

# AT HOME, IN BED AND IN THE STREET: FEMINIST MEDIA STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

## EN LA CASA, LA CAMA Y LA CALLE: ESTRATEGIAS MEDIÁTICAS FEMINISTAS PARA EL COMPROMISO SOCIAL

## NA CASA, A CAMA E A RUA: ESTRATÉGIAS DE MÍDIA FEMINISTAS PARA O COMPROMISSO SOCIAL

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## **Abstract**

Using a Contracorriente exam, a project of the Nicaraguan feminist organization Puntos de encuentro, I have explored the role that feminist media can play in combination with support networks in multiplying dialogue opportunities and the promotion of women's rights. The article tries to answer the following questions: How does feminist media take advantage of the power and knowledge base of transnational networks of support to represent and debate the impacts of globalization on the lives of women? What type of media and mediation can they access to discuss complex issues such as abortion, incest or rape with the general public? How does the creative process happen to transform a TV program in a catalyst to imagine the change and a platform for sharing solutions?

## **Keywords**

Nicaragua, Centroamérica, medios feministas, televisión, telenovelas

## Resumen

A partir de un examen a Contracorriente, un proyecto de la organización feminista nicaragüense Puntos de encuentro, he explorado el papel que los medios feministas pueden cumplir en combinación con las redes de apoyo en la multiplicación de oportunidades de diálogo y en el fomento de los derechos de las mujeres. El artículo trata de responder las siguientes preguntas: ¿Cómo aprovechan los medios feministas el poder y la base de conocimiento de las redes de apoyo transnacional para representar y debatir los impactos de la globalización en la vida de las mujeres? ¿A qué tipo de medios y mediación acuden con el fin de discutir temas complejos tales como el aborto, el incesto o la violación con el público en general? ¿Y cómo se da el proceso creativo que convierte un programa televisivo en un catalizador para imaginar el cambio y en una plataforma para compartir soluciones?

## Palabras clave

Nicaragua, Centroamérica, medios feministas, televisión, telenovelas

## Resumo

Partindo do exame de Contracorriente, um projeto da organização feminista nicaraguense Puntos de encontro, tenho explorado o papel que a mídia feminista pode desempenhar em combinação com redes de apoio na multiplicação de oportunidades de diálogo e na promoção dos direitos das mulheres. O artigo busca responder às seguintes perguntas: Como a mídia feminista lança mão do poder e da base do conhecimento das redes de apoio transnacional para representar e discutir os impactos da globalização na vida das mulheres? Que tipo de mídia e mediação são usadas a fim de discutir questões complexas tais como aborto, incesto ou estupro com o público em geral? E como se dá o processo criativo que converte um programa de televisão em um catalizador para imaginar a mudança e uma plataforma para compartilhar soluções?

## Palavras-chave

Nicarágua, América Central, mídia feminista, televisão, telenovelas



Over the years, I have borrowed, adapted and made films about individuals and groups that use media to foster dialogue and go public with seemingly private, or difficult subjects such as incest, rape, or even genocide. Puntos de Encuentro (Meeting Points), referred to as Puntos, a feminist group in Nicaragua, captured my attention early on and for over twenty years I have learned from and documented their unique way of blending communication projects with social movement strategies to build public awareness around women and children's rights. Puntos was founded by a group of women who were involved in the Sandinista revolutionary period of the 80's, but who felt that while many important reforms had come out of this time, not enough attention had been paid to the rights of women in both the public and private spheres. They recognized that decades of dictatorship, war, and authoritarian rule could not be undone through governmental or policy changes alone. They wanted to inspire change at all levels, at home, in bed and in the street. Using multi-platform communication strategies including print publications, radio, television dramas and public service announcements, their mandate has been to draw attention to the power relations that play out in everyday life. Rather than seeking only to change individual behaviours, their emphasis has been on challenging the social and cultural norms that shape interpersonal relations. In collaboration with a wide range of partners and networks, Puntos has been using media to initiate processes that challenge existing cultural frameworks, offer alternative feminist representations and motivate personal and collective action. It was the unique intersection of feminist politics, narratives, organizational networks, and multiple media platforms that first captured and has held my attention over the years.

Through a close examination of their most recent project, *Contracorriente* (Turning the Tide), a family drama that depicts the impact of globalization on women's lives, I explore the role that feminist media projects in combination with women's rights

advocacy networks can play in multiplying opportunities for dialogue and for the advancement of women's rights. The project offers a unique portal to explore a range of questions relevant to feminist media and social advocacy: How are feminist media projects tapping into the power and knowledge base of transnational advocacy networks to represent and debate the impacts of globalization on women's lives? What forms of media and mediation are they drawing on to address complex subjects such as abortion, incest, or rape with the general public? And how is the creative process of making a television show a catalyst for imagining change and a platform for sharing solutions?

