

## GUADALUPE

I've been in this region about 25 years, always observing the women in particular. I began with them through a community organization program that dealt with issues related to childhood in the countryside. The idea was to not only deal with the children but also their parents, as co-educators. We invited whole families, but only the women showed up, and we started asking ourselves why men wouldn't come to these meetings.

Back then I thought the important things were the ones the men would come to and that we had to attract men if we wanted that program to be important.

What I did was create some special spaces, that is, meetings just for men, in the countryside, peasants, only men allowed! And men did go to those. But then I thought: Why do I have to be after the men all the time in order to make this important, when the ones who come are the women? Why don't I start getting to know these women who come here? That's how I started to ... to... well, let's say, to observe them. I hadn't really seen them, and in order to see them, I started going to their houses. I would sit on the dirt floors with them, just like they were sitting, and we would talk about their children, their families, life... and then I began to see that these women possessed a lot of knowledge, but that our impulse had always been to go there and take things to these women, from our perspective, but we really didn't have any idea of what was behind them.

So from then on I started working to organize the women, not just as mothers, but as themselves, with their own rights.

They started to get organized through a program called Active Women and then the community started to see them as leaders. They had never been seen as such before, even though they had always been there. What used to happen was that they would make important suggestions, the men would steal their

ideas, implement them, and it would look like it was the work of just men, even though the ideas would have been voiced by the women, very timidly of course because... they were peasants who wouldn't even go to the meetings without their husbands. At the meetings they would be elbowing their husbands and saying, "But look...", then the man would voice the opinion which had been hers, and it would become important then because he had said it. If she had said it no one would have listened.

After the program on women and their rights began, there was a special space for women, who have always been chatty. They've always been there, and they talk and converse, and everything, up to their elbows. My role there was just to encourage them to talk, and to pick and choose things from all that they said and make comments like, "what you are saying is very important," or "do you hear what she just said," and "what do you think" or "what do you say about this?" That creates an atmosphere where the women start to bring out all the unspoken things they've been carrying within them and where what they have to offer is valued. Also, I began to show them that it wasn't just what each one of them said that was important, but also the fact of being in a group and speaking in front of a group, which created the conditions for one woman saying one thing and another one catching her drift and adding something, and then the first saying something in response, and the thoughts were being nourished by the whole group. This way it was no longer the sum of the individual women but, rather, a collective thought which was richer than the sum total of what each individual woman said.

What we women were able to construct together and which was our own thought gradually became a force; it was our own space and identity, and the communities began to listen to it. In the past, the board of directors of the community organizations had been male; but suddenly women start to be appointed. They start to have spaces in which they are heard, taken into account and respected, and not just at the community level, more locally, because when

we started my mission was only to deal with kindergarten, with children from the town. I wasn't going to go beyond that, but as I started to bring together spaces, the municipal space opened up for me. It was larger and at that point what I wanted was for the groups of each town to also join together in a municipality, with a more municipal vision, more, more... global.

This is where the women start to create a space called "From the house to the town square," as if they were moving from a private space to a public space.

That was the situation when the war started to escalate, about five years ago, and everyone started to realize that the main victims of the war were women and children, because the men either went to war or were killed. In any case they had to go away and the women were left alone to take charge of the family and the children. They had to deal with all of the family tension and the whole situation they were living. At that time we were looking at these women as a vulnerable population, a poor population, a victim-population, and I didn't like that, because I realized that something wasn't working, that there was something there that wasn't being said and needed to come out. That's when I got the idea to do a little research into what they were thinking, what that war meant to the women, to extract everything that was specific to a woman's way of thinking.

As we dug into this project we discovered that the women, rather than victims, were—even though it was never said—the ones who had created the conditions for maintaining the social fabric of the communities, because the women were the ones who had occupied the spaces for socialization, which are: the home, the school, the neighborhood; places where women have always had influence, brought their emotions, had affective exchanges with each other, exchanged knowledge and many other things. We also began to realize that this role, which women had traditionally played, had been greatly accentuated by the war. With the war the men, who had been the ones to show up before, were suddenly gone. The women were left alone.

In this area women had never before had the opportunity to have money because here the one who worked was the man. The woman just looked after the children. Many women were totally unfamiliar with money. They didn't know how to manage it. The man always handled it, did the marketing, bought everything... she never handled money. When the war starts the woman has to create working conditions to begin to... to... to earn something to support the family. She starts to look for work, then she becomes the economic provider but she also continues to put a lot of energy into maintaining that place which... I always say she's like a pillar, which runs through the whole family.

