

How to Mobilize Women: Some Experiences

Viviana Arroyos Jimenez

*Women for Peace Network
Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress, San José, Costa Rica*

Summary

The campaigns organized by the NGO *Viva Rio* in Rio de Janeiro are excellent examples of mobilizing women as agents of social change to reduce violence and arms proliferation. Diverse women gathered to launch the *Choose gun free! It's your weapon or me* campaign on Mother's day in 2001. The campaign distributed white flowers and materials to help women disarm their loved ones that gave convincing arguments that a gun is much more likely to kill or injure than to protect loved ones. The *Mother, Disarm your Son* campaign involved awareness-raising concerts by popular artists.

Women also mobilized through marches and seminars in attempt to lobby politicians to penalize murders and other aggressions against women. In 1998, the government gave the National Institute of Women the responsibility of writing a new law which incorporated women's suggestions. Although the President promised his support and presented this proposal to Congress, Costa Rica's Domestic Violence Law remains the only national law in Central America that does not penalize such conduct.

Nevertheless, women have continued to organize peace campaigns such as the *Visitación Padilla of Honduras* movement that succeeded in changing forced military service to voluntary. Since 2000, women have been holding monthly vigils and distributing brochures and orange ribbons symbolizing the necessity of peace between men and women. However the key to real progress is education for peace and equality, especially of children and youth, in order to change the very roots of gender problems and violence.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I feel very proud to be here today representing the Women for Peace Network, of which the Secretary is in charge of the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress, where I work. The reason why I am here today, instead of my colleagues from the Center for Human Progress, is that in the Center for Peace, we are currently working with a gender perspective, in the topics of human security and arms proliferation.

All the organizations involved in the arms proliferation topic have been getting aware of the important role of the women on this topic. Camilo Reyes, ambassador for Colombia and president of the United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light

Weapons in all its Aspects, carried out in July 2001, has been insisting in various seminars about the role of women as victims of violence, insecurity and arms misuse.

In Central America we can identify three different areas in which women are being victimized. First of all, there is a victimization of women in the street. This problem, in our culture, goes from listening to obscene phrases to physical attacks. Second, violence within civil society is killing women's husbands, sons and other relatives. In the third place, about the situation of women in relation to their safety, we have proved by many studies, that in Central America, even though streets are dangerous for women, the most dangerous place for them is their own house. According to the study "Femicidio en Costa Rica 1990-1999" (murders of women from 1990 to 1999), 57% of the women killed in this period, were killed in their houses, 14% in the street, 18% of them were found in a vacant lot, and 11% mentioned as "others".

According to this same study, 75% of these women were killed by a person they knew and only 9% by a stranger; in 16% of the cases the killer was not found. Thirty-seven percent of these women were killed in a domestic violence context, and there is of 18% of women killed because of "passion problems". This category has been hiding murders of women for many years, because it is supposed to be related to jealousy problems, infidelity, but most of them happen because the man thinks that the woman is being unfaithful. Most of the time this is not true, and there are no proofs of this.

What we argue in our region, is that more than half of women are being killed because they are women, because of a gender issue. If we look at the aggressions and deaths that happen in the street, in our region, most of men got killed after being robbed, but most of women got killed after being raped. Either inside or outside the house, women are in danger because of their gender.

One of the best examples about mobilizing women around this issue, are the campaigns carried out by the NGO *Viva Rio*, based in Rio de Janeiro. As many of you may know, Rio de Janeiro in Brazil is a city with a big insecurity and violence problem. The statistics from *Viva Rio* say that 8 out of 10 homicides are committed with firearms. And even though the ratio of

men to women killed by guns is 24 to one, this organization knows that behind each victim of gun violence is the pain of a mother, wife, girlfriend, sister who was left behind. With this in mind, *Viva Rio* gathered women – advertising executives, journalists, artists, writers, mothers and relatives of victims – to support the campaign *Choose gun free! It's your weapon or me*, launched on Mother's day in May 2001.

Viva Rio distributed white flowers and materials that explained that a gun is much more likely to kill or injure loved ones than to protect them. The campaign aimed to empower women as agents of social change, and to develop convincing arguments to help women disarm their loved ones.

Another *Viva Rio*'s campaign was called *Mother, Disarm your Son*. This campaign is organized with the cultural group Afro Reggae, Afrolata and MV Bill. Many other popular artists and musical groups have participated in concerts in the favelas organized by the campaign.

I would also like to share with you an experience that we had in Costa Rica, with a group of women from NGOs, that were trying to get the approval of a national law to penalize women's murders and other aggressive attitudes against women. In Costa Rica, as opposed to the rest of Central America, aggression against women is only regulated in a "Domestic Violence Law", including preventing measures but without penalizing these conducts.

This group of NGOs carried out many activities such as marches, seminars, rallies (mass meeting), and a strong work of lobbying with politicians, especially with congressmen. The rallies reunited hundreds of women that most of the time got together after the killing of a woman by her husband or boyfriend. We have had more than twenty women killed every year. This project started in 1998, when the Commission for the implementation of the domestic violence law, saw that women were still dying, and that a penalizing law was probably needed. They gave a lawyer from the National Institute of Women the responsibility of writing the law project. Many workshops were carried out to enrich the proposal with women suggestions. This proposal was presented to the President Miguel Angel Rodriguez, who took it to the Congress.

Since the year 2000, these women have been doing what we call *Vigilias*, which are at night, once a month. They also made brochures, and an international Internet campaign that directed any commentary to the Presidency. The President of the Republic had promised them his total support to this legislation, but it wasn't enough and the law will need a new fight from now on.

An important symbol of this campaign is the orange ribbons that have been distributed, as a symbol of peace, the necessity of peace between men and women.

It is important to observe that only women, tired of being relegated from politics have organized many campaigns. A good example comes from the movement *Visitación Padilla of Honduras* that achieved to change the forced military service into voluntary service.

As a conclusion, we can say that it is important to improve the role of women in security and safety topics, particularly at the local level, where sometimes we can do more about specific issues as safety in streets and houses. But most important of all, is to remember that we need education for peace, and education for equality, directed to kids and young people, in order to change the roots of our gender problems.