## Shifting the terms of mainstream television

I lived in Nicaragua in the early 90's, just after the Sandinista Revolutionary period of the eighties. While the country was undergoing enormous social and economic transitions, the autonomous women's movement was flourishing. Puntos was central to this movement and proposed that beyond the provision of direct services such as health clinics or shelters, the women's movement needed to counter oppression in both private and public discourse. They developed an open school for women, a popular women's magazine called *La Boletina*, and a youth talk radio program to promote dialogue within Nicaragua's growing women's movement. Years later the organization expanded their mandate to include television. Their first series, *Sexto Sentido*, (Sixth Sense) featured six young friends living together in Managua, a bit like the sitcom *Friends* but with a serious social agenda and made with a fraction of a standard television budget.

I contributed to their efforts by developing *Novela*, *Novela*, a documentary about the process of making and distributing the series. I was eager to share the story of how this women's group was managing to produce a wide reaching television program in a small Central American country like Ni-

caragua, considered one of the poorest countries in the Americas. Nicaragua was still recovering from the effects of dictatorship, revolution, and war and had only a minimal infrastructure for television production. Enthusiastically occupying the new space afforded by the digital revolution, Puntos was shifting the terms of mainstream television in Nicaragua. On the one hand, the series represented one of the first television projects in the region to introduce complex representations of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans-Gender or Questioning) identity and abortion into the mass media. This was particularly noteworthy in a country where the Catholic Church has enormous political and cultural influence and has opposed sexual and reproductive rights.

Within this conservative context, the organization was piloting a means of introducing controversial issues like abortion, domestic violence and homosexuality to mainstream audiences by collaborating with a national anti-violence network, prepared to handle a range of responses to the programs. Executive producer and scriptwriter Amy Bank describes this unique reception strategy; “If somebody who’s watching TV or listening to the radio ... if they wanted to get involved in the issue or if they needed help, we created a whole system, a network of organizations and service providers that were dealing with issues in the show so people could connect.” (A. Bank. Interview by Elizabeth Miller. Video Interview. Nicaragua, September 28, 2012). Rather than a one off experience, they approached television as a catalyst for a wide range of communication processes and they piloted a range of low budget multi-platform communication strategies to build impact. The series was a success and they went on to produce eighty episodes that were aired in eight countries, a scale and reach that far exceeded their initial expectations. The *Sexto Sentido* series and the documentary, *Novela, Novela* were shared with women’s groups and schools across the Americas interested in alternative representations of domestic violence and LGBTQ issues and

who were hoping to develop their own grass roots media campaigns.

A decade later, I returned to Nicaragua to make a second documentary, this time about the group’s newest television project, *Contracorriente*, a family drama developed in response to the global economic crisis. The series grappled with issues such as tourism, the rising incidence of commercial sexual exploitation of adolescents and trafficking, workers rights in free trade zones, economic power relations in the family, and the concerns of transgender youth coming of age in a small city. Addressing global economic issues required developing new partners and strategies and over a three-year period, I observed and documented the organization’s process of scripting, directing and making strategic connections to regional organizing efforts. Issues like sexual exploitation, which they define as the sexual abuse of youth in exchange for money or protection, reach beyond national borders and as a result, Puntos was now collaborating with groups through out Central America. They wanted to ensure the project would be useful for groups and networks addressing trafficking, violence against women and economic disparities.

While planning the documentary, At home in bed and in the streets, I was also aware of the shifting concerns of communications students in my classes in Montreal, Canada. They were increasingly aware of the diverse impacts of global economic disparities, but many were unsure how they might intervene. I wanted the documentary to speak to their concerns and I wanted to profile a young protagonist they could identify with. I chose to structure the documentary around Tamara Salas, a Nicaraguan communications student and first-time actor in the series. She plays Jessica, the female adolescent character, who is drawn into sexual exploitation. I also profiled Amy Bank, a North American who has lived in Nicaragua for almost thirty years, who produced both of the organization’s television programs, and who was in the best posi-



tion to explain the strategy and how the program fit into the larger mandate of Puntos. Out of the thousand or so individuals involved in the production, she introduced me to the team and helped me understand the challenges they faced at each stage of production. In observing the development of *Contracorriente* over time, I hoped the film would shed light on how the production of a television series offered a unique opportunity to forge new political alliances, cultivate leadership capacity, represent the impacts of globalization on women, and imagine future actions.

