

Colombia

“Learning to Love Them: An Experience in Personal Development with Sexually Exploited Girls”

A Project of the IPEC, the ILO and the Antonio Restrepo Barco Foundation

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1. Summary “Leaning to Love Them”

Between 1998 and 2000, the International Programme for the Eradication of Child Labour (IPEC) of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Antonio Restrepo Barco Foundation, carried out a project to explore the dimension of Personal Development with sexually exploited girls. The interest was to enrich proposals for the care of this population, based on the premise that a true opportunity for life transformation can only be constructed by a confluence of external resources and internal processes of change.

We started from an experience (with adult women) that was already quite consolidated and that had produced a conceptual and methodological approach that enriched internal processes of healing, autonomy and empowerment, and we wished to explore work with girls between the ages of 14 and 18 who had experienced sexual exploitation through prostitution.

We began with an extensive study of the written work on the subject, and gathered the experiences of several individuals and institutions that had worked on the issue. This showed us that, although the recovery of young people had been addressed, the majority were traditional therapeutic approaches. The literature seemed to hide the face and soul of girls behind statistics, cold analyses and great attention to external factors – which are also very important, but which revealed a great poverty in terms of the interior elements of these stories.

We also found lights showing us the way. These came from those persons who had managed to surpass traditional care approaches, and whose love for the girls had led them to show their soul and truly accept them. With this equipment, we began a fruitful encounter with various groups of girls who came to show us the path little by little, and we understood that we were the ones who needed to change. This is why the book on this experience is titled “Learning to Love Them.” Thanks to them, we were able to increase our ability to love, as well as being able to delve deep into the eternal essence of what is human. It is this path that I will talk about today, in a summarized form.

Based on the book that gathers these experiences, we have spoken with other individuals who have traveled similar paths and who found in the text an echo of their own quests, a place to celebrate their own findings, a language for their sensibility, and perhaps a bit of inspiration to continue creating. I will attempt to show the spirit of an institutional experience that has been close to this path.

This is the “Germinando” Cultural Foundation, a project in Pereira, Colombia, is run by courageous women who over the years have gotten to know the inner workings of this city, creating ways to support diverse groups in recovering their dignity and creating life choices. A conversation with the director of this foundation, while exploring the field of knowledge on this subject, was one of the lights that later led to the emergence of the above-mentioned text. The women of this group have risked their lives for the idea that if we can heal one individual and collective soul, we will find the peace treaties that we so need in our country and on this planet.

Hand in hand with these persons and many others – including the wise Worshipping Sisters, who showed me the path and were always at my side – I will attempt to briefly tell you about the elements that characterize this work and point out some places on the map that could enrich the work that many of you are doing with youth who have been sexually exploited through prostitution. I am certain that the dialogue will be fruitful.

2. Who Are They?

To accompany the growth of the *magas*, we have to know their childhood, the origins of their injuries, the depth of their solitude, the terror of their nights. We have to give their story a place, recover it, acknowledge it, and although it seems unthinkable, we have to accept it in order to be able to help them do the same.

We intend to see this story (which is perhaps very well-known) from an inside perspective, transcending the enumeration of facts, seeing how a biography is created, an internal topography.

Feeling Alone

When girls felt alone and unprotected no matter how many people surrounded them, they felt they were floating in nothingness. This solitude was woven by many threads. Perhaps the most painful comes from their relationship with their mothers and fathers, from whom they expected protection and care, and who often only doled out blows or indifference. They also bore the weight of sensations that went right through the body and made the air tense, in the scarcity and daily anxiety to survive. At the bottom, unheard cries, and hugs and looks of recognition and acceptance that were never received. Only heavy burdens of responsibility and tension that robbed them of time for joy and play. All of this surrounded by a devastating silence about the most definitive facts of their existence.

These threads make an internal knot: the profound sensation of terror and insecurity about life, about others, and about themselves. As we grow, we vitally depend on the persons and situation around us. We require affection and care as much as food and air. It is the gaze of another human being that creates our identity, and it is the heat of another body that creates our skin. If this fails, then the world turns threatening.

During these girls' childhood, inadequate care for their needs was mixed with mistreatment. Thus, the adults on whom the child depended were people who not only abandoned her, but also were potentially dangerous because they could abuse their power to devastate her spirit, and they felt authorized to offend, hit, force and inhibit the girl in the world.

In these families, abusive relationships are part of daily life. A chilling fact: in a study on prostituted minors or minors at risk for prostitution, “95% of them had been, or were being,

abused in the home.¹ However, perhaps the most preoccupying is the fact that these families are not isolated cases, but rather the extreme of a reality that crosses all social groups. It is an overwhelming majority, because it corresponds to cultural patterns that are very widespread and deeply-rooted, which do not depend on the personalities or deviancies of particular groups.

We live in a culture that permits an extremely high level of mistreatment of children, as well as among adults. Any power that is had in a relationship is used as the domination of the strongest (or the one with something that is socially valued) over the weakest (or the one with something that is less valued). In domination, violence is always present in its most diverse forms.

Abuse emerges when we think that adults have the right to impose their way of thinking and their needs on children, and when we believe that standards can be imposed by force because they are more important than one's soul, and when we consider that children should behave a certain way, without respecting them as individual beings. Abuse is also born of the belief that the marks of violence can be erased over the years and the belief that we have to be vigilant and controlling because children are essentially evil, and must be guided and dominated.

The *guerreras* suffered abuse from the cradle and learned that **that is how** people interact; that is why they only recognize it when it is expressed in the most brutal and violent ways. They endured incredible levels of abuse until the spirit of the *guerreras* called on them to run away. This way of interacting led them to dominate and abuse others who were at a disadvantage (smaller children, the elderly) or

led them to submit to people with more power than they.

