

# Gendered Communication Strategies

## Puntos de Encuentro-Nicaragua: A Case Study<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

'Fundación Puntos de Encuentro para Transformar la Vida Cotidiana' is a feminist non-profit development organisation working in the areas of communication, research and education. The multi-disciplinary, multicultural staff of women and men, young people and adults, with different social and class backgrounds and sexual preferences, share a common 'rights based approach' to development. Moving beyond the narrow basic needs approach, this approach seeks to promote daily rights, such as the right to live without violence, as fundamental to the well being of all individuals.

Puntos de Encuentro (Meeting Points or Common Ground) believes that while societies have to change, they have to decide for themselves how to change. Rather than seeking to change individual behaviour, their work seeks to influence the social context in which individuals act and in which discussion occurs. To this end, the mass media is utilised to influence public opinion, which is seen as critical in raising individual and collective consciousness. Messages designed for specific target audiences such as women, or young people, and on one occasion even men, promote gender equality and women's rights via the most appropriate media outlet. Their activities aim to facilitate changes in social norms and collective attitudes over time through nurturing capabilities such as the ability to identify and analyse the causes and manifestations of discrimination, social exclusion and violence, and the development of proposals to promote and facilitate individual and collective action to change them. The institutional goal is to establish new values, attitudes, behaviours and social relationships based on the principles of inclusion, respect, solidarity, non-violence, and co-operation. To this end a broad multi-level, multi-media social communications strategy has developed over time based on the following principles:

- *Analysis of the status quo*

All communication activities are based on a coherent critique of traditional and official discourses, revealing how they reinforce the subordination of women and young people and promoting alternative ways of thinking.

- *Ideas that are understandable to everyone*

Complex ideas and analysis are 'translated' into simple and straightforward language so that people with little academic training can understand them and thus participate in the debates that affect their own lives.

- *Engaging and attractive messages*

Close attention is paid to the way in which the ideas are presented, not only in terms of content, style and tone, but also design, producing attractive, high-quality materials, pre-tested to ensure the messages are relevant for the users, understandable and easy to use.

- *Controversial issues*

There is affirmative action to focus on taboo subjects, removing them from 'the closet' onto the public agenda and into mainstream consciousness in order to de-stigmatise them and highlight their relevance within a human development process based on equality and rights.

- *Creating media outlets*

To ensure that the messages reach the widest range of peoples possible and are not blocked by commercial, religious or other interests, alternative media outlets have been developed.

### Gendered social communication

Puntos de Encuentro's social communication strategy began life as a four page, mimeographed newsletter serving the autonomous women's movement in Nicaragua. Over time the strategy has

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<sup>1</sup> This unpublished article was written in 2001, and has been only slightly updated since then. A thorough update, including impact evaluation data, is pending.

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developed, in form, in terms of the media outlets used, and in focus, the contents of the activities and their audience. As a feminist organisation Puntos de Encuentro is built on the desire to challenge existing unequal gendered power relations. However, recognition that women experience these relations differently as they inter-act with discrimination by age, ethnicity, social class or sexual preference, for example, means that these other multiple discriminations cannot be ignored or divorced from gender discrimination especially since the experience of multiple discriminations also influences the relative importance over time and space of the multiple identities that an individual has. That is, a person does not only identify themselves by their sex alone, but also their age, or their ethnic group. At times one (such as being young) may be more important to the self-identity of a person than another (such as being a woman); a young woman then may identify herself more with other young women and men, than with older women. This results in the need for a generational focus, alongside a gender focus, and to discuss women's rights within a broader spectrum of rights, such as the rights of young people.

Puntos de Encuentro then does not fit within traditional conceptualisations of what feminist or gender organisations do, since the gender focus may be implicit rather than explicit in the different social communication initiatives. On the other hand Puntos is distinct from other rights based organisations or those who work with young people, not least in terms of its gender policy. Since challenging gender norms is, and always has been, at the very basis of their work and activities, the organisation has not had to include a 'gender perspective' in the communications work, nor has gender been 'mainstreamed' into the organisation's (other) activities. Rather in the case of Puntos de Encuentro, gender, or rather challenging unequal gendered power relations, is embedded in the organisation's very core; its internal structures, goals and activities.