### At home: a site to challenge and transform values

The decision for Puntos to draw on the genre of the family drama was strategic. For years, the organization has advocated that change in the family can lead to change in society. By staging complex stories within the family household, the organization has been working to “reframe family values so that instead of reinforcing unequal power relations, families are a place to explore mutual respect and equal opportunity.” (A. Bank. Interview by Elizabeth Miller. Video Interview. Nicaragua, September 28, 2012). Discourses about the family and the insistence of stereotypical gender roles are often used to justify and reinforce the subordination of women and young people at home as well as in economic and political realms. If in mainstream media, women are consistently seen as caregivers and not as capable economic managers, decision makers or leaders this impacts cultural norms and perceptions. Bank explains,

We wanted to make a family show, because part of our understanding of the world is that what goes on in families reflects what is going in society and vice-versa and all of the issues of power and authority and autonomy and who gets to make decisions and who has access to resources and what you do with those and how that all works is true on the micro and the macro level and is often imbued with

a tremendous sense of morality, social norms and gender norms. (A. Bank. Interview by Elizabeth Miller. Video Interview. Nicaragua, September 28, 2012).

Framing family as a site of analysis and struggle is particularly relevant in Nicaragua where conservative forces have had increasing influence in both personal and public realms. The president Daniel Ortega, known previously as the revolutionary socialist leader, who led the overthrow of a dictatorship and then led the country throughout the volatile 80's, shifted tactics in his return to power in 2007. Ortega now cultivates alliances with the right wing, the business elite and the Catholic Church. In 2006, he backed extreme anti-abortion legislation that led to a total ban on abortion. The issues of incest and domestic violence developed in *Contracorriente* are close to home for Ortega, who was at the center of a public scandal when his adopted daughter accused him of incest. He denied the charges and the experience appears to have deepened his and the first lady's animosity towards the women's movement, seeking both ideological and tactical means to lessen their impact. Within this charged environment, Puntos has persevered in their mandate to use media to foster debate, challenge stigmas and draw connections between diverse forms of violence against women.

The organization chose to place their family drama in the historic colonial city of Granada, one of the most beautiful and touristic cities in all of Central America, because as a city in transition, it reflects the rapid economic and social transformations the country and the region are undergoing. Like the British and North American television series, *Downton Abbey* or *All in the Family*, *Contracorriente* profiles a family responding to the society transforming around them. For years Nicaragua was known as the land of volcanoes, lakes, poetry, and Sandinista revolutionaries. Today it is recognized as a hot spot for retirees, tourists and global businesses seeking land, business opportunities, and

all kinds of cheap labor - from factory laborers to sex workers. An increased focus on gender in poverty alleviation strategies such as free trade zones or micro-credit plans identifies women as critical economic contributors but it does not take into account that women or girls may not have control over the resources they generate. Most recently Nicaragua is garnering attention over a hotly contested new inter-oceanic canal, being built by the Chinese. If completed, this project will inevitably introduce a new set of economic and environmental transformations and challenges.

Globalization has presented opportunities as well as new forms of exploitation for Central American women and girls who face increasing levels of violence in both the private and the public spheres. Across Central America and the Caribbean, migration and the sexual exploitation of adolescents, have increased as communities confront the pressures of diminishing social services and reduced economic and educational opportunities. Bank explains the urgency of representing how adolescents are coerced into abusive sexual relationships within this larger economic framework; “The issue of the commercial sexual exploitation is a problem that has exploded all over the world. It exploded in many other parts of the world, in Asian and Eastern Europe and its exploding here now, with all of the things that are connected to that such as organized crime, drugs, smuggling and trafficking.” (A. Bank. Interview by Elizabeth Miller. Video Interview. Nicaragua, September 28, 2012).

Through the series, Bank and her production team suggest that while economic trends such as tourism, free trade zones, and micro-credit have been introduced as ways to involve women in the global economy, they do not necessarily ensure women’s economic autonomy or advancement. Geographer and theorist Cindi Katz defines globalization as, “a system of social relations of production and reproduction nourished by uneven development across a range of spatial scales.” (2001, p. 1214). She arti-

culates the relationship between globalization and structural violence as “the searing unevenness of capital’s investments and disinvestments, the social costs of the privatization of public life, and the excruciating predations of all manner of state violence.” (Katz, 2001, p. 1214). Katz is careful to point out the importance of analyzing both globalization and its encounter with existing social relations and material social practices in particular places. While recognizing the importance of an in-depth analysis of any one place, she calls for a gendered oppositional politics that moves across scale and space, an approach that is situated, but at the same time scale jumping and geography crossing. (Katz, 2001, p. 1216).

