

**INTERVIEW WITH ROSALBA HERNANDEZ REYES
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Translated by Cecilia Chapa

My name is Rosalba Hernández Reyes. I have a degree in Law. I used to be Attorney for Women's Defense for the Municipality of San Cristobal de las Casas. My field of work was within the *Instituto de Desarrollo Humano* (Human Development Institute), now called the *DIF [Desarrollo Integral de la Familia]* (Comprehensive Family Development,) where I looked into all issues of violence against women: All kinds of physical, economic, and psychological violence that women experience.

Tell me about specific cases. What is the main issue for women at all levels -- indigenous, urban, and from every social class and ethnic group?

All sorts of women came to this office, women who were either sexually or psychologically abused by their partners. In many cases the husband was the aggressor. In other cases, women were abused by their own father or by a very close relative. Our job was to provide legal and psychological advocacy to help them overcome their situation. I feel that the main problem is education. Why? Because when women don't know how to read and write--this happens often, mainly among indigenous women--men take advantage of the situation and force them into submission. Consequently, the only things women can do are to take care of their homes and have children. It is not unusual for a woman to have three or four young trailing behind. For that reason, when a woman's rights are injured, she is forced to submit to her husband's will. And frequently, when a woman raises her voice she is beaten. Many battered women came to us. We

took them to the Office of Public Prosecution to register a formal complaint.

Unfortunately, because women are not trained for any jobs that could support them and their children, they had to go back to their husbands. When we were making progress and the man was soon to be jailed, the woman would say, “No. Better not do this... for my children.” Therefore, we feel this happens from [lack of] education. We have--the Government has--to work hard to educate women.

Which are the most frequent cases? Give me some examples of abuse. What kinds of abuse?

Abuse? Physical abuse, when a woman is battered because her husband didn't like what she prepared for a meal or because she wasn't sufficiently attentive. Many times the abuse is sexual too, even when a couple is married, because women do not have the right to choose when to have sex. Sex is to take place whenever the husband wants it. That's when sexual abuse happens [within a married couple].

But, they are unaware that this is abuse. Right?

Usually they are unaware. Women mostly don't know they're being abused. They feel it's their duty. They believe that, as a wife, it is mandatory.

This happens at all levels.

It happens at all levels, not only among indigenous people like we are discussing. It happens in all social strata.

And what can you tell me about rape of girls and minors in [indigenous] communities?

Yes, there is rape in the [indigenous] communities. And a lot of the women do not register a complaint out of fear, ignorance, or because of the slow pace of the law. They say nothing! They keep quiet. However, in the long run the problem affects their lives. Even if the woman is married she feels distressed because, on top of everything, many men do not forgive a woman for being raped. And they are forced to leave their community because they were raped. Yes, there are many cases of raped girls. I worked cases of girls raped in their community, many of them by their own stepfather or their natural father. Our work was to establish a complaint [and] to start the complaint procedure. But the weirdest thing was that their own mothers threw them out.

So, they were raped and not only did they carry that trauma but they were expelled from their homes too?

From their homes. In these cases we turned to public institutions for assistance for these girls. That was the way in which we helped those girls' suffering. Well, not entirely, but only to a certain extent.

What were their ages?

We are talking about girls as young as three or four. [There is a case] of a twelve-year-old girl who was raped and gave birth.

Was she expelled from the community?

No. She is here in San Cristobal. A relative raped her. When her mother found out, she threw her out. She stayed in a civic association. She was helped with the birth. She gave birth, this child, because there was no way to help her not to have the baby. When she was brought to me, she was almost due. And her child was born. She was twelve years old.

How terrible! And what happened? What is the girl doing now?

To tell you the truth, I lost track of her a year ago. I don't know how things ended for her, if her mother [took her back] again. We insisted with the mother to take her back home. What was a twelve year old girl with a baby going to do?

You talk about education. What is the education status here? I understand that education in Mexico is free and mandatory, right? What is really happening?

Yes. Our laws state that education must be free and mandatory, but many times due to family break-up children don't go to school. [...] How many women go to school? Very few. [...] Education is important and, because of social or political issues, many children do not go to school. This is particularly true in the communities, where children are displaced for religious issues. When two different religions meet one prevails and it doesn't allow that child [from the other religion] to attend school. It is also a result of human mobility because they come to the city from the communities. In the cities children have to contribute to the family economy ending up as street vendors. That child doesn't go to school. Therefore, it is worrisome to see them selling their goods in the park

instead of going to school. [...] What all [government] programs are missing is sensitivity in every area. Whenever it will be that the governing leader(s) becomes a little sensitive, Mexico or Chiapas will be different.