### **Development of alternative media outlets**

Understanding the importance of influencing public opinion in order to construct a context conducive to the discussion of women's rights, Puntos de Encuentro has placed communication for social change as central to its activities. While many feminist organisations have sought to use the media to promote their message, they have traditionally sought to ensure their opinions are reflected in mainstream media news outlets. That is, the traditional approach has been to attempt to 'engender' existing media outlets. Moreover, traditional approaches presenting the demands of the women's movement have at times had the opposite to the desired affect. Puntos de Encuentro sought to construct alternative, gendered, media outlets from the beginning and to utilise entertainment media outlets to present gendered messages via wider rights-based debates.

In terms of the construction of alternative gendered media outlets, the first initiative was a newsletter publishing reports from women's organisations on activities undertaken. The 'value added' from Puntos was to analyse and present these activities within a feminist framework, along with the publication of short pieces that sought to provoke wider debate on topical issues. Despite the obstacles posed by the lack of a national mail system (or indeed addresses), bad or non-existent roads, and limited telecommunications coverage, 'La Boletina' is now the largest circulation magazine in the country. It has a press run of 26,000 and a national readership of 150,000 (evaluations show that on average 6 people read/share each copy). Fundamental to its success is its unique distribution system; a network of local volunteers physically carry copies to local communities for further, wider distribution. In this way La Boletina reaches all parts of the country, even the most isolated communities where newspapers are still not easily available, making it the only accessible printed material for many women.

Its success may also be seen to rest on its independence from party politics, and indeed from Puntos itself (it is not the newsletter of Puntos' activities). Moreover, it does not pretend to be 'the' newsletter of the women's movement, rather a source of information and analysis for women and women's groups to share knowledge and promote informed debate. Today's La Boletina is a 108-page magazine with a full colour cover, published 5 times a year. Each edition tackles a variety of topical issues, while sections such as 'Breaking the silence' (which deals with the theme of violence) are present in every issue. As such according to one recent external

evaluation, “Puntos de Encuentro’s most extensive contribution to the women’s movement of Nicaragua is, without doubt, La Boletina”.

This, however, should not be taken to suggest that the other media outlets developed have not been successful. Instead the focus of these initiatives, in line with the focus on multiple discriminations and basic daily rights, have been distinct and the gender message more implicit. For example, recognising music radio as an attractive and relatively easy medium by which to reach a young audience, ‘Un Programa Joven Sin Nombre’ (UPJSN), went on air in 1992, with the aim of creating a space where teenagers and young adults could talk about their problems and concerns with other young people, without the mediation of adult ‘experts’. Working from a feminist and anti-adultist perspective, this nightly call-in programme does not present ‘solutions’, but seeks to enable young people to recognise their rights and promotes non-discriminatory, non-violent relations. This focus on discrimination by age was further developed within the organisation with the founding of the youth training project in 1996, with a 2 week long ‘youth leadership camp’ its central plank.

Another important element of Puntos de Encuentro’s communication initiatives since its conception has been national media campaigns designed by the organisation based on formative research and pre-testing of messages which have focussed on the right of every woman to live without violence. These campaigns utilise various media outlets from TV and radio ‘spots’, to posters, bumper stickers and even in the latest campaign in 1999, beside the road billboards advertising the campaign slogan, ‘Violence against women, a disaster men CAN avoid’.<sup>3</sup> This latest campaign also introduced a new supplementary communications approach. Alliance building at a local level, strengthening links with local media channels was used as a means to reinforce the message and as forums for debate. A team of promoters also worked with local organisations and service providers via workshops and personal face-to-face meetings. This ensured that the organisations took on the campaign as their own, using the complementary educational materials produced as the basis for their own local level group work and reflection.