By focusing on the experiences of one family based in Granada, *Puntos* presents a situated feminist analysis of globalization within a fictional genre. They use non-actors struggling with these issues in their everyday lives, situate them in a neighborhood in transition and then grapple with questions, processes and partnerships that extend far beyond the city of Granada, Nicaragua. Through this representational strategy and by activating a regional advocacy network in the development and distribution of the project, the organization is also, I suggest, working towards Katz’s vision of a gendered oppositional politics. Their strategy is deeply immersed in a local context but also seeks out regional and international connections to address the impacts of globalization on women’s lives.

## **Networks and organizations as protagonists in a collaborative process**

When I first arrived to Nicaragua to begin documenting script-writing sessions for *Contracorriente*, I observed that Bank, rather than reviewing scripts or dialogue, was busy preparing for a series of consultations. One day she was meeting with trade union organizers and workers to discuss



the textile workers storyline and the next day she was meeting with representatives of a network of organizations working on sex trafficking at the border. For Bank, developing these alliances was as essential and creative as developing storylines. Puntos has developed a unique experience in collaborating with organizations, unions, and networks and through strategic alliances they have been able to broaden the terms of timely political and social debates about the rights of women and girls. They have either developed or tapped into existing regional, national and international networks to create representational strategies, shape public stories and contribute to campaigns and actions. In explaining the powerful combination between networks and media, Bank explains, “this strategy helps us get to places in ways that laws and policies don’t.” (A. Bank, comunicación personal, 28 de septiembre 2012). Their unique version of crowdsourcing knowledge and collaborating with networks has been effective in challenging the cultural contexts that influence behaviors, policy and political frameworks.

Political scientists Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink discuss the potential of transnational advocacy networks to reach beyond national legislation and policies. These networks are made up of “actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and a dense exchange of information and services.” (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 89). In describing the potential of these networks they explain,

What is novel about these networks is the ability of non-traditional international actors to mobilize information strategically to help create new issues and categories, and to persuade, pressurize, and gain leverage over much more powerful organizations and governments. Activists in networks try not only to influence policy outcomes, but to transform the terms and nature of the debate. (Keck & Sikkink, 1999, p. 159).

For years Puntos has developed media strategies to support legal and political processes that advance the rights of women. For example in the first television series, *Sexto Sentido*, they introduced the story of Elena, a young girl dealing with domestic violence, to raise awareness of the country’s first law against family violence. This was a law that Puntos had worked hard to establish in coordination with the national network against violence that they helped form. The law had the potential to save women’s lives but was not well known. In one episode Elena begs her mother to leave an abusive relationship and explains to her how she might use the law to protect herself. By informing her mother, Elena was simultaneously informing thousands of Nicaraguans watching the episode. Over the next several episodes, the organization demonstrated how Elena’s mother or any Nicaraguan woman might use a legal mechanism in coordination with support networks to address the violence she was facing.

Documentary maker and media theorist Margaret McLagan suggests that globalization and the ongoing expansion of mass media, popular culture and consumerism have resulted in the decentralization of democratic practices and that “media are not simply conduits for social forces, but rather are key sites for the definition of political issues and communities and the making of active and attentive publics.” (McLagan, 2005, p. 223). Sociologist Manuel Castells also maintains that communication is a central form of power. He argues that while opposition and dissent are connected to economic, political, military, ideological and cultural contradictions of power, they come into play through emotions of hope or outrage that are circulated via networks and large scale communication processes. (Castells, 2012). Puntos has developed methods to activate publics by initiating communication processes across a range of platforms to inform, to frame issues, and to engage people in public debates and political processes. So for example while



Elena, the fictional character, was struggling on national television to find a way to support her mom, Puntos had initiated a national media campaign using Elena as the spokesperson for a series of public service announcements. They hosted debates on their youth radio program, visited high schools, distributed pamphlets that explained how to use the law, and initiated a range of activities to encourage audiences to develop awareness, analysis and empathy towards a character they might otherwise judge. On the program and through the coordinated activities, audiences were introduced to a range of ways they might confront violence in their own homes, in schools, on the radio, through legislation and in streets.

Keck and Sikkink suggest that transnational advocacy networks are political spaces, in which differently situated actors negotiate, formally and informally, the social, cultural and political meanings of their collaborative efforts. Their analysis helps underscore why Puntos has invested so much time and energy in engaging networks and organizations as key protagonists in the both the development and the dissemination of their media initiatives. By convening groups to review scripts or discuss outreach, Puntos is cultivating a unique political space and a method for groups to articulate values, share strategies, develop skills, and ultimately strengthen networks.