In the scenario of these relationships – the family – the fates of women and men are intertwined with stories of rupture and violence. In almost all cases, the mothers end up facing life alone, with several children, often from different fathers, products of loves that have left them bearing the burden of disappointment. Women more or less responsible, but broken, hurting, without time to nourish themselves or renew their energies. Women addicted to substances, games or destructive relationships, or simply overwhelmed by the weight of a difficult existence, with disadvantages of all kinds and few opportunities to spread their wings.

If we look back at the history of the mothers, we find another part of the fatal cycle experienced by successive generations of women, which the girls continue without breaking. Daughters of homes where the protection and love necessary for growth were not offered. They received traditional images of what it means to be a woman, which made them dependent in romantic relationships, with very low self-esteem, and which sent them on a compulsive search for love, putting up with unlimited abuse and irresponsibility from men. Valiant, persevering women with a miraculous ability to remedy poverty and work in the most adverse situations.

The mother is the only permanent – although ambiguous – reference in the lives of the *guerreras*. There are great ruptures with the mother when girls enter puberty, but their link with her remains through the years, often with painful conflicts and distance.

The father exists as an emptiness or as a monster. In no case is there a real father that accompanies them upon their arrival into the world, and loves them. Fathers are even a mystery, fleeting beings who leave no images, no memories. Men who passed through the lives of the mothers and left them pregnant or

¹ "Diagnóstico preliminar sobre la situación del menor de edad prostituido o en peligro de serlo." 1993-1994, Procuraduría Delegada para la Defensa del menor y de la familia, Ministerio Público, Procuraduría General de la Nación. Colombia.

with small children. In these families, there does not appear to be an imaginary in which the father has a place and has irrevocable responsibilities; rather, the fathers are transitory beings, but with an immense and devastating power. When there is a substitute – a stepfather – he is imbued with supreme authority, and the mother and children are subservient to him, often regardless of his real contribution to the family. Some stepfathers are true torturers, while others are distant, offering little support.

The men who pass through these homes have grown up in a world where being a man is associated with dominating, while the women have endured abuse starting in their households of origin. Men with hearts armored by cultural prohibition against expressing their fragility and the demand that they be aggressive and combative. Men from our country, a country that for a century now has been arming their souls and their bodies for bloody battles. Men who do not know the father's place, how to be fathers, how to express affection. Men who leave, and who leave behind them their own lives, without facing head-on the pain that life always brings. Men loaded with accumulated rage and silence that periodically overflow, causing damage around them and terrorizing the people they perhaps want to love but cannot.

Inhabited by men and women with these stories, the space of the family turns more and more threatening, and girls learn to distrust others and to defend themselves. There is an episode that takes the terror to the point of no return and, unfortunately, is a common and almost obligatory factor in the lives of the guerrillas: sexual abuse. In the great majority of cases, this abuse is committed by men who are close to them – fathers, stepfathers, uncles, neighbors – who are expected to protect them, and who become violators of the last frontier of the girls' being, their own bodies. Sexual abuse is the clearest proof to these girls that no one can be trusted and so they must build a wall to defend themselves, or

else it is impossible, faced with certain people imbued with power and strength. The deepest fibers of the girls are shaken by this event; it disconnects them from a part of their bodies and confirms to them that violence can be used for any attempt at self-defense.

During childhood, the home, inhabited by this complex universe of affections and imaginaries, is the main space for the construction of the girls' identities. School, although it is less strong in this sense, is also an important space. The great majority have spend some years there, and although a higher level of education is clearly to their advantage in terms of development, they cannot break the fate of escape and expulsion that awaits them. It is also a precarious space because it does not offer them refuge or contain them.

They feel that school does not include them; it feels distant, obligatory and rigid to them. They like their friends, and sometimes there might be an adult that welcomes them, but the space of school is not able to provide them with tools for understanding their lives and creating a kind of meaning that would give them roots. In several stories, school is a space that loses its meaning as the girl grows and begins to understand the reality in which she is living. For young people in poor areas, school is not sufficient to truly change their fate because it does not seem to offer them nourishment for the soul or open wider horizons for them.

In school, they re-encounter authoritarian models of relationships with adults, exclusion of the least favored, and a pedagogy that makes them view reality as something alien and distant, with no relationship to the everyday and the questions of young philosophers on life. More than a rejection of school, it seems to produce in them a long yawn and the sensation of undertaking a succession of activities that are obligatory, formal and totally unrelated to life.

They generally face a belief, deeply-rooted in parents and other adults, in the merits of school just because, because one must attend and make a grade. This belief will be challenged by high levels of repetition, early desertion and later full dropping out of school when the girls break with their family life.

The spaces of the home and the school open more and more toward the "outside" world as the girls enter into the difficult period of puberty. Little by little, the demands of the world become focused on physical appearance and the ability to seduce. Their flourishing sexuality is thus turned into a focus for attention and a source of contradictory sensations and experiences: rejection, seduction, pressure, "commercial" value, excessive control, and, of course, desire.

Along with the complexity of experiencing sexuality, this age of transition becomes a stage of high risk for the internal growth of the girls – who are almost women – because their social existence becomes more and more restricted and stereotyped. Mary Pipher,² speaking of contemporary adolescents, proposes that there is a gap between the true "I" of adolescents and the demands of what culture prescribes as feminine.

The imaginary space that we have defined for femininity is too reduced and rigid a reference, and leads the young women to compress their being and try to show only that which is socially legitimate. Faced with these cultural pressures, they divide their being between false and true persons. When the guerreras go through that age, the internal wounds from childhood are coupled with these demands, fragmenting them and reducing even more their possibilities of opening up their true being.