Finally, after almost 5 years of preparations, February 2001 saw the launch of ‘Sexto Sentido’, a half hour weekly TV drama along the lines of ‘Dawsons Creek’ following the lives of six young people as they struggle with everyday problems of friendship, sex, study etc. The central idea of the programme is to promote young people’s right to decide about their own lives, as well as the need to accept responsibility for the consequences of those decisions. The TV programme not only marks a new chapter in the use of communication media by Puntos de Encuentro, but may also be seen as a catalyst to an internal institutional rethinking of its communication strategy.

### **Development of a communication strategy**

While different forms of communication media have been used in Puntos since its conception and other elements have been added over time, this did not occur as part of a strategic plan to develop a unified organisational communication strategy. It may be suggested then that a communication strategy did not actually exist as such, merely a number of media outlets based on a set of common principles. Financing organisations questioning how the TV programme was going to link viewers with local service deliverers influenced the development of a common strategy. This led to a recognition that the links made with local level service providers during the recent campaign against violence could once again be activated. The discussion continued and deepened until a strategy utilising the positive lessons learned from the 1999 anti-violence campaign and the distribution network of La Boletina took shape. Most importantly the positive impact of supplementing a national media ‘campaign’ with face-to-face interventions was recognised. At the same time discussion over the youth training manual resulted in the recognition that an over-arching conceptual framework already existed.

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<sup>3</sup> Hurricane Mitch in October 1998 suggested the need for a campaign aimed at preventing the secondary disaster (violence) suggested by research in the area. For the first time the campaign message was aimed at men.

This multi-disciplinary, media strategy, 'We're Different, We're Equal', is aimed at promoting national and local debate and creating a favourable climate of public opinion that influences the perceptions, attitudes and values of Nicaraguan youth on a range of issues. The strategy includes:

- *TV programme* – "Sexto Sentido" is a 'social soap' which during the first series tackled amongst others issues of; contraceptive use and unwanted pregnancy, alcoholism, intra-family violence, homosexuality and power relations – within couples, peer group and with parents. In addition to being broadcast on the main commercial station in the country, it was re-broadcast on 11 local cable stations.
- *Radio programme* – Un Programa Joven Sin Nombre became Sexto Sentido Radio, continuing in its proven format to allow for discussion of the themes raised in Sexto Sentido, promote debate and more in-depth analysis, while not relying on the audience having seen the TV programme. It is broadcast live and simultaneously on local radio stations in 9 different 'departments' of the country so that young listeners in different places can listen on their local station and be in touch with young people in other parts of the country.
- *Magazine* – La Boletina includes a new section that discusses the themes central to the strategy, presenting these themes from the perspective of young people. Thus parents will have a chance to better understand their children's point of view, while younger readers will have access to a further source of information.
- *Educational packages* – To promote discussion and reflection on the themes within local organisations packages are distributed that include a VHS or DVD copies of special editions of Sexto Sentido, along with discussion guides, directories of services and other informational materials.
- *Youth training programme* – Puntos has published a manual that lays out both the conceptual framework and the methodological approach of their yearly youth leadership camp, on issues such as discrimination by gender, age, race and sexual preference.
- *Promotional products* – To reinforce the impact of some key messages and themes, printed materials, and other products such as T-shirts and caps, have been distributed to young people across the country.
- *Local media* – Building on links already made with 70 local media outlets and commitments to re-broadcast the radio and TV programmes, training workshops on central 'human rights' themes are imparted to further strengthen links and improve knowledge and coverage.
- *Building and strengthening local alliances* – Puntos maintains active working relationships with over 200 local and national organisations and coalitions, as well as governmental and non-governmental service providers.