To represent the sexual exploitation of adolescents in the burgeoning tourist economy of Granada, the Contracorriente team called on the expertise of a network of thirty organizations across Central America, working against the trafficking of adolescents. Puntos hosted individual and group consultations over several years to develop the storylines and to shape engagement strategies. Bank explains how this consultative approach is informed by a long-standing commitment to the power of collective processes.

What makes change is collective action. And collective action means organization and coordination. Things don't happen either by magic or strokes of pens or by an individual thinking "I have a new idea and am going to change myself in the world" it happens because people are in interaction. (A. Bank. Interview by Elizabeth Miller. Video Interview. Nicaragua, September 28, 2012).

Professional convener, Adam Kahane writes that "the complex and vital challenges we face cannot be addressed effectively by any one leader or organization or sector, and so we need to build our capacity for co-creation." (Kahane, 2010, p. 127). The script consultations for Contracorriente facilitated a means to co-create storylines through a meaningful exchange of information, ideas and insights. The group was able to socialize diverse perspectives and experiences related to sexual abuse and the sexual exploitation of adolescents that were not circulating publically in other research forms or reports and then apply the collective insights to character development. Group consultations in some cases led to a significant reworking of a character. This was the case in the development of Jessica, the young protagonist in the sexual exploitation storyline. Bank explains,

One thing that was unanimous in developing Jessica's story was that the organizations working on the issue didn't want her to be portrayed in absolute poverty, to make getting involved in sexual exploitation seem like a purely economic endeavor. They wanted to show that the things that make a girl vulnerable to getting into this kind of situation are often not largely economic. They are social and emotional, what they call factors of vulnerability. And although poverty is one of them, it is not necessarily the main one. Another thing is that they



did not want for it to look like there was a cause and effect relationship of sexual abuse in childhood leading to being involved in commercial sexual exploitation. We had thought Jessica would be a survivor of sexual abuse and they said ‘please don’t do that!’ (A. Bank. Interview by Elizabeth Miller. Video Interview. Nicaragua, September 28, 2012).

A significant mandate for this storyline was to shift the stigma away from Jessica and her mother, as mothers are too often held responsible for whatever troubles their children encounter. Instead the groups wanted to focus on the role of the perpetrators of violence and the systems that support them. It was also important that Jessica not be framed simply as a victim. How do you tell the story of a teenager who is raped and trafficked, and still give her agency? Scriptwriter Helen Dixon describes the challenge, “We want to show how this one girl has been victimized by sexual exploitation and how this one guy is drawing her in but also show how she is active in putting her foot in it, and we have to also show how she is active in getting out of it. This is what we owe to young women is to raise them up as social subjects.” (H. Dixon. Interview by Elizabeth Miller and Deborah Vanslet. Video Interview. Nicaragua, September 28).

Bank is quick to point out that creative consultation with thirty organizations is not the most efficient way to write or validate a script but that the consultations played a vital role in permitting groups to reflect on their ongoing work in a new way. She explains:

One of the interesting things about having consultations with various groups at the same time is that they get to talk to each other about their own experience. And so in addition to working on the stories they are working on their own thinking about what they are doing, and their own practice. Having

the chance to get together in this way its not the kind of work they do regularly, so it puts them in a whole different space, plus they learn about television and storytelling. (A. Bank. Interview by Elizabeth Miller. Video Interview. Nicaragua, September 28, 2012).

The consultants and the scriptwriters were tasked with identifying thorny issues and also imagining possible resolutions to the problems addressed. In this respect Puntos was also facilitating an opportunity for creative speculation. In the collaboratively created publication, *Speculate This!*, speculation is defined in the following way, “Speculation, we shall argue, is essentially always about potentiality; a reach toward those futures that are already latent in the present, those possibilities that already exist embedded in the here and now, about human and nonhuman power, which is, in effect, the ability to become different from what is present.” (Uncertain Commons, 2013, p. 5).

