



LISTEN TO THEIR VOICES AND ACT STOP THE RAPE AND SEXUAL ABUSE OF GIRLS IN NICARAGUA

Rape and sexual abuse are widespread in Nicaragua, and the majority of victims are young. More than two thirds of all rapes reported between 1998 and 2008 were committed against girls under the age of 17.

Young survivors of sexual violence face daunting obstacles in speaking out about the crimes committed against them. Information on where to get help is difficult to find and many young rape survivors are rejected by their families and communities. The stigma associated with sexual crimes in Nicaragua means that it is often the survivor – not the abuser – who is blamed.

For those girls who report the crime to the police, the fight to get justice and to rebuild their hopes and dreams is not an easy one. The justice system often fails them at every step, from reporting to investigation to court hearing.

The vitally important task of providing young rape survivors with the psychological and other support they need is carried out by NGOs. Their support can make the difference between despair and hope for survivors. Despite this, the Nicaraguan government gives no financial support to NGOs providing these crucial services.

Rape, particularly the rape of young girls, often only comes to light when it results in pregnancy. Since 2008, abortion has been a criminal offence in Nicaragua. All abortion in all circumstances is banned, no matter how young the rape victim or how serious the risks posed by the pregnancy to her life or health. Girls who give birth as a result of rape have little or no state support to put their lives back on track.

This exhibition tells the stories of some of the young rape survivors, their mothers and support workers, who shared their stories with Amnesty International. First and foremost, they wanted to break the silence surrounding the crimes committed against them.

Their courage and strength are inspirational. Listen to their voices, and act on their words.

FREEDOM FROM SEXUAL VIOLENCE
IS A HUMAN RIGHT

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



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Child street sellers, Managua.

The Central American state of Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in the Americas. Nearly half of the population (48.3 per cent) live in poverty and one in every five children suffers from stunted growth due to malnutrition.



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Woman and child, Managua.

The government has implemented a number of anti-poverty programmes and improved access to ante-natal health care and education. However, the issue of sexual violence lags far behind on the government agenda. Rape and sexual abuse of girls is widespread in Nicaragua, and in many ways remains a hidden crime.



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Young girls doing their homework, Bluefields.

More than two thirds of all rapes reported between 1998 and 2008 were committed against girls under 17. In almost half of all rape cases, the girls were under 15.

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A government poster beside a Catholic cathedral in Managua reads: "Christian, Socialist, In Solidarity! 31 Years of Triumphs, Long Live the Revolution!"

Despite clear evidence of widespread sexual abuse in Nicaragua, the government has chosen not to prioritize tackling this grave human rights violation. There is no clear government plan to prevent sexual violence against girls or to ensure justice and reparation for child victims so that they can rebuild their lives.



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Some of the thousands of solidarity messages sent by Amnesty International members across the world to nine Nicaraguan women's and children's human rights defenders.

The nine women were subjected to an apparently baseless legal investigation after a Catholic Church-backed NGO filed a complaint against them for their work to promote and protect women's and girls' rights. They remained under investigation for two and a half years – much longer than the time permitted by Nicaraguan law. The investigation was eventually closed in April 2010 with no charges brought.

**BRINDAMOS ATENCION
JURIDICA Y PSICOLOGICA
GRATUITA A MUJERES, NIÑEZ Y
ADOLESCENTES QUE SUFREN:**

*** Violencia Física:
GOLPES, MORETONES, LESIONES**

*** Violencia Sexual:
VIOLACIONES, ABUSOS
TOCAMIENTOS, MANOSEROS**

*** Violencia Psicológica:
INSULTOS, GRITOS,
AMENAZAS, DEPRESIONES**

*"Mujer no tengas miedo,
denuncia a tu agresor"*

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A psychologist at the entrance to a women's centre run by the "Movement of Women, Chinandega". The sign reads:

"We provide free legal and psychological support to women, children and adolescents who suffer:

- Physical violence (beatings, bruises, wounds);
- Sexual violence (rapes, abuse, touching, groping);
- Psychological violence (insults, shouting, threats, depression).

Women, don't be afraid, report your abuser."

Women's centres play a key role in providing help and support to women and children survivors of violence.



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Woman and baby at home in Bluefields.

The home should be a place where young children and teenagers are safe. However, in many cases the home is where girls are most vulnerable to sexual violence.

“Rape and sexual abuse of girls aged between 13 and 15 – these are the cases we most commonly receive here at our centre. Who is the most common perpetrator? The vast majority are family members, uncles, cousins, stepfathers, fathers, grandfathers.”

