators.

The greatest challenge was parents needing to learn how to use the different online tools. Most of the participants were from low-income households and some did not have internet. CONACMI provided parents with an allowance to recharge data so that they could access the internet.

## IMPACT

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- Fifty families (63 per cent) reduced violence in their homes, applying the knowledge and tools provided in the workshop. This reduction was seen in families after approximately three months of attending the therapeutic workshop, though it varied from family to family.
- The workshops changed mothers', fathers' and caregivers' behaviour. They were offered non-violent alternatives for parenting and given a safe space where they could share their experience, their difficulties and the actions that had helped them in bringing up children and adolescents. They were supported to identify their parenting patterns and realise that violence is not the right way; instead they learned to understand their children's perspectives and reflect on their own childhood. This encouraged parents to create change without fear of being judged or criminalised.
- After using the suggestions and guidance provided during the workshops, parents and caregivers reported improved intra-family relationships, better communication and the use of non-violent parenting alternatives. Peaceful family coexistence, a nurturing environment for children and identification of safe spaces at home were the main changes seen in families.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of the training: at the end of the workshops an evaluation was carried out by CONACMI to assess the knowledge acquired; this took place through a quiz.

## WHY THE PRACTICE WAS EFFECTIVE

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- **Maintaining contact with families and children:** CONACMI realised early on that it was crucial to maintain regular communication with families and children and used phone surveys and online workshops to do this.
- **Adjusting to maximise output:** CONACMI adapted existing activities and good practices to the new situation. The internet and telephones helped to engage communities remotely and staff worked to make these interactions personal, engaging and effective, tailoring them to meet the needs of the group. At the time of writing, CONACMI believes that this hybrid model is viable and will continue to hold workshops virtually as well as face-to-face workshops as this increases accessibility for parents.
- **Regular analysis and revision to accommodate the ever-changing context:** CONACMI staff critically reviewed and reflected on the input received through the monitoring forms and carried out a weekly case analysis in their team meetings. Teams were encouraged to share experiences, challenges, good practices and lessons learned; they also shared their strengths and weaknesses, how they handled the workshop topics and how the workshops positively affected parents. Staff also analysed the COVID-19 situation on a weekly basis, factoring any changes needed into their plans for the following week.
- **Interactive nature of the workshops:** Experiences were shared and complemented with theoretical information so that parents and caregivers could identify appropriate practices. An atmosphere of participation was fostered, in which the parents were not judged, giving them greater confidence in honestly expressing their experiences.
- **Learning materials were provided:** This meant that parents could carry out written activities from home.

## Case study: a grandmother

When working with a maternal grandmother, CONACMI found out that the violence she faced from her partner had started in the early days of their courtship. This increased after marriage and the birth of three daughters. Under the influence of alcohol her husband verbally and physically assaulted his daughters and wife. He also controlled the finances. One of the daughters had three children, who also lived through a violent and aggressive cycle perpetuated by their parents. Through a legal process, the grandmother was granted their guardianship. CONACMI's family plan included working with both the maternal grandmother and the mother. Knowledge and tools were provided to help them understand violence, parenting patterns, what constitutes a good relationship, how to identify risk and how to protect children. The process helped the grandmother to realise that she had been a victim of violence for several years. She decided to permanently separate from her husband, and now brings her grandchildren up with warmth and is responsive to their needs.

