

Guanajuato Feminist Wins Human Rights Defender of 2006

by Marisa Díaz

Semillas is proud to announce that Verónica Cruz Sánchez, executive director of Centro Las Libres de Información en Salud Sexual—a grassroots organization that has received Semillas' funding for three consecutive years—has been named Human Rights Defender of 2006. This prestigious honor, given by Human Rights Watch, recognizes Verónica's work with women from disadvantaged communities who seek legal abortions for pregnancies resulting from rape. Only three activists worldwide are presented with this award each year.

Verónica's recognition comes after a relentless 15-year struggle to defend and promote women's rights in the state of Guanajuato, one of the most politically conservative states in the country. In addition to lifelong grassroots work with women in marginalized rural and urban communities, Verónica served as the national and regional coordinator of the feminist NGO network Milenio Feminista. In 2000, Verónica joined with other activists to establish Centro Las Libres in response to an initiative in the Guanajuato state congress that attempted to eradicate the right of women to abort in pregnancies resulting from rape. Since that time, Verónica has led the organization to expand its services to reach women and girls throughout the state of Guanajuato.

Born on February 1, 1971, Verónica grew up in León, Guanajuato among a large and loving family. Throughout her life, her parents and seven siblings have supported her work and her passion to help others. Due to her interest in social justice, Verónica pursued a degree in social work from the José Cardijn School of Social Work in León. After receiving her degree, Verónica obtained a B.A. in International Commerce from the Instituto Politécnico Nacional in 2000. Since then, Verónica has continued her formal education through various courses on diverse themes such as sexual and reproductive rights, leadership, feminism, organizational development and gender. Currently, Semillas is sponsoring Verónica to attend the Global Women in Management Program, held by CEDPA in Washington D.C.

In the following interview, Verónica gives a candid picture of her work, the work of Las Libres and the current situation of women's rights in Guanajuato, Mexico.

Marisa: *What is the current situation of women's rights in Guanajuato?*

Verónica: The current situation of women's rights in Guanajuato is very grim. Our authorities do not politically recognize the current conditions of gender inequality, discrimination, and violence against women. Our society continues to legitimate and tolerate violence against women to the point where in the last five years 300 women have been killed within the home by family members or husbands. This is the maximum degree of the phenomenon of violence against women. We have a high number of girls who are sexually abused within their homes, we have the third highest number of teen pregnancies nation-wide, and we have women living in desperation and extreme poverty. These women feel abandoned and depressed. These are only a few examples of this situation in which women's rights are not recognized. There is no access to justice or to adequate and necessary resources to work on behalf of women and gender equality. Therefore, the situation is very serious and the worst part is that we have a government that instead of acting, negates the problem and doesn't do anything to respect or advance women's access to their rights.

Marisa: *What motivated you to work for women's rights in Guanajuato?*

Verónica: I was motivated in 2000 when the local congress reformed the penal code to revoke rape as an exception for a legal abortion. That made me react—as a woman, as a feminist, as a person who fights for social justice—to become a tireless defender of women's rights in this state, a state that is insensitive to the specific challenges that women face, where the government and Catholic church do not want women's rights to progress. That infuriated me, and I thought about myself and all the women that fight every day to conserve the rights we have already won and to work for the rights that we still do not have. That threat signified a great turning point in my life. Since then, my focus has been on access to justice and health

services for women who are victims of sexual violence, especially legal abortions for women who become pregnant as a result of rape. To me, it is an essential and basic right of all women to have the power to make decisions about their body, their sexuality, and their reproductive health.

When I led Las Libres to pressure the government to veto the new law, I committed myself to claim the right to an abortion as a greater struggle for all women's rights, and to not only talk about those rights that avoid making people feel uncomfortable. Since then, I speak publicly about this issue in order to destigmatize social discussion of abortion, so that women and society begin to view abortion as a human right and not as "an easy decision" or a crime.

Specifically, I am motivated to work in Guanajuato because the government is very conservative and the Catholic church here involves itself in government decisions. This situation hinders the advancement of women's rights, and therefore it is even more necessary to work here. It is also critical to reveal the situation the women of Guanajuato find ourselves in, one that no one wants to listen to, talk about, or invest in. It is because of this that we speak publicly day in and day out so that people are aware of our struggle and our efforts function also as a social condemnation.

Marisa: *What is Las Libres' mission and how do you complete this mission?*

Verónica: Our mission is to contribute to the construction of equitable relations between men and women and to ensure complete access to human rights for all women, especially in regards to women and children's sexual and reproductive rights.

We work very hard so that every woman we work with knows her rights— that she is a person, that she can aspire to be happy, and that with her own resources and with the external resources we provide, she has the capacity to improve her life. We struggle daily to ensure that boys and girls know that they have the opportunity and capability to construct better relations than those experienced by their parents and extended families. We work so that young men and women know that they have the ability to make responsible decisions regarding their sexuality, so that they can exercise their sexuality in a pleasurable way free of guilt.

We work persistently to sensitize public health and justice officials so that they treat women with respect and sensitivity to gender, offering information specifically designed for women that is free of religious, ideological, or political prejudices and that doesn't place the blame on or re-victimize the women who seek their services.