Although their wounds are very deep and their souls are fractured, deteriorated, they never truly give up the search for love and recognition, preserving it in the sphere of illusion and closing their heart to new disappointments. It is an act of protection, a way to survive the horror that will have extremely high costs for them and require an enormous expenditure of their energy. Their fate as fugitives has been sealed.

The construction of a world of illusions, which is totally separated from gray reality, will be a constant in their existence and will determine many of their paths, especially, their tendency to escape, to illusion, to fantasy. Tendencies that are born of the stubborn refusal to accept a reality that hurts and scares them. Romantic relationships contain a good part of this projection; they see them as salvation, as a place for realizing their deep dreams of acknowledgment and acceptance. Projections that seem to resist proof to the contrary that reality has already given them – in the lives of their mothers – and that it will continue to give them for the rest of their lives. And although many of them want to escape, in the fear of repeating their mothers' stories, unfortunately they have already internalized too many feelings and ideas to not go down a similar – often much worse – path.

Thus, their childhood is a succession of expulsions and precarious welcomings in which building security and trust is impossible, the need to defend themselves on their own becomes essential, and the body and soul are closed off in order to avoid pain while illusion has become a separate territory that is too desired and unreal.

It is in this way that the space becomes larger and larger, creating for them a deep conviction that there is no niche that will include them and guarantee them protection and freedom. The world of their childhood becomes more and more gray, suffocating and devastating; their childhood ends too early and is never fully experienced – it remains pending, post-

² May Pipher, Ph.D. *Reviviendo a Ofelia (o como salvar a la niña adolescente)*. Grupo Editorial Norma, Colombia, 1997

poned. Something urges them to escape the trap, a young spirit, a desire to find other horizons, and above all, terror, which effectively pushes them to throw themselves into the void.

At some point of the journey, the guerreras will make the escape, will try to forget, and will run incredible risks in order to do so. The choice has been made: to walk along the mortal abyss, but dependent only on themselves, accepting their fate. It is then that the guerreras escape in the search for their own lives under their own responsibility; others, who are weaker, remain.

Running Scared

The escape from home is frequently unleashed by extreme events in a chain whose beginning is sunk in the fog of time. More than once, they attempt it, and return for periods where they try to resolve the conflicts, but end up with new confrontations and new escapes. The break with the family is always progressive, and rarely total, especially from mothers and sisters, and sometimes brothers or other individuals. But the distancing is definitive, because it opens a gap between the daily life of the girl and that of her family. Her escape is not exempt from expulsion, rejection from the thing she is fleeing. The girl leaves, but her world of childhood also expels her.

Along with the desire to escape reality, when we are very young we have an enormous reserve of energy, we sparkle, we want to go fast, to never stop – it is a beautiful sensation. The guerreras are inhabited by a profound hope of finding what they have never had: freedom, pleasure, beautiful things, and love. They pay for their escape with their life; it is a high price, but at their age it seems that they will always have something with which to pay for it.

The escape is not limited to the family; actually, they are fugitives from themselves, from their past and from the horror of their world.

They know the darkest side of life and its impression has broken them into a thousand pieces. The escape signifies a great fragmentation, but also the entry into play of inside strengths that are nourished by intuition, subtlety, prudence, caution, resourcefulness. These strengths are used to the maximum resistance with scarce possibilities for compensation with situations of surrender, trust, relaxation and pleasure.

The defensive position constantly returns. The guerreras joke, laugh, yell, whistle, but at our first meeting when we asked them to relax and close their eyes, the terror was so great that most of them were unable to keep their eyes closed for more than a brief instant. Their hands and legs close to protect them. They recoil in unease. They hate going inside; the ghosts hit them in the stomach. They must keep their eyes open, the world under control. There is nothing that they can guarantee will not hurt them.

Thus, their attitude is oriented outward – externalized – and sometimes very much adapted to the demands of the moment, but not authentic, and often aggressive and distant. This attitude is vital for them; they learned the hard way not to trust, and they will probably not trust again, as they are too afraid of being betrayed. It is a great internal sacrifice, but it is necessary in order to survive. Escaping means dividing oneself, fragmenting oneself, and disconnecting internally, denying parts of oneself and losing contact with zones of one's body.

They escape through destructive relationships, and also through substances that obliterate consciousness for a while and take away their terror. But the terror always comes back. That is what they are running away from. Their deep connections have been broken, and they depend on themselves for survival. Their sense of identity is fragile, their body has fragmented, there is pain, but the terror holds it hostage. In order for the pain to

emerge, there must be some possibility for salvation, some safe refuge.

They run from dangerous, aggressive stepfathers, from weak, confused mothers, from poverty mixed with desperation and rage, from the loneliness of people who have already had to forget their dreams at a young age, from the images that demand they be different from what they see in the mirror, from the pain that burns them inside and makes them cry tears that no one has heard. They run from the rage of knowing that their lives will be cut of the same cloth as their mothers' lives. They are fugitives because they are brave and because they have no choices. There are girls who die, totally or partially, in the middle of this darkness, and there are girls who escape. We are talking about the brave ones who leave; the others are barely talked about in statistics on abuse and homicide.

It is also common that each girl thinks she is different, special, exceptional, and they look at what has happened to many older women with horror, and think it will not happen to them.

In this escape, they almost always find the streets,³ a territory they have generally known well since they were children, because many of them worked there helping their mothers, or have lives in neighborhoods where a sense of street life is part of daily existence. They like the street, it revives them, it encourages them. They learn to move around, to overcome their fear, to stride through the streets. The streets are a harsh place, where they depend on intuition, skill, and ability to respond. It is an hallucinatory space because it contains the darkest randomness subject to strict rules. They know that the streets save them and destroy them. The streets are freedom and terror.