### **We're different, We're equal: Puntos in the global communications community**

Perhaps most well known in the field of social soaps is the Sabido Method, pioneered by the Vice-President at Televisa in Mexico in the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> Using radio and TV programmes, it has been described thus "the way it works is simple. There is a formula for the main story (feisty girl meets unattainable boy) and the secondary plot is the tale of the bad guys who do their ill-fated best to keep the meant to be lovers apart. The social marketing message is injected into a tertiary plot..."<sup>5</sup> The results of the method reported to date, not only from Mexico, but from sister projects 'exported' to Kenya, and India amongst others, are impressive. For example, after the first Mexican series 'Acompaname' (Accompany me) with a family planning message, enrolment in family planning clinics increased by 33% (compared to a 1% decrease the year before). The Puntos approach, while showing similarities to the tried and trusted methods also demonstrates important differences, not least the nature of the story lines and the fact it is not a daily soap.

While similarities exist with other media projects the key differences with the communication strategy of Puntos de Encuentro are threefold:

1. The strategy evolved from, and builds on, already established self-created alternative media outlets that have won credibility and respect over 10 years of operation

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<sup>4</sup> For further information see: [http://www.geocities.com/imech\\_2000/](http://www.geocities.com/imech_2000/)

<sup>5</sup> Contribution to the debate on 'social soaps' on the Drumbeat discussion list: <http://www.comminit.com/index.html>

2. The strategy also incorporates the other established (non-media) communication channels such as alliances with local level organisations and the youth training programme
3. The strategy promotes social messages that are 'rights-based' and tackles controversial topics openly and from the beginning.

Rather than suggesting it to be off the mark, the Puntos communication strategy may be better seen to have been ahead of its time.

The greatest advocates of the Sabido method, the US organisation Population Media, recently started promoting the 'Whole Society Strategy'.<sup>6</sup> Described as a 'new technique', the strategy utilises as many channels of communication as possible "to reach an entire society with messages and role models that promote positive behaviour". In 2000, for example, their programme in Mexico piloted what they describe as a "new methodology of radio broadcasting uniquely created for youth". The strategy combines a mini-soap opera with radio talk shows developed by and for adolescents. The parallels with the approach of Puntos de Encuentro are obvious. What is distinct is the underlying principles that inform the two programmes.

Puntos de Encuentro's communication strategy rests on two fundamental beliefs:

- While societies have to change, they have to decide how to do it. The aim of Puntos is to produce 'social' rather than 'behavioural' change - change the context in which discussion of a theme occurs and collective attitudes to the theme over time.
- Debates around violence against women, rape, abortion and homosexuality are debates around basic human rights. Such 'controversial' topics can and should be presented within a multi-media format, entering the homes and consciousness of the majority of the population via their TVs and radios.

The Soul City project in South Africa is another example of a successful 'home grown' strategy that uses TV, radio and printed educational materials to promote health and social messages. Recent evolutions in the story lines of Soul City to include issues such as violence against women and rape, suggests an alliance between the two projects could be built, and conversations have begun in that regard. Alliances such as this may mark one possible way forward in alleviating some of problems identified from the Puntos experience with developing multi-media communications strategies:

- ↳ *Cost* – Multi-media communication strategies are not cheap and thus often perceived of as 'high risk'. However, the potential coverage that TV and radio offer, and the credibility that mass media outlets have, means that final cost per head of message delivery may well be lower than financing various small scale, local level initiatives. Message impact may also be greater as people tend to assimilate more when they are being entertained, and character identification (role-models) reinforce positive messages.
- ↳ *Time* - The time taken to develop such strategies and the time lag between initiating the process and seeing 'results' is lengthy and demands taking a longer-term view. It is thus important to invest in the design of robust evaluation procedures, integral and integrated into the strategy at all stages; formative research, pre-testing, base line data, and impact evaluation.
- ↳ *Skills* - The lack of trained media professionals in a country like Nicaragua is a real problem that potentially could lead to failure. Design of innovative communication strategies demands investment in people and processes as well as products. Skills development and training are crucial to long-term success.

Cross-country alliances between organisations working in the area would allow a sharing of methodologies, skills, evaluation procedures and lessons learnt, reducing both the risk and cost of this potentially highly effective means of promoting rights and challenging discrimination.

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<sup>6</sup> For more information see: <http://www.populationmedia.org>