Puntos’s approach to television drama has been to move beyond the representation of reality and to use fiction as a vehicle to present potential circumstances for transformation. Bank explains, “We are trying to take the reality of people’s lives and give it a push to get people to think in new ways about their experience and their lives so they might then be able to do things differently.” (A. Bank. Interview by Elizabeth Miller. Video Interview. Nicaragua, September 28, 2012). So for example Milagros Herrera, a community organizer in Granada working against sexual exploitation and trafficking, identified the lack of coordination between the police and community organizations as an area to improve. Her hope was that the show might both accurately represent the alienation that groups or individuals feel when trying to communicate with the police, but also lead to a better coordination of services for both victims and families.<sup>1</sup> Milagros concerns presented a unique creative challenge

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<sup>1</sup> *En la casa, la cama y la calle*, directed by Elizabeth Miller (Nicaragua, 2014), DVD.

for the writers and producers. How do you represent the weaknesses of a police force, such as lack of training, corruption, excessive violence or even abuse, and at the same time collaborate with them to change the system?

## Developing strategic alliances with non-conventional partners

A critical step in producing *Contracorriente* was to forge strategic alliances with police, business owners, and even government agencies that are generally loathe to coordinate with non-profit groups, much less feminist ones. The *Contracorriente* production team felt their perspectives were important and recognized that they could be critical players in implementing change. In representing the police, the challenge was to convey the very real problems of the system without portraying them as entirely hopeless or corrupt. The writers had to find a way to convey just enough reality for a credible story, without alienating the collaborating police, who would eventually be responsible for improving the system. In both the fictional and the social advocacy realm, *Puntos* was piloting new forms of collaboration and had to strike the right balance between applying pressure and offering support for the services to work better. Bank explains, "In the program we had to demonstrate that one way to get the system to work is by collaborating with the community organizations that are doing local advocacy work." (A. Bank. Interview by Elizabeth Miller. Video Interview. Nicaragua, September 28, 2012). Both the creative process and the resulting fictional scenarios played a role in encouraging a range of players to come together and imagine new ways to address ongoing problems. Co-creation in developing fictional storylines became a rehearsal for future on-ground collaborations.

Strategic Ambiguity, a term frequently referred to in the script sessions at *Puntos*, is central to storytelling and entails developing characters who make mistakes, who are rife with personal contra-

dictions, and with whom audiences can identify. (Svenkerud et al, 1996). It was a strategy used in the development of Jessica's character and the representation of the police force. Strategic ambiguity was also helpful as a method in forging alliances across ideological divides. When I asked Eloy Isaba, Executive Secretary of the National Coalition against Human Trafficking, what it was like partnering with a feminist group, he responded with a baffled expression. I restated the question asking what it was like to forge a relationship with *Puntos* and the other groups engaged in writing the scripts. He replied that it had been wonderful, and later laughed that he hadn't really thought of *Puntos* as a feminist organization. Through the creative process of co-creation, both the police force and the Government's Coalition Against Trafficking had put aside the general government claims that feminist groups were hostile, hysterical or even hard to work with. Eloy Isaba had actually put aside the fact that *Puntos* was a feminist organization. He was more focused on the group's shared accomplishment of rescuing their young protagonist, Jessica. For *Puntos* and government officials, co-creation was a method that permitted all partners to put aside differences and engage in a shared creative endeavor.

Initially I had understood the script consultations as a strategic way of validating scripts and building social engagement around the television series. While making *En la casa, la cama y la calle* and through interviews with Eloy Isaba and other partners, I came to realize how the creative process itself had led to a series of unique processes whereby new relationships, networks and collectivities were forming. In discussing the significance of building relationships in social movements, theorist and organizer Marshall Ganz explains that an exchange of information transforms into a relationship when "a mutual commitment of resources is made to a shared future." (Ganz, 2013, p. 513). In scripting the sexual exploitation story, the shared future became the resolution of Jessica's storyline and collaboration facilitated what Ganz refers to as



a relational capacity that facilitates future collaborative actions. (Ganz, 2013, p. 514). By facilitating a creative space, Puntos established trust with the diverse groups involved and set the stage for future potential actions and coordination.

The groups involved in the creative consultations were also learning the elements of storytelling. They were helping to construct relatable characters, compelling plots, and reflexive messages, a skill set that could be applied to future endeavors. Ganz suggests that developing stories is critical in building social movements and emphasizes the value of a public narrative, the story of a movement, as a process where a group defines a set of values that can lead to actions. (Ganz, 2013, p. 522a). Throughout the script writing process and the production of *Contracorriente*, Puntos collaborated with more than two hundred organizations in six different countries. And through these consultations, they facilitated processes of learning and creative problem solving. They convened a unique creative space to explore public narratives around the impact of globalization on women's lives as well as strategies to confront personal and structural forms of violence.