They handle territories of the city, and there they experience light and blood, love and violence. Their skin bears their experience on the streets, their ways of moving, of flowing through the crowded spaces. Once they have decided to escape, the streets replace the home and school as spaces for the construction of identity.

The streets are represented in the collective imaginary as negative, terrifying, chaotic. New approaches show that although it is a very harsh world, where surviving in borderline conditions takes maximum effort, this is not a non-world – it has its own codes of meaning, its own networks of solidarity and protection, its collective identities, its landscapes. It is a space with a physical reference, but which is essentially symbolic. To be from the streets means living in a complex world that is incarnated by identities and practices with particular esthetics and symbols.

The guerreras are on the streets either totally or partially, returning home only sporadically. There, they not only learn survival skills, but also methods of making a minimum income. There are multiple ways of living and surviving on the streets. Chance, along with some personal determinations, define the paths taken. Each path borders the abyss, and is on the margins of the socially accepted territory. From street vending to prostitution, one of the most internally degrading, the limits are diffuse, and people will often engage in more than one occupation in a single day, such as combining work and theft.

On the streets, the girls are even more "hardened," closing themselves off, defending themselves, combating, being cautious, using intuition. It is a fatal combination, and it impedes their ability to perceive danger, but it also creates greater defensiveness, closing the soul off even more, and putting primitive energies to work, as well as protecting them.

The succession of abuse that has marked their lives does not end on the streets; the

³ It is important to note that the street in a city like Bogota has a density and complexity that may vary in other cities.

only thing that changes is their attitude – now it is more active. They become part of defined hierarchies where “earning respect” is a daily exercise of the show of strength, which leads them to continual confrontations to maintain their place and defend their friends who intend to dominate them. It is not rare for the girls to have scars from armed confrontations with other girls or adults who have tried to take advantage of them.

Here, the guerreras have accepted their fate and are not willing to return to a passive role. They have thrown their childhood life overboard, and have silently and definitively decided that the world belongs to the strong and survival involves violence and transgression. Their lives have not left them many alternatives, and their progressive marginalization from socially legitimate spaces will worsen the restriction of opportunities to find a better life.

Almost all of them are or have been addicts. Certain addictions are part of street life. Addictions to food, substances, illusory romantic relationships. They are ways of running away, escaping the feeling of emptiness, feelings of depression. Avoiding reality is a way of surviving their horrors. The altered states of consciousness that substances offer them not only mitigate very painful daily feelings, but also momentarily fill them with security and joy. They become more and more accustomed to experiencing the world at a distance, which is unreal, illusory.

Prostitution is one of the most frequent fates of young “desired” women in the sex trade. There, they find an underworld inhabited by characters and stories, links and rituals. While they are young – and this is a very short period in this world – they are sought and thus make a mid-level income, a bit more than what they would earn at jobs available to those with their level of schooling or preparation. But their old wounds will be more and more submerged, their escapes will be more damaging, their self-love more weak, their possibilities for changing their fates fewer, and

their bodies will be more and more closed to feeling and pleasure.

Given that underage prostitution is prohibited, entry into this work means that the girls become involved in an underworld that is clandestine. Their participation in this world leads them near people who live in dangerous worlds where violence is the norm of coexistence. Often at this point the girls cut off their relations with their families and disappear, changing cities and using another name. The name change signals dissociation between the childhood identity and the identity that they will acquire in this world.

Prostitution locks the girls into a lifestyle that is difficult to break. Their world is a shameful one, but there they build their links, their loves, their hates, their memories. Just like any world created by humans, this world has its own meaning, with people and events that nourish the biographies of those who inhabit it. Often, their worlds run parallel and while during the day or at night they are on the streets or in spaces (residences, bars, etc.) where they work their “trade,” when they are not working they go home or to the space they share with a companion and/or children. As we have already mentioned, sometimes there are total ruptures with the family. The existences are varied, but the experience of prostitution will always have devastating effects for the soul and body of a woman who is growing.

The character of the rejected but permitted reality of prostitution – not a strange paradox in our culture – is replicated in the lives of the women and men involved in it. They feel the rejection, the exclusion, the violence, but they know that they have a place that, although marginal, is necessary for the ways of life and relating that we have built. They learn to live and interact with many people using pieces of their bodies, in hidden spaces, in clandestine relationships where parts of their being, their identity and their story are excluded.

This disassociation has been installed since childhood, as well as the fragmentation of their bodies and the denial of their being; however, in this constant exercise of simulacra, the disassociation becomes deeper. There is an appearance, a surface that takes the place of the being: a way of dressing, acting, speaking, looking, which gathers the codes required for exercising the seduction involved in prostitution, but which becomes their way of being in the world. Obviously, many parts of the young women are suppressed, silenced; it is this negation that carries the greatest suffering and emptiness.

The women involved in prostitution are not essentially different from other women; they are simply the extreme of the disassociations that we all suffer, simply an expression of what it is to be a woman in a culture that demands that we deny a large part of our being to adjust to the demands and desires of others. Prostitution is the dark side of collective sexuality. "The prostitute concretizes the excision of female sexuality from eroticism and maternity, social and cultural foundations that are positive signs of the female gender."⁴

Prostitution is not just a trade, "it is a total way of life (real and symbolic)."⁵ There, a relationship is built with men, in which these girls are excluded from love and procreation; it is a partial encounter, in which the girls' being is more and more fragmented. When talking about sexuality, the *guerreras* clearly differentiate loving encounters from "dates." When they tell about the former, there is joy and mischief; when they tell about the latter, they seem to be a succession of dark, anonymous moments. This does not exclude the possibility of establishing a more personal relationship with a client, but the rest are just an indiscriminate mass.

