



SUCCESS STORY

Justice in Mexico

USAID Support Led to the Creation of Oaxaca's First Women's Justice Center



Photo Credit: USAID Justice and Security Program

A Justice Center enhances assistance and protection for women.

"If you don't train, and if you don't get to see what other people are doing, you are condemned to a life without innovation and to be trapped within the confines of what you already know."

— Ileana Araceli Hernandez,
Oaxaca Deputy Attorney
General

On a sunny afternoon, Ileana Araceli Hernandez, deputy attorney general (AG) for the state of Oaxaca, was busy studying the documents spread over a large table in her office. But this was not her usual bundle of legal papers: they were large-scale architectural drawings mapping out the state's first Women's Justice Center. "This will be the reception, and this will be where we look after victims of domestic violence," she explains, running a finger over several details on the plans.

The center has been Ms. Hernandez's dream ever since she went on a USAID-sponsored training trip to the state of Nuevo León in 2010. "That was the inspiration," she says. "The experience made me realize exactly what we had to do here in Oaxaca. It gave me a glimpse of the future."

Trips to Nuevo Leon and Chihuahua proved instrumental for Oaxaca because it gave Ms. Hernandez and other state officials the chance to see how other Mexican states were implementing the 2008 Criminal Justice Reform. The reform seeks to orient the criminal justice system towards protecting the rights of victims rather than focusing on punishing the perpetrators. As Ms. Hernandez said, "for many years, our justice system forgot about victims' needs."

The Women's Justice Center in Oaxaca will do just that. The goal of the Center is to provide a full range of services for women including representatives from the state ministries of social development and employment, and other medical, legal, and social services.

Ms. Hernandez is working to secure a judge for the center to provide victims with rulings on divorce, financial settlements, and custody of children. Within the reform framework created by Mexico's Federal Government, the State of Oaxaca and the Federal Government have invested fourteen million pesos (approximately one million USD) in infrastructure to establish the Women's Justice Center. The government hopes to start a nationwide trend of women's centers with federal support from the Secretariat of Governance and the National Commission for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence against Women (CONAVIM its acronym in Spanish), which USAID helped facilitate.

Oaxaca desperately needs this center. The acutely poor and

mountainous state on the Pacific coast, is improving in terms of security with homicide rates steadily decreasing over the last decade, but still suffers from issues such as an 81.7 % impunity rate for murder and 83.7% proportion of unreported crimes. Yet Oaxaca has started to take important steps forward. Thanks to the USAID-sponsored trips, Ms. Hernandez and her team established the Special AG Office for Crimes against Women (*Subprocuraduría de delitos contra la mujer por razones de género*), which they expanded from a smaller unit within the state AG Office. In 2012, the office handled more than 2,000 cases – many of them involving women in the throes of despair following a violent crime.

One of them was 20-year-old Rosa, who arrived at the Special AG Office for Crimes against Women a few days after her uncle brutally raped her. Frightened and tormented by feelings of humiliation, Rosa received psychological support and legal assistance at the office free of charge. “I couldn’t speak, I felt so ashamed and I didn’t want anyone to see me,” she recalls. “But here, I got the help I needed. I feel I am no longer alone.” The office staff provided support to Rosa for several months.

None of that professional help would have been possible without USAID, which trained all of Ms. Hernandez’s staff through a series of seminars and workshops. The training taught staff about the rights of victims under the new system, and how to provide victims with legal, employment and psychological assistance. Building on the support provided by the Special AG Office for Crimes against Women, the Women’s Justice Center began providing services in April 2013.