## On set: a site to explore new modes of production

Feminist media groups like Puntos advocate for complex and responsible ways to represent women and the challenges they face. While scholars, artists and organizations have developed a range of methods to analyze how women are represented in the media, there are fewer projects where the explicit mandate is to get more women behind the camera.<sup>2</sup> Training and involving women in all as-

pects of communication has been a long-term commitment for Puntos. For *Contracorriente*, the organizers decided to create an all women's crew. Bank explains, "we considered that in addition to being about women's rights the show could be a school for learning production and it would up the skill level of women makers in Central America." (A. Bank. Interview by Elizabeth Miller. Video Interview. Nicaragua, September 28, 2012). Because the film and television industry in Nicaragua is small, they had to recruit women from the region. They offered on set training in production, sound, and cinematography. They involved Latinas working in Hollywood to help the crew reinforce skills in scriptwriting, directing, acting, script supervision and continuity. While offering training, Puntos was also fostering valuable networks for future productions.

Another critical component in the *Contracorriente* production was to cultivate a safe space for the actors, crew and scriptwriters in order to address the complex issues that might arise. The organization encouraged peer support, made therapists available to actors and scriptwriters, and offered ongoing workshops to address the long-term impact of violence, shame and secrecy. They thought carefully about how to stage sensitive scenes, like when Jessica is drugged and raped by Richie, who she thought was her boyfriend but is actually a pimp. With the sexual exploitation storyline, Bank and her team had to balance how to offer the young actor enough support, but also find a way to depict the horrific nature of the violent acts. She explains, "On the one hand we had to figure out how to stage the scenes to protect the actress. On the other hand we had to figure out how to evoke a sense of danger and violence. If we didn't show enough then the audience might not know how horrible this is and if we show

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2 The International Association of Women in Television and Radio conducted a multi-country participatory research project to improve conditions for women in the media called, "Towards Gender Sensitive Indicators for Media: Best Practices for Gender Perspective in Media and in Media Content." Cinemas in Sweden are introducing a gender-bias rating for films using the "Bechdel Test," designed by American

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cartoonist Alison Bechdel that rates a program favourably if at least two named female characters talk to each other about something other than a man. Film *Fatales* claims that less than fifteen percent of independent features are directed by women and offers mentorship and support to American women filmmakers.

too much it might be sensationalist.” (A. Bank. Interview by Elizabeth Miller. Video Interview. Nicaragua, September 28, 2012).

In the final episodes of *Contracorriente* the young protagonist, Jessica turned her life around by speaking out about her experience with sexual abuse, exploitation and traffickers. Tamara Salas, the young actor who plays Jessica, similarly became a national spokesperson, visiting schools and encouraging girls to break silences. Once the program was on television, Salas and the two other lead actors in the storyline, became full time organizers of national and regional events. The three actors were responsible for coordination with the local police, the schools, community centers, the press and everyone involved in the larger campaign, “Alert and Eyes Wide Open.” Salas explained that her involvement in the campaign impacted her role in her own family and that she was increasingly confident confronting gender issues at home with her mother and boyfriend. The two other actors on the tour, who play the mother and the pimp respectively, also felt that with the support of Puntos, they were able to address personal issues and this put them in a better position to help youth. Both actors had experienced violence at home as children and as a result of the series and their role on the tour, they had revisited the silences in their own pasts. In the documentary they candidly discussed the complexity of integrating their position as spokespersons with their own histories of violence. While challenging, the series and the tour had permitted them to come to terms in a new way with the violence and trauma in their own lives.

Prioritizing a safe space is very much in line with the group’s practice of valuing the everyday as a site of potential transformation. Media theorist Clemencia Rodríguez explains how “Puntos works towards developing awareness? and the empowerment of individuals who will in turn collectively dismantle dominating cultures and re-invent new forms of more equitable interaction.” (Rodríguez,

2005, p. 371). By acknowledging the production itself as an opportunity for personal and collective reflection, Puntos encouraged actors, the crew and collaborating organizations to analyze the impacts of gender inequality, violence and globalization on their own lives. By forging a safe space and accompanying the staff through complex emotional processes, they set the stage for both personal and social transformation.