3. What is Personal Development?

⁴ Marcela Lagarde, *Los cautiverios de las mujeres: putas, madre - esposas y locas*. Universidad Autónoma, México, 1993.

⁵ Ibid. Preceding note.

Personal Development work is an alternative approach to the processes of prevention and recovery of groups that, like the *guerreras*, have experienced terrible things; but it is also for anyone who wants to enhance their being, to grow and spread their wings. This is perhaps the primary characteristic – it is not conceived to "cure" people who are "sick" but rather help any group or person to grow. This breaks with the principle of the gazes that pathologize their life, and puts confidence in the healing ability of everyone.

This approach favors a holistic view of the human being. It opens the possibility of understanding that everything exists as a whole and it will never be able to be contained or healed if we continue dividing it and disconnecting it inside and from everything else. From there, it strives to revive internal connections, awaken one's own healing force, nourish the soul, offer experiences of freedom and autonomy, provide tools for daily life, open spaces for self-knowledge, strengthen the singular gaze and voice, awaken self-love, and create links of deep respect.

The central premise is that the true force for healing and growth is unconditional love. For this, there is no technique, no recipe, no procedure that saves having to explore oneself inside. The path of Personal Development work begins from the inside of the person doing it; there is its primordial, permanent source.

Contrary to traditional therapeutic approaches – and here, please forgive me for making a rather abusive generalization – this approach starts from a completely unapologetic look. This means radically renouncing the conversion of a personal experience, which is the product of a dense cultural and social fabric, into an individual psychological illness that must be cured by someone who has the knowledge and techniques to do so. In its place, we affirm that it is the person herself who must use her inner healing strength if she

finds an opportunity created by links based on unconditional acceptance and experiences that show her alternatives to the experiences she has had, and that open up other possibilities that can heal the wounds of the soul. This is the aim of Personal Development processes.

The work with the *magas guerreras* allowed us to understand that, although the conceptual and methodological approach that had been taken with adult women served as a foundation for work, it was also necessary to adjust many elements in order to create significant experiences for these young women who have known the profundities of life, who have suffered excessive violence and solitude, who have barely felt moments of lightness, and who wisely distrusted others.

In synthesis, we will describe some paths that were followed by the experience, although its central characteristic was to break all molds and expose ourselves to continuous creation and the risk of uncertainty.

4. Paths for Personal Development and General Methodological Characteristics

Paths

The first path invites us to **recognize ourselves** and is inhabited by experiences that allow us to see the travels of daily life, its roots, its cycles and its movements. It helps to understand the past and the way we live day-to-day. Acknowledging ourselves is carefully looking at ourselves, recovering wonder and curiosity. It demands that we clean ourselves of judgments.

Truly acknowledging ourselves has to do with the parts that we have denied, repressed or silenced in the belief that they were bad, inadequate, ugly or shameful. It has to do with confronting the memory of moments of pain – if we have not resolved them – and going back to feeling the rupture that it produced in us. To

acknowledge ourselves means to see ourselves in the most complete ways, opening up our hearts and minds to views that can suspend what we have always taken to be true, what we considered facts; it means breaking down defenses, walls and trenches that have clouded our view through time.

How can we not be divided when we live in a world that taught us to create dichotomies out of any complexity, to separate the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad, the acceptable and the unacceptable? Divisions from the sacred totality of life that, with one slash, amputate them and drain them of the magic of their diversity and tones.

Thus we judge our being and the world within rigid parameters striving to homogenize life to what we consider to be beautiful, good, acceptable. In this way a large part of what constitutes us is denied, and we invent tremendous mechanisms for exclusion, domination – always loaded with violence – of what remains outside. We do this in collective as well as personal life.

To acknowledge ourselves means going beyond these divisions, seeing ourselves in wider terms, breaking judgments and attachments in order to be able to contemplate our own faces, with their lights and shadows, and appreciate the panorama of our life with its green valleys and deserts, understand the colors of our days that flow from blue to red, without expecting them to all be the same, knowing the multiple cycles both begin and decline inside us, and that each birth and death must be welcomed.

Thus, acknowledgment requires full acceptance, abolition of judgments and demands, and presupposes love. Those parts that we hide, censor constantly, or simply deny, are vital parts; otherwise we would not pay them so much attention. They are often loaded not only with ethical judgments or negative aesthetics, but also with overwhelming pain that terrorizes us. This is the case of the *magas*

guerreras of our story, and the case of almost all of us as well. Voices that have been silenced by terrible violence that, with blows or with criticism, have paralyzed us or at least made us hide part of our being so as not to be exterminated.

Experiences of rejection, abandonment and abuse are effective in this way. When children are mistreated, the abuse of power – almost always by an adult – turns the children into objects, things, denying the sacred condition of their body and soul, invalidating them, destroying them, terrorizing them.

The most evident maltreatment is that which brings physical violence; however, just as terrible and devastating is constant, rigorous verbal torture and control of the body, which decreases the person's ability to believe in herself, love herself for who she is, hear her inner voice when she confronts the vicissitudes of life, establish herself as a singular being, and feel that she deserves a place in the world.

Recognizing those paralyzed moments is the first step towards understanding them and, little by little, leaving them behind in their rightful place as memories. These situations contain lessons that we have not managed to understand, coded messages that carry truths about life and reveal new meanings, so that we can progress in life. In these scenarios, it is terror that stops the flow of life, a terror whose origins are lost in memory and covered in layers of darkness. We are no longer running away from memories, but from terror of terror.

To **get back to the center** is the second path. It is inhabited by experience that seek to teach us to center our being, in the present and in our immediate surroundings. This opens up sensitivities towards things that happen to us, towards other people, towards the times that the day acquires, the expressions of life, the tiny and the immense.