The husbands start to go away or be killed, but she holds on to a very important role: they go away but all of them, from wherever they are, whether it be at war, as combatants, or just because they've left the town, they have them, the women, as the family pillar and from wherever they are, they call. And the women understand, they follow the trail of all those who have left... So it would seem that the family is all spread out, but it hasn't been dissolved. She makes sure the family stays together even if it gets separated, because she keeps up with everybody and everybody knows she's there and that as long as she's there they can communicate with her, and that's where the family unity lies. She maintains the family net through the links and relationships that she forms.

On the other hand, she's the one who maintains the relationship of the family with the outside world, with the social spaces of the community; the one who keeps going to the community action meetings, to the school where her children are being educated, to the hospital to see how she can get drugs and how to get attention paid to her children's health. And when the situation is one of poverty she goes and looks for and keeps looking for food for her children. Also, through maintaining that relationship with the spaces, she finds out what's going on with education, with health; she goes to church and keeps all of these spaces united and organized.

As this is happening. The armed groups become a threat, all of the armed groups. They had already lived through at least 15 years alongside the guerrillas, and the peasant has within him a sense of hospitality. He is supremely hospitable; anyone who comes to his house receives food. He receives food because it is given to him. The guerrillas at that time took care of the peasants, helped the community, filled many vacuums left empty by the State. For example, whenever there were money problems, or problems between neighbors, the guerrillas would intervene. They would call the peasants together and have them talk about the problem; or they would threaten them or scold them, but they would intercede in the neighborhood conflicts.

And when it was planting season they would go and help with the planting. You might say that that's how a close and affectionate relationship was formed between the communities and the guerrillas, a relationship that helped them a lot.

Nonetheless, when the paramilitaries arrived about five years ago, it's my feeling that that's when the conflict began to escalate. Until that moment, everyone thought this area was a peace zone. Everyone said that the largest peace zone in Colombia was our territory, Oriente antioqueño, because there hadn't been a conflict there.

But the paramilitaries start to look for the guerrillas, and of course they start to kill townspeople who had been helping the guerrillas. But all of them had helped, all of them, because they had lived so long with them. So a sort of intelligence system was created to rout out the leaders, find the key people, those who had the most influence.

The paramilitaries used a tactic which consisted of going to a town, taking two or three people and massacring them using the most brutal methods such as, for example, cutting their heads off and playing football with them, or cutting their

genitals off and hanging them from sticks so everyone could see them and they would be shamed. Or they chopped them up; they chopped them while they were still alive, so everyone could see. They used to say it is preferable to kill three and kill them like that, than to come in and kill lots of people, because if you caught three and killed them brutally like that, the rest would feel so frightened they wouldn't do it again. They did it as a way to avoid killing more people.

That's how the escalation of war begins. And the guerrillas, of course, defend themselves in the same way as the paramilitaries, looking for informants. That's why you see signs that say "Go away toads, go away toads, go away toads!" The toads are the stool pigeons who, when the paramilitaries arrive, start to look around to see who has been closest to the guerrillas. And the guerrillas begin to distrust those who were their friends from the days when they were there.

All of this takes place especially among the men because they are the ones who come, mainly the combatants. But in the meantime you could say the women were in the rear guard because they were the ones who had been sort of indoctrinated by the guerrillas. They really believed that the guerrillas were going to save them, to bring them out of poverty... that they were making the revolution and that the revolution was near, that soon they would triumph and they would have better living conditions. They were convinced that the guerrillas were, you might say, their army, which would take them out of their situation.

What do the women do then? They are the first to begin to realize it, and then to treat with mistrust those who had, up to that point been their friends and allies. They no longer see them through the eyes of a friend but, rather, with eyes which don't trust. Who here is informing? What is happening here? Plus, the guerrillas and the paramilitaries are looking for their sons to take them off to war, and there are battles in which they die. And they hear what is said to them: "What's to be done? We didn't want you people to die, that wasn't the idea, but that's what war is, it's hard, but you have to..."

So the women start to realize that all of that ideology which had seemed so clear to them no longer worked. They say, “How is it possible that those who said they were working for our good, now, simply because they feel threatened, come to us and do things to harm us? These groups can say ‘it’s not our fault, that’s not what we wanted, it’s a consequence of war, war’s like that’ as much as they want. But they can no longer count on our support.”

Instead of the idea that had been engrained in them, the women start to form the idea that war only causes harm, that it’s not true that it can bring good because: how can it be good if it kills their sons, takes them away to war? How can it be good if their houses are taken from them, if they no longer have food because no one has work?

The women begin to feel a strong rejection of war. For the women having their children around and being able to trust their neighbors is even more important than having food to eat. What is war for? How can it promise them that they are going to eat better, have a better life, if the price they pay, if what is being taken from them, is what they most love? They are their ties and the ties are being destroyed. So they start to reject war resoundingly.