### Multiple tasks, platforms, publics, and challenges

Early on Puntos discovered that by delivering content across many platforms, over time, they could increase the potential for impact. So in the case of *Contracorriente*, in addition to airing eighteen episodes on mainstream television they developed a range of companion projects including a parallel radio series, talk shows, a national campaign against the trafficking of adolescents and more. In explaining the logic of a multi-authored, multi-platform, multi-public approach, Bank is quick to explain that media on its own does not change the world. “You need to combine that with all kinds of other actions on the ground.” (A. Bank. Interview by Elizabeth Miller. Video Interview. Nicaragua, September 28, 2012). One strategy that the group has used to ensure diverse forms of public participation has been to design strategies that take into account unforeseen connections or plans. Media scholar Virginia Lacayo, formerly the director of *Sexto Sentido*, has used complexity science to articulate why describing values or processes that lead to effective interventions is more helpful than trying to articulate best practices. She suggests that the danger in promoting templates or success stories is that they can inhibit innovation and flexibility within the field. (Lacayo, 2007). She also suggests that rather than defining a fully defined set of outcomes at the onset of a project, Puntos typically develops a range of initiatives, tests them out, and then figures out how to link the diverse pieces together. (Lacayo, 2007). Planning carefully but staying flexible and opening



up processes for consultation, collaboration and new possibilities for circulation, permits partners, staff and even fans to take initiative and assume diverse forms of leadership.

While the goals and the reach of Puntos are wide, resources are frequently scarce and as a result, the organization has cultivated a strategy they call “todologos” or permanent multi-taskers. Bank explains that multi-tasking serves the group in a number of ways.

“Having people do more than one thing is not just a question of efficiency. When people are involved in various aspects of the work, they have a much broader and deeper understanding of what they are doing, so for the actors to be in touch with the organizations, in the thematic consultations and in the implementation, it gives them a whole different sense of what this is all about.” (A. Bank. Interview by Elizabeth Miller. Video Interview. Nicaragua, September 28, 2012).

Bizmark Martinez, the charismatic actor who plays Richie, the pimp, played a critical role in the national campaign against sexual exploitation. On tour his role was to facilitate dialogue about the male characters in the series and to inspire young men to think about masculinity and to rethink their relationships to systems of exploitation. His role has been critical in demonstrating that the struggle against violence involves men taking risks and speaking out. While Richie and other young actors in the series began as protagonists on television, with training and support they become protagonists off screen as well and ultimately strengthen the reach of the project.

The media landscape in Nicaragua shifted considerably in the eight-year lapse between the two television series and Puntos has had to adapt to an increasingly distracted and fragmented audience base. While television is also still widely popular throughout Nicaragua, there is increasingly more

competition. When Puntos initiated *Sexto Sentido* there were four national television channels but by the time they began airing *Contracorriente* there were over twenty channels. More channels have meant lower reception ratings; for *Sexto Sentido* 90% of polled audiences had seen the program and 60% were regular weekly viewers whereas for *Contracorriente* 26% of polled audiences have seen the program and 20% were watching it regularly.<sup>3</sup> Nicaragua is a small country so 20% translates to approximately half a million viewers.

With the world on their screens, Nicaraguan audiences have increasingly high expectations for production standards. This has implied a higher price tag for each production despite the fact that television infrastructure in Nicaragua has not improved much in the last decade. Beyond production costs, certain stations have required payment to air the program. To pay for this, Puntos created additional alliances with groups interested in the impact that the show could have. Funding for the program has come from a range of foundations but continues to be a challenge for non-profits and media initiatives in the region.<sup>4</sup>

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3 There is no system of rating in Nicaragua, but external evaluations were done for both series. For *Contracorriente*, CIET International (<http://www.ciet.org/en/country/nicaragua/>) conducted surveys involving 6,000 people thirteen years and older in forty-three urban and semi-urban areas all over the country. The survey included questions to discover whether people had watched *Contracorriente* and whether they'd seen/heard about the campaign “Alert and Eyes Wide Open.”

4 Private and public funders from Spain, Germany, Holland, Norway, Mexico and the U.S. include but are not limited to: Women's World Banking (US), Ford Foundation, Hivos, United Nations.

## Conclusion

Puntos has used the series *Contracorriente*, to make connections between domestic and structural violence and present victims of violence as social subjects, with both complexity and agency. They are using the program to redirect attention from the victim to the perpetrators, and to the systems that enable violence. They are modeling alternative modes of production by offering leadership skills and professional training for women in an industry largely dominated by men. By collaborating with non-profit groups, unions, advocacy networks, police and governmental agencies they use the creative process as a method to gather information, instigate dialogue, co-create strategies of representation and resistance, and then widely disseminate their results across both mainstream and alternative networks. They recognize the potential to impact cultural norms, inspire action and foster alliances at every stage of production. In this way, they are enacting Cindi Katz's vision of gender oppositional politics by piloting social change strategies that are situated in everyday life but contest global structural inequities. They are using media to activate individual and collective agency in their efforts to contest violence in bed, at home, in the streets, at work, and around the world. And how many other family drama's around the world are attempting to address the impacts of globalization on women's lives in a dramatic yet critically informed way?





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