To return to the center, we must take the threads of existence and accept that we have been given valuable time during which life teaches us what we need to learn. Feeling that what happens to us can be understood and accepted as our own, personal, and not something that comes from outside, by coincidence, with no meaning. When we are able to see out life in this way, we are attentive to its messages and we know that all of its experiences, even the most painful ones, are part of the vital fabric – they are not additional or useless.

To return to the center means to lay the foundation and extend the internal territory, giving space to voices that come from our own beings, connected to deep knowledge. It means giving a space to silence and introspection in a world that is constantly filling us with noise and putting us outside ourselves, which promote us to appear more than to be, more to behave in certain ways than to listen to and follow our internal wisdom.

This “putting ourselves outside” has immense costs; it subjects us to the constant tension of adjusting ourselves to expectations, to what is acceptable, but also it distances us from our inside space, disconnecting us from ourselves and taking away an invaluable source of growth and plenitude. In order to get back to the center, we must experience relaxation, silence, contemplation, quiet. We almost always have great difficulty doing it, as it is a little-known path that we learn to fear, but whose wealth is directly perceivable when, little by little, we open up.

One of the disconnections that most impedes internal growth is the disconnection from our body, the tangible and material expression of our being. For this reason, to **inhabit the body** is another one of the vital paths that we propose to enrich Personal Development.

The body records our story, its languages writes great events, feelings, ruptures that life has incorporated into our being. The body, like

tree trunks, keeps our story. We have forgotten its languages; we are deaf to its voices, and thus cannot understand its calls for alert and its pain. We do not know the marvelous power inhabiting it, either; our sensitivity to its power and beauty is dormant in us.

The body has been subjected to rigorous control, to a training that ultimately distances it from the flow of life. This is how we treat their symptoms, their pain, their expressions – as if they were those of an object accompanying us, and is useful to us, but which is not part of us, part of our sadness and joy, our life. We speak of it as an entity that is separate, or often loaded with visions that not only dissociate it but also devalue or satanize it.

When we talk about the parts that we have denied or silenced, we are talking not only about mental or emotional aspects, but also those that have a corporal expression, which have a multiple nature. For example, the heart of a girl who has been disappointed again and again, whose cries have not been heard, whose need for protection has not been satisfied: her soul closes itself off to new disappointments. A part is submerged in silence, to stop suffering. Thus there is only a change in the way of feeling pain, which is chosen as a way to survive at the cost of hardening themselves, denying a profound need.

Closing off the heart, silencing cries, deciding that we will never again lose what is given to us, renouncing the light of love – these things not only affect our soul, but they also remain imprinted on our body. The chest closes, the heart is enclosed in a great cage of hardened muscles, it is protected and also armored against feeling pain or – and this is the fatal cost – many pleasurable feelings. This is what happens to the *magas guerreras*.

To inhabit the body means going back to feeling fully, unblocking areas that tension and forgetting have been slowly killing. For this, we need to return to feeling the way in which we walk, how we express our being in postures

and gestures, and recover our corporal sensitivity. Thus, we open a door to self-awareness, the way in which life flows, and how we receive the days that come.

Very close to the return to the body, a path is opened, which seeks to **recover knowledge**, redimensioning the supreme power that we have given to reason, moving it from its place as the only valid and legitimate way of knowing.

“I think, therefore I am” is not a simple phrase; it is the motto that founded a way of understanding that for centuries has framed out perception of reality. Reason has a fundamental place, and to deny it would be foolish; however, it is not the only feature that makes us human, or that makes us exist.

Fortunately, we have begun to recover knowledge that comes from sensations, from intuition, from the body. Knowledge that includes reason, and opens up new perspectives and possibilities for knowledge of the world and of ourselves.

The enrichment of Personal Development seeks to take up this knowledge, learn to listen to it, and follow its guidance. This requires sensitizing ourselves, stopping to listen to ourselves. The process by which our ability to understand it is suppressed during childhood is a long one, and just as long is the path toward relearning it; however, the benefits are great, as they mean increasing our understanding of the world and opening up large parts of our being.

While we are exploring our inner selves, getting to know ourselves, our relationships with other people are also changed through experiences that allow us to **have more loving relationships**. This is no easy task, because we have assumed forms of mutual violence, of domination and control, that defer affection and cause pain. Change in relationships comes from internal change and from the experience that we accumulate in other types of

relationships that show that equity and respect are possible in contexts where power could be used to subjugate and dominate.

An experience of Personal Development must be a space where loving relationships allow a point of contrast. This type of relationship is the territory, the nourisher of the processes, and without it no experience would make sense; this is even more the case for the *magas guerreras*, as we will see further along.

General Methodological Characteristics

Growing involves change, starting from the full acceptance of who we are, of our stories, of what our gestures and words reveal. Change is a consequence, not a goal; it must come from deep processes of integration and recognition, from understanding of the path traveled, from love, imprints and scars. If we change, it is because our being finds more fluid ways of expressing itself, not because a new face is put on us.

To believe that each one of the girls is a singular being, with particular talents and ways of seeing the world, is the only way to accompany them along a path of acknowledgment and acceptance of themselves. This requires great internal confidence in human beings, in the goodness of the energy that fills us, and the internal tendency toward realizing who we are. Adults' need to "change them," "cure them" and "rescue them" only demonstrates a great lack of confidence in the idea that all human beings, in conditions of acceptance and love, will find paths along which to create an existence that has meaning, because their power comes from the inside, from their authentic "I," from those parts of them that have been silenced, rejected, prohibited, they can show themselves and integrate themselves into acceptance.

Below, we will mention the methodological principles that can illuminate Personal Development experiences in various contexts. The founding principle is that each experience

must be created starting from the reality of each group and place. Personal Development is not taught; it is promoted, and facilitated.