Every day in Las Libres we commit ourselves to the disadvantaged women of Guanajuato, who come to know us as a group of women from civil society that act as allies to help them improve their lives. We transmit our confidence and trust in them, and soon they start to realize that they can do a lot for themselves and for other women. We debunk the myths that women in our culture have heard throughout their lives, such as the idea that it is hard for women to act and work in solidarity.

Marisa: *Can you talk about one case in particular where Las Libres has helped a woman?*

Verónica: There are various cases, but I can speak about two in particular.

One was of a woman who was a victim of all different types of gender violence within the home - sexual, economic and emotional. She was in danger of being killed by her husband if she didn't seek help. Her husband was in the United States, but he threatened her via telephone, saying he would kill her or destroy her face. He further intimidated her by saying that he had contracted someone in Mexico to hurt her, so she was always afraid when she was out in public. When she came to us for psychological help, she thought that there was no solution because her husband was very influential. He had been a police officer for the justice department and in addition, he had put her in jail before when she didn't let him see his children one weekend. In summary, she was very fearful and she had good reason to be. However, we listened to her, offered her crisis intervention and gave her psychological attention. We accompanied her during the legal trial and were there to help her recover. We pressured the authorities and obligated them to take action. This woman had to enter a women's shelter to

protect her from being killed by her husband. We worked closely with her and in three months, she was ready to live alone with her children, confident in herself and with the motivation to continue living, especially with the extra resources that we helped her find or discover within herself.

To me this case is important because first of all, we literally saved a woman from being killed by her husband and second, we pressured the entire state system to act in favor of this woman, guaranteeing her real and practical access to her rights.

Another important case was about a rape victim named Sandra who didn't have access to a legal abortion even though she had been raped by the owner of the house where she worked for 15 pesos a day washing dishes. Sandra was severely mentally challenged, which made the case even more complicated. When Sandra's mother realized that she was pregnant and had been raped by her employer, she took Sandra to a private clinic to get a legal abortion, but the doctor at the clinic refused to perform the abortion. So Sandra's mother, angered, went to file charges in the public ministry specializing in sexual crimes and domestic violence. The female lawyer at the ministry not only refused to accept the charges, but also told Sandra's mother to go home and think about it and to return later. The mother returned the next day to file charges and request authorization for a legal abortion for Sandra. However, instead of authorizing an abortion, which was her daughter's right, the officials threatened her, telling her that if she took Sandra to get an abortion they were going to throw her in jail. In other words, the same authority that is there to ensure women's access to their rights is the main entity violating them.

The authorities used diverse tactics to delay Sandra's case until it was too late for her to obtain a legal abortion. So she was forced to carry the child of her aggressor to term. We decided together with Sandra's mother to make their case public through the mass media, marches and the closing of governmental institutions dealing with rape victims.

This mobilization was very important because it generated a social consciousness about the injustices faced by many women. The high visibility of Sandra's case has prompted more women to exercise their right to file charges and solicit a legal abortion in the case of rape. It forced governmental institutions to recognize this problem and the necessity to resolve it, even though they remain unresponsive to this day. For this reason, every day women come to us at Las Libres to ask for help, and we guarantee these services while the state fails to do so.

For Las Libres, and for me in particular, Sandra's case was a lot of work. We worked closely with her and her family for three years, offering support and fighting to ensure that the state paid for the emotional and economic damage they had inflicted. Through this case, we learned a lot about the critical route rape victims must take and the outright refusal of authorities to assume their legal and institutional responsibilities in these cases. Personally, it helped me specialize in working with rape victims in a comprehensive manner.

Marisa: *What are the greatest rewards for you as director of Las Libres?*

Verónica: The greatest rewards are:

--Feeling that every day my work is worth it because thanks to our discussions, workshops, and conferences, the women begin to recognize themselves as individuals with rights.

--Knowing that every time we give a talk, workshop, or conference, there is at least one woman who joins Las Libres to work on behalf of other women.

--Observing that the women we work with in the rural communities begin to understand and exercise their rights and reach out to other women in their communities. They become more aware and take actions so that they don't reproduce violence against their children.

--Seeing that the girls we work with recognize the violence they are victims of and the opportunity they have to stop it and to not reproduce it and instead, to help other girls whose rights are being violated.

--Seeing that when I accompany women to file charges of violence, rape or any type of violation of their rights, the women feel that they have the power to come out ahead and that I give them the security and motivation to stand up for their rights.

--Watching women accompany other women to file charges because that means that the women are multiplying their resources and knowledge with other women and that this movement is generating changes.

Marisa: *Why do you think your work and the work of Las Libres is so important and what motivates you to continue to defend and promote women's rights?*

Verónica: Because I am sure that the women need the support of another woman who is confident in herself— because I can transmit my confidence and my commitment so that other women gain access to their rights. I know that women are inspired by my desire to shape a better world for women and that I am capable of transferring my passion for life and for fighting to make women's rights a reality in our country.

I am motivated by seeing and feeling how deeply the women are moved when I talk about improving their lives. I am motivated by the fact that the girls begin to improve their lives from a young age and that now they aspire to things other than just getting married, having children and staying at home.

Above all, I am motivated by the many friends that join me and Las Libres in solidarity every day, offering their knowledge, abilities, human and financial resources to promote our cause because they are convinced that we work professionally and that we are capable of constructing a better life and society for women in our state.

SEMILLAS web site: <http://www.semillas.org.mx/>