



PROGRAMMING

SUMMARY:

This program promotes the self-esteem and confidence of girls who have been the girlfriends of the paramilitary. This interview is also a profile of a young peacebuilder dedicated to supporting young women's rights.

NOTE:

FOR SECURITY REASONS THE NAME AND PHOTO OF THE YOUNG WOMAN WORKING ON THIS PROGRAM HAD TO BE REMOVED.

7. GIRLS SUPPORTING GIRLS

A REHABILITATION PROGRAM FOR TEENAGE GIRLS IN MEDELLIN, COLOMBIA

"I am 17. This year I will graduate from high school. Then I am going to study history at the university. Right now I study in the morning and work in the afternoon.

I am working in the northwest part of the city of Medellin with Corporation Simon Bolivar for Education and Culture.

They have one centre for children and another for adolescents and young people. I began when I was 8 years old, working with young children at the centre. I was participating as a child in this program. When I passed into the adolescent group I started to work with children. Now I am working with young women who have been girlfriends of the armed groups. This includes the paramilitary, guerrilla groups and gangs. "

Q. Why do the girls go with these men?

A. A lot of the young women are escaping from horrible home situations, especially with their fathers. Not so much sexual abuse, more that they are very restrictive with them – don't want them to go out, very controlling. So if the girls go out with these guys from the paramilitary it gives them a sense of rebellion, of power. These guys protect them – a guy with a gun. It is very common – there are a lot of girls like this.

When they come into the program their relationships have ended. Some of these girls are pregnant, others are threatened by these men because they have left them. The girls have very low self esteem.

Q. What is the objective of your program?

A. We want to promote the participation of girls and women. We want to help give them the ability and confidence to participate in their lives. This includes the whole range – from decisions in their personal lives to public policy forums.

We don't mean just any kind of participation. You can have participation in the armed groups, that is not what we are working for! No, we are working so these girls can participate in a positive way for themselves and maybe also for other females.

Q. You say many have little confidence. Why is this?

A. Many of these girls have been passed around. They go from one member of the paramilitary to another. Other girls move around just because they want to. If one relationship ends, they may start a romance with a boy from another group. The gossip can start.

Girls who have been raped have big problems. There is a real refusal from their families to accept them. Even in our groups girls who have been raped have very low status. Sometimes the women who have not

been raped won't want to associate with them, they refuse to be in a group with them. The girls who are raped are scarred by this – it is seen as their fault.

We work on a range of things – self esteem, gender issues, sexuality and violence against women. There isn't really a one –two – three step. How we proceed really depends on the interests and skills of the group. One of the first things we always do are life stories. We want to see how each woman understands her life.

Then we do workshops to explore their creativity. We use games and songs. We often have them write poems. We have activities such as pyjama parties. Sometimes we video the women and then play it back to them. We do all this to help them think about their lives and to build up their capacity to speak in groups. We try to do it in a fun way to help them relax.

Once they have a level of confidence we might move into discussions on issues such as gender or violence. It depends on their interests. We talk about their roles in their homes, growing up. We also look at the stories and situations of women in other countries –we compare these with our situation in Medellin. We also talk about the work that women do. Sometimes we do “rapid research” projects and invite them to participate.

Q. How is this organized?

A. Let me give an example. November 28 is the day for thinking about violence against women. Before this day we conduct personal and group interviews on questions relating to issues of violence. We interview girls and women in many different situations to get an overview of the circumstances of women in Medellin. We make contact with a lot of women in this way. Then on the 28th all the women who participated are invited to attend workshops or participate in a march. We can have as many as 200 girls and women participate.

Q. Do you see many changes in the women?

A. At first, it is very difficult to get them to listen or participate. Serious discussions are impossible. When they eventually begin to talk about their lives, they don't seem to feel bitter. It is not like they feel they have wasted their lives by being with these men. It is more that they start to think that they want something different for their future. They want to change the direction of their lives, to have a new future. So this is good.

Q. How long does this process last?

A. It is very fluid. Very few attend the whole process. They might come for a couple of sessions and then we won't hear from them for a long time, then one day they pop up again. We just have to be flexible, go with them.

Q. Do you get any trouble from the paramilitary?

A. So far, it is OK. In our barrio there are hundreds of them. We have kind of learned to live with each other. They have gone into our centre and stolen a TV or taken things. But we haven't been actually threatened

by them. The people working at the centre live in different parts of the barrio. When we get together the para are more vigilant, it is as if they are worrying that we are planning something against them.

We have restrictions. We don't try to mobilize big demonstrations, we don't keep the office open late at night. When we hold public events like a dance the paramilitary will arrive and they will hang around the door – sort of a group of men playing with their guns, their machine guns, and smoking. Some times we will go to them and try to talk to them to keep things calm.

Q. *I think you are very dedicated to your work.*

A. Oh, yes, Every day, weekends, all the time I am there. Even if there is no particular work to do we are still together. We might cook and have a meal together. Then we sit together and discuss issues.

I love that. It is so good.

We are trying to unlearn the habits of violence. It is all around us so we have to consciously look at our ways of being with each other and analyse them to see if they reflect the violence of our environment. This is important – to stop these habits that we may not even be aware of. We have also have come to realize that we can't just work with women. We also have to work with men but it is probably better for other men to do this.

Q. *And for your personal future?*

A. I want to study history. In the future I want to work for and with women. That is my passion, that is my future.