Unconditional Love

Unconditional love means that in a relationship, the differences and limitations of each person, their diverse desires, tastes and interests will **never** mean using power to dominate someone and abolish their spirit. This means breaking with the deepest experience that the *guerreras* have had since birth: domination and maltreatment. This demands from adults a too-strong conviction of the equality among beings and a great ability for loving and accepting oneself and others.

Breaking the Mold

The first lesson we learned in this process was to open ourselves up to the paths that experience pointed out for us, and this is not only the result of the fact that we were exploring little-known spaces, but also because, with this group, openness is the very essence of a Personal Development experience. And openness allows the spirit of the *guerreras* to have a true place and be expressed.

What should never be lost in the activities is the intention, the sense that they permit recognition of themselves, a different experience of relationships and reality, an encounter with their own faces and places, a scenario in which to know themselves and their world a little bit better. In order to maintain the intention in focus, the facilitators must understand that they can be as flexible as necessary, but must always find a way to make the experience into a mirror, something with meaning.

In this process, important aspects of Personal Development come into play: the expression of their own points of view, the ability for dialogue, creativity, respect for diversity, equality between people with different roles, etc. For this reason, here as well as in many other aspects, what is important is not the result, but

rather the process, the fact that there is real communication and a relationship in which different opinions have value.

The traditional scheme where “someone teaches, defines the norms, provides contents...”and “someone learns, follows the norms, receives contents” is definitively omitted here. And it is not that there are not different roles; rather, the differences are not based on these aspects: instead, it is an encounter in which dialogue predominates, the sharing of meanings and feelings is pactured, norms are agreed upon and are subject to discussion, as they are only valid while they allow the achievements of objectives, and are not valid in themselves for exercising control.

Living Life

Living, the direct experience of life, the concrete, is where we find the source for the experiences with the girls, far from verbal reconstruction or representation. Here, the guerreras are no different from the young people of their generation. For them, experience is valid, and not rationalization, not theories, not speeches, not great causes, not institutions, not the abstract.

Experience refers to something vital, significant, subjective. Words are part of experiences but they are not the center and, above all, they are not in the territory of explanation or justification of things that have been experiences, but rather the very expression of what is felt and perceived. Image and action are very important in the experiences of these young women, hence their closeness to the symbolization of life through signs, colors, schemes and passion for the street, television, music, show business, magazines. Images that are fast, changing, strong.

Experience is, it is lived in the present, in a direct way. It is not a conversation about life – it is life itself. While this is going on, our intentions and the processes that we want to facilitate either flow from our being, or not. This

is not to say that we consider autonomy important, for example, without giving it a value in real experience.

Experiences nourish existence, and it is through them that we build and transform who we are. We experience them totally, with body and mind, and they make us who we are. The possibility of internal growth is nourished by having been through experiences that allow us a new perception of ourselves and the world in which we live. Transformative experiences – not rationally received ideas – are able to make us break patterns of existence.

Words From the Heart

One of the things that most impressed us in the initial phase of the study was the number of life stories of girls and young women similar to those of the guerreras. Literally transcribed stories of terrible events that are little analyzed, or barely remain in scandals and reports. Their behavior at the beginning showed us that they believed that telling the most scandalous events of their lives was a way to please us or obtain approval.

A story told in this way cannot have healing value. It is not enough to tell it; we must give it new meaning, and this is not achieved when the telling is the result of external pressure or therapeutic pretension that considers it sufficient just to tell, no matter how and no matter what the meaning of the words. This is even more true in the case of these girls, since they have built “commercial” versions of their stories in which they recount the most horrendous events unflinchingly. We believe that for the experience to be healing, it is not the narration of the events themselves that is important, but rather the chance for the girls to go back through them, for themselves and sometimes for other people, when necessary, when desired, and not for adults hoping to save them or just to pry into their lives.

And it is not that words are not healing – they are, and they are very powerful – but they

must emerge from the inside, express an image, an understanding of the people saying them, communicate their ways of seeing things. It is in the exercise of bringing out the soul through voice or image that they are oxygenated, extended, connected. The words that emerge through force are dissected and there to please or shock someone; they are external, alien and thus not healing.

Letting Go

They, like many of us, have learned that forgetting and not stopping to look back on the painfulness of existence, will make it go away. This is a very common belief, nourished by the national custom of quickly forgetting tragedies, the faces of our dead, and the terrible disasters that occur. The shock of what has happened is still there, but we rarely stop and attentively listen to our inner beings.

Thus, we must go into the past, to those experiences connected to the present, allowing for expression with words from the heart, and unconditional openness and acceptance. To go back over the experience without judging it or explaining it, to know that it is part of our being, and to connect with it, but also at the same time, to let it go, to unload it. Thus it becomes part of our biography, and although we are not indifferent to it, it does not torment us and we can look it in the face.

The Inner World

Opening a window to the inside, perceiving oneself as a unique being that vibrates with life means to enter into contact with an inexhaustible source of growth. It is often enough just to go back to a place where one has experienced many things, to paint a feeling on the silhouette of the body, or write down what happened that day in a diary, to open that window and start to look out through it.

The guerreras panicked when faced with silence or anything that required "looking inside." With them, techniques of relaxation that

are appropriate for adults rarely worked with them. This is why we sought other paths, and subtly the space began to be created, and silence began to be possible, to look more deeply at one another and at themselves.

Contacting the inner world enriches our view not only of ourselves, but also of others. It involves considering the diversity of life paths, feeling destinies and understanding the source of each person. It is connecting with the profound being that inhabits us and, from there, the universe, with the soul of all beings, beyond classifications and hierarchies.

