International Safeguarding Conference 2026

“One Commitment, Many Contexts: Safeguarding Across Cultures”

THE CULTURAL SHAPING OF INTRAFAMILIAL ABUSE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON STREET GANG PARTICIPATION IN NICARAGUA

INTRODUCTION

"To overcome it, I attacked people, wandered on the streets, smoked marijuana… I made it a way of life."

Understanding the Cultural Context of Nicaragua

- Political & economic instability
- Poverty
- weak institutions
- dysfunctional families
- Violence normalized across generations

Peña: “the history of Nicaragua is written with blood”

THREE CULTURAL ELEMENTS

1. Physical Punishment as “Normal Discipline”

- Corporal punishment widely accepted
- Severe beatings seen as correction
- Children internalize blame
- Abuse hidden in plain sight

2. Silence and Shame Around Sexual Abuse

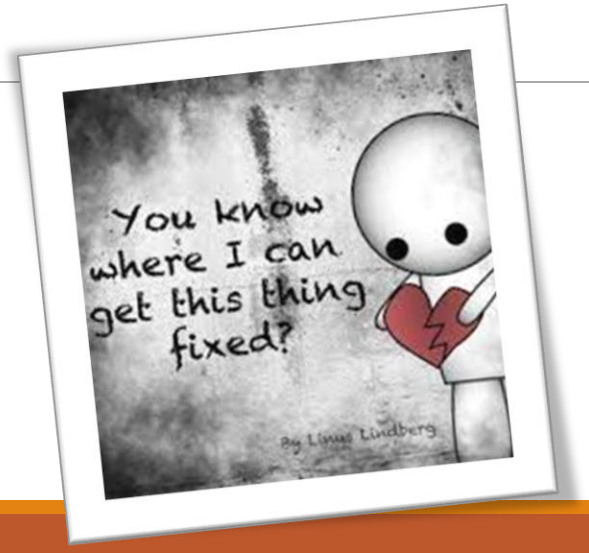
- Deep cultural silence
- Fear, shame, threats, grooming
- Abuse by family members
- Machismo + obedience norms reinforce silence

3. Fragile Family Structures

- Single mothers, stepfathers, relatives
- Weak protection systems
- Increased vulnerability

How Culture Shapes the Experience of Abuse

- Physical abuse = rejection
- Sexual abuse minimized or denied
- Machismo → aggression, hypermasculinity
- No healthy alternative to deal with the trauma



Why Gangs Become a Refuge?

Pandilla as Substitute Family

- **At home they felt**
  - ➢ **rejected**
  - ➢ **fear**
  - ➢ **like nobodies**
  - ➢ **powerless**

- **in the gang they felt**
  - **accepted**
  - **courage**
  - **important**
  - **powerful**

Coping Strategies: Between Risk and Resilience

Negative coping strategies (more visible)

- Gang involvement as an escape from rejection
- Alcohol and drug use to numb emotional pain
- Aggression and antisocial activities
- Easily available responses to trauma, neglect, and instability

Positive coping strategies (culturally rooted)

- Spirituality deeply embedded in Nicaraguan Catholic culture
- Support from Church groups and faith communities
- Pastoral accompaniment helped some leave gang life

Culture can increase vulnerability, but it can also provide resilience through faith and community support.

Prevention: Culturally Grounded Safeguarding

- **Move beyond “Mano Dura” — repression ignores cultural and familial roots of gang involvement**
- **Strengthen families — address physical and sexual abuse; support struggling parents**
- **Activate Catholic Church Supports — develop coordinated safeguarding programs; collaborate with the Family Apostolate**
- **Empower communities — safe spaces, job opportunities, reintegration programs for youth**

A victim-centered, culturally sensitive approach is essential for effective prevention in Nicaragua.

Conclusion: One Commitment, Many Contexts

Our commitment to safeguarding is one — but the contexts in which we work are many. If we want to protect children and youth effectively, we must listen to their stories, understand their cultures, and respond with compassion, creativity, and cultural humility.

Thank You