

## Report To The Funding Network: June 2004

### Barefoot Lawyer Project

#### How the grant has been spent?

Primarily, Womankind has used the grant from the Funding Network to recruit and train women to become “barefoot lawyers”, and to extend this initiative to other parts of Nicaragua. TFN’s funding has also allowed our partner organisation to consolidate training of existing recruits, and to continue raising local and national awareness of domestic and sexual violence against women. The net result has been an expansion of the barefoot project, with greater numbers of women now conversant with their legal rights and in a much better position to help both themselves and other women around them.

#### Project Achievements

Thanks to the barefoot project, more and more women are getting **recourse to legal, social and psychological support**, and so are able to change their lives for the better. For example, in one part of the country where the barefoot lawyers are active, the number of cases of domestic and sexual violence reported per year has risen by almost 300. That broadly reflects the way women are becoming more aware of their legal and human rights, and of the means to exercise them.

Increasingly important has been the role of barefoot lawyers in **resolving domestic disputes through mediation**, whereby women use their new-found knowledge of the legal system as a tool for educating perpetrators of violence on the impact and consequences of their actions. Last year saw the settlement of over a thousand such extra-judicial cases. Given that for reasons of fear, social stigma or economic dependence, only 20% of Nicaraguan women report violence to the police, and that fewer still are able to endure a long and costly judicial hearing, using mediation in this sense is an innovative method of addressing the problem. The following quotes illustrate the direct impact it is having on local women.

*“...Before we saw it [Domestic Violence], and we kept quiet, but now we do not keep quiet anymore...”*

*“...I was trained in 2002; it was marvellous, a great achievement – you start to awaken...”*

Considering women’s lack of faith in the police and courts, the full participation of these bodies is essential to forging a sustainable solution to the problems facing women in Nicaragua today. Clearly, women will not reap the full benefits of this project if they continue to perceive the police and courts as inaccessible and ineffective. It is on this reasoning that Womankind has complemented its barefoot lawyers initiative with work to sensitise the police and courts to the challenges facing women in their communities. Recently, an external evaluation commissioned by Womankind and funded by the Community Fund confirmed that there have indeed been **significant changes in the attitude and provision of services for women experiencing domestic violence**, and recommended that Womankind continue its focus in this area.

As the evaluation also points out, changes in attitude have led to **substantive benefits on a judicial level**. In the past, perpetrators of rape enjoyed almost guaranteed impunity. Now, following the efforts of Womankind to sensitise the police and courts, this has changed markedly, as is indicated by a significant rise in the number of arrests and convictions. Inspired by this, Womankind's partners in Nicaragua have mapped out a joint plan of action with the national police force, in a bid to bring about a nation-wide change in the police's perception of violence against women.

Also important to sustaining the progress made so far is to consolidate the training of existing barefoot lawyers. One way of achieving this is by arranging up-date and co-ordination workshops. Several of these were held last year, and attended regularly by over a hundred participants. Another way is by encouraging current barefoot lawyers to take an active part in the training of new recruits. In the town of Condega, for example, more than 50 of the previously trained barefoot lawyers recently took part in the training of new groups of women.

### Media Coverage

While the project has received limited coverage by the mainstream media, there has been a concerted and evidently successful effort by Womankind and its partners to disseminate news of the barefoot lawyers to other parts of the country. In fact, our decision to expand the project was inspired by outside interest, from women living in areas where the barefoot lawyers had not been active, having learned of the project through word of mouth.

### Conclusion

Berta Ramirez is 52 years old, a mother of two and a committed barefoot lawyer. Her story is unique, though it mirrors those of countless other women who have benefited from our work.

*“Soon after joining the initiative, I knew that something important was happening, as if something was stirring within our community. Women were slowly beginning to chat openly about their problems, or about their friends' problems, and about ways of resolving them.*

*In the year since I completed my course as a barefoot lawyer, I have trained and advised hundreds of other women, sometimes helping them put an end to their misery, sometimes just broadening their minds.*

*Take one girl, for example, who came to me recently complaining of being physically harassed by a group of men. When my colleagues and I threatened the men with legal action, they immediately stopped bothering the girl. “*

*It's all changed since the project began – our community, our lifestyle, even our way of thinking. We're a formidable force when we act together. We don't keep quiet any longer. We're making a stand!*

On reflection, it is important to remind ourselves that the support of the Funding Network has done much more than protect women in unfortunate circumstances; it has given them a chance to increase their participation and adopt roles of leadership in their communities. The barefoot project continues to do just that – to allow disadvantaged women to grow both personally and politically. In the words of one project beneficiary:

***“...here women find a forum they can trust; it is an opportunity to talk and be listened to; they can make their own discussions; they are supported in a practical way, so that economic issues are taken into account...”***