With time, the women form the idea that there are no good guys and no bad guys in war, just interests that are being defended as valid; and they start to feel furious, not at the combatants, but at war itself. And that’s what is going to give them an extraordinarily clear idea of what it is they have to fight against, which is war, come from where it may, regardless of which armed group is involved. They know that anything that’s being done with arms isn’t good, no matter how just the cause they say they are fighting for may be.

The time comes when it is the women who show up, who are there, and who are organized, no longer just at the municipal level, but also through their town organizations, in each municipality and even through regional organizations.

Of course all the armed groups begin to take notice, to call the women and speak to them. But besides [being stopped at] the checkpoints they start to be followed, questioned about why they're doing what they do, what it is they are after. In the face of that, the women organize a clear discourse which remains the same no matter which armed group they are talking with. That way they feel less fear. At first the fear was great. "What do I have to say? What do I have to do? What is my role at this particular moment?" But in the meantime what they have to do is show what they are doing and why they are doing it. They know how to find the words to explain it to any group, no matter which one; it's clearly the same discourse for everyone. They show that they have absolutely nothing to hide. As they grasp this truth, they shed their fear, but they shed it even more when the armed groups call them. The women start to talk and they begin to realize that the same groups that are interviewing them see them with respect.

The armed groups discover something here they had not counted on, something which makes them respect the women: clarity with regard to what they are doing, why they are doing it, what it is about war they are rejecting, and what it is they are saying to each group.

When they are asked, "If the enemy camp calls you, will you go?" and they respond, "I will go because you called me and I came because I have no weapons, and I have to come because you do have weapons. You can kill me, I have to come. But the other group also has weapons and if it calls me I will go and say the same thing."

Then they begin to say things with great clarity and very directly, even though they are never hostile. Never. And they never speak ill of one group to the



other. They never pretend to be more on one side than the other. Maybe because what they are rejecting from all of the armed groups is everything related to war, and that's what they tell them.

When the women start to have this attitude, the mayors, the authorities, and the townspeople begin to see that these women have a discourse they have been constructing, a discourse whose intent is to defend life, which is what they are defending. Later, when the committees on humanitarian bonding are formed, the women are always placed at the forefront, and you always see the women going in groups; and they are always asked to speak first —let them speak first--and everyone realizes that this is very attractive to the armed groups. Because they are speaking from the heart! They start by saying things they have in their heads, but their hearts are aching and they start to talk of the harm the war has done to them, about what is happening with their children...

They don't create this discourse to move hearts, but it is moving. They do it to defend the very fabric of life.

**Interviewer:** How do you see women in relation to religion and religious faith, which permeates everything here?

I get very excited, very, when I see the evolution of people and witness how they have changed. I feel lucky and fortunate to have been able to spend 25 years in the same place watching the generations, watching the revolutions and everything. That's very exciting! It allows me the good fortune to be able to witness change and understand where it comes from and why. It has also given me certainty regarding the changes. It has allowed me to feel certain that with constant hard work all things that can have a favorable evolution will have it. What I am saying is that I believe very much in change.

Twenty-five years ago peasant women weren't like the women you see today, no. You are seeing something else. They were women who could hardly speak, who shied away. You might say the only thing they had outside of the home was the church and whatever the priest said. In other words, the church dominated their lives totally, and the men's lives as well; but the women were even more religious than the men.

We never attack the church, we never go against it, we would never touch that topic, absolutely never. We always speak respectfully about religious beliefs and political beliefs. At first they looked at us with great distrust: What do they want? Where are they headed? Because they weren't used to people not having a hidden agenda, which sooner or later always came out.

The one thing we have definitely earned is trust. Today no one believes we are on this one's side or the other's, or that one's, neither with regard to religion nor politics nor anything else. They know that we have our own ideas we are working on, that we are reflective and thoughtful, that we never go against anyone but when one begins to work to promote one idea, that one displaces another. I think that as one starts to go outside of one's religion to find answers to many of one's problems and concerns, one's religiosity begins to get displaced without it ever having been attacked.

And then suddenly they get fired up. I have been very struck by many of them as they speak against the church. You have never heard us do that, never, never. But they start to say: Look, when we were in dire straits, the church did not respond. When has the church ever been with us as you have been with us?

They start to compare things and then all of that church part gets displaced. Nevertheless, they continue to go to mass, they have their religious rites. But I think that total reverence toward the clergy is a thing of the past. They're still religious, they still practice their religion, but the Church has been demystified.

For example, they didn't have any birth control and now they can get it easily. They go out and find support for themselves, without worrying. They have gained a lot of autonomy.