5. Perspectives on Personal Development as a Path to Recovery for Sexually Exploited Girls in the Institutional Context: "Lunanueva," Paraguay and "Germi-nando," Colombia

The experience recounted has been an advance in the wider construction of a Personal Development approach tailored to different social projects that the Restrepo Barco Foundation has continued to support. This attempt has been maintained, as it has been shown that it is a great contribution to efforts to transform collective problems. It is a path toward change from the inside, complemented by others that are aimed at the external.

In the case of protection institutions, training on this approach was offered and the cited book was offered, as well as the journal that accompanies "Learning to Love Myself" as a tool to nourish institutional work.

The institution being presented here as an illustration and model has participated since the very beginning of this experience, and nourished proposals that have been developing from its own vision. It has been selected because it shows, in practice, what it means to use Personal Development as the center of institutional work. It is worth emphasizing that this project has its own path and that "Learning to Love Them" was only a contribution toward it.

GERMINANDO: A Refuge

A refuge, as its name indicates, is temporary, and is devoted to moments of nourishment, but must be open and help us to spread our wings, to shake off the dust, to cure them, or to discover them to be able to fly and keep growing every day. As we have stated, in the refuge we re-learn the arts of living, in order to bring them back into the realm of life.

The Germinando Cultural Foundation runs projects aimed at various groups and the community of the city of Pereira, Colombia. Its work is focused on supporting the construction of life alternatives from an approach that has been created from sensitive contact with the reality in the field of work.

In all of its programs, Germinando emphasizes some elements that constitute an orientation along the lines of what we have talked about up to now, even though it was created based on their own experiences. They know the material regarding the approach and have used it to nourish their work, along with others who work with a similar way of thinking. This shows that what we have been doing shows a trend in the field of care for sexually exploited girls and other groups. This trend emerged from many searches that looked for a humanistic, holistic view of people, life and reality.

Thus, from different spaces we come to similar conclusions and proposals. What identifies Germinando and helps analyze other institutional experiences is:

➤ A humanistic vision. This means that priority is given to the realization of the being and the expression of its essence. It is a transcendence of approaches that focus on the issue of material resources, giving more attention to the total growth of individuals, without omitting the creation of external opportunities. This emphasis brings with it an established, rich philosophical position that allows us to under-

stand the complexity of human experience, to go beyond appearances and to seek liberating proposals for creativity that enhance autonomy. Thus it is a political vision that breaks with the assistance-oriented view, seeking to create powerful, creative subjects who are responsible for their lives and who are in harmonious, participatory relationships with their surroundings.

- A holistic vision. This involves looking at individuals as a whole, and all of their relationships with all of the beings inhabiting the earth, and with the earth itself. This translates into the work of Germinando in position of basic, deeply felt, everyday ecology. When we work from the idea that there is a unity and beings are just an expression of this unity, the attitudes that illuminate everyday life are those of respect, celebration of diversity, valuing of everything that exists – not separation. In institutional practice, this translates into projects in which facilitators are deeply involved in the process, knowing that they are part of the problem and do not see the guerreras in this case as different, removed, disadvantaged, lacking. This is also expressed in multiple attempts to get close to nature, reflected not only in the institutional name, but also in the stages of work with the guerreras. It speaks of planting seeds, sowing, germinating harvest...
- This same language shows how Germinando considers that what it does in a process is permit the display of the true internal nature, to strengthen healing powers that come from the singularity of every individual. This means that we do not place an ideal in front of the girls; rather, we nurture the expression of their own nature and offer them profound acceptance.
- Another feature of this institutional approach is the use of artistic and creative

languages for care processes. This is no accident. When there is enough sensitivity to understand the way in which the human soul expresses itself, it is natural to use art and the expressions of the senses, since we have touched the limits of rational words and believe in the power of narrative. This is very much present in the projects run by Germinando.

- Another particular feature of the approach is the emphasis on the everyday. This means having understood where human experience is cooked up, and thus where it is transformed. The everyday is the terrain of real life, and it is there, and not in irregular spaces, that new visions and experiences can be fertilized. This means that we have understood that the girls need experiences that tell them that there are other life possibilities, imprinted on their skin and in their memory not as mental ideals but rather as experiences that are real and that are felt. This gift will be that which illuminates their future life choices.
- There is also an insistence on the formation of autonomy. When they speak of being the ones to play a central role in their own stories, they are stating a key element for reference. To give people back the center of their lives is radical political work. Even in the most adverse outside conditions, it is important to know that life is woven by one's participation, and it is not something external that can just be passively received.
- There is also the language of citizenship and human rights, which completes the perspective. The empowerment of persons who are subjects holding rights as well as the acknowledgment of their responsibilities as citizens make it possible

to build an ethical vision of people's relations with society. Personal development does not mean isolation or passivity regarding collective issues; on the contrary, it means dignity, internal power, valuing, and thus demand for respect and construction of democratic relationships.

- In the words of a member of the team: "I do not conceive (personal development) as a special area; I believe that it is in every corner, in every space, at every moment, from the small solitude of the bed, the branch of the tree I climb to air out my dreams or to move my sadness, to the dining room or kitchen where flavors and memories blend."
- Thus Personal Development can be viewed in three dimensions: as specific activities, as the manner of guiding activities with other objectives and as a presence that crosses over every activity, meeting, exchange...in daily life. What this means is that institutional life as a whole is created and guided as an experience of Personal Development. It allows people who move through the institution, at any of its levels, to have a healing experience, a refuge.

These features of the Germinando experience are a way of understanding what is human and formulating alternative paths. The reports and materials it produces clearly show that it puts a great stock in life, laughter and love. It is enough to see the features of a person participating in one of the projects to understand that Germinando knows how to care for, maintain and strengthen a call to life.