Director of a centre that provides support to victims of domestic and other violence, Granada, Nicaragua

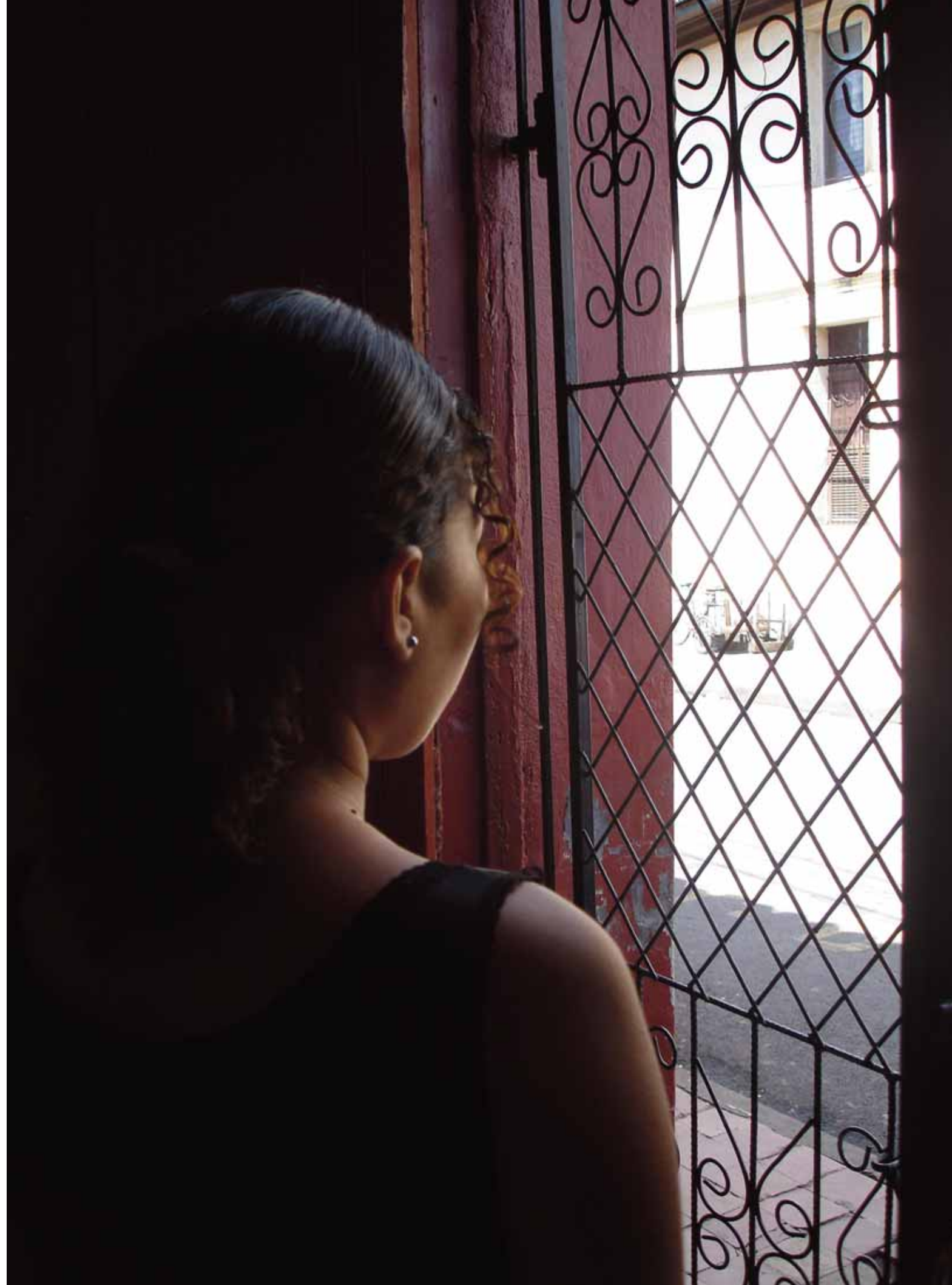


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A young rape survivor draws her hopes for the future.

“My father was the one who abused me. He started to rape me from when I was 9 until I was 14. I was terrified of him... Sometimes he would hit me so much I could not go to school the next day... He wanted me to just stay in the house... And he abused me [sexually] as many times as he wanted. I couldn't say anything because I was so frightened of him.”

Connie, aged 17, Managua



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A young survivor of sexual violence at a women's and girls' centre.

There is little understanding or awareness of the problem of sexual violence in Nicaragua. Schools are not required to teach children about sexual abuse or how to seek help, so in the majority of cases, children have little idea of their rights or how to protect themselves.

The government has no public campaign to raise awareness of the problem or reduce the stigma that child rape survivors face.



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“People said things to me, and as he [the abuser] was an Evangelical priest, no one believed me. Instead, they said ‘Why are you saying these things?’ This reaction hurts me even now.”

Linda, aged 12

The lack of government campaigns to educate the public on issues of sexual violence against girls means that often it is the victim who is blamed rather than the abuser, and that the survivor is not believed.

The sustained support of a non-governmental centre for women and children helped ensure that Linda’s abuser was sentenced to 30 years in prison. However, for many survivors the outcome is very different.



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Young girl carrying water along a street in Managua.

“Sexual violence and abuse affects children from all classes of society. The principal risk factor for suffering sexual abuse is being female. Where social class makes a difference is in accessing justice.”

A psychiatrist in Managua, with extensive experience of providing psychological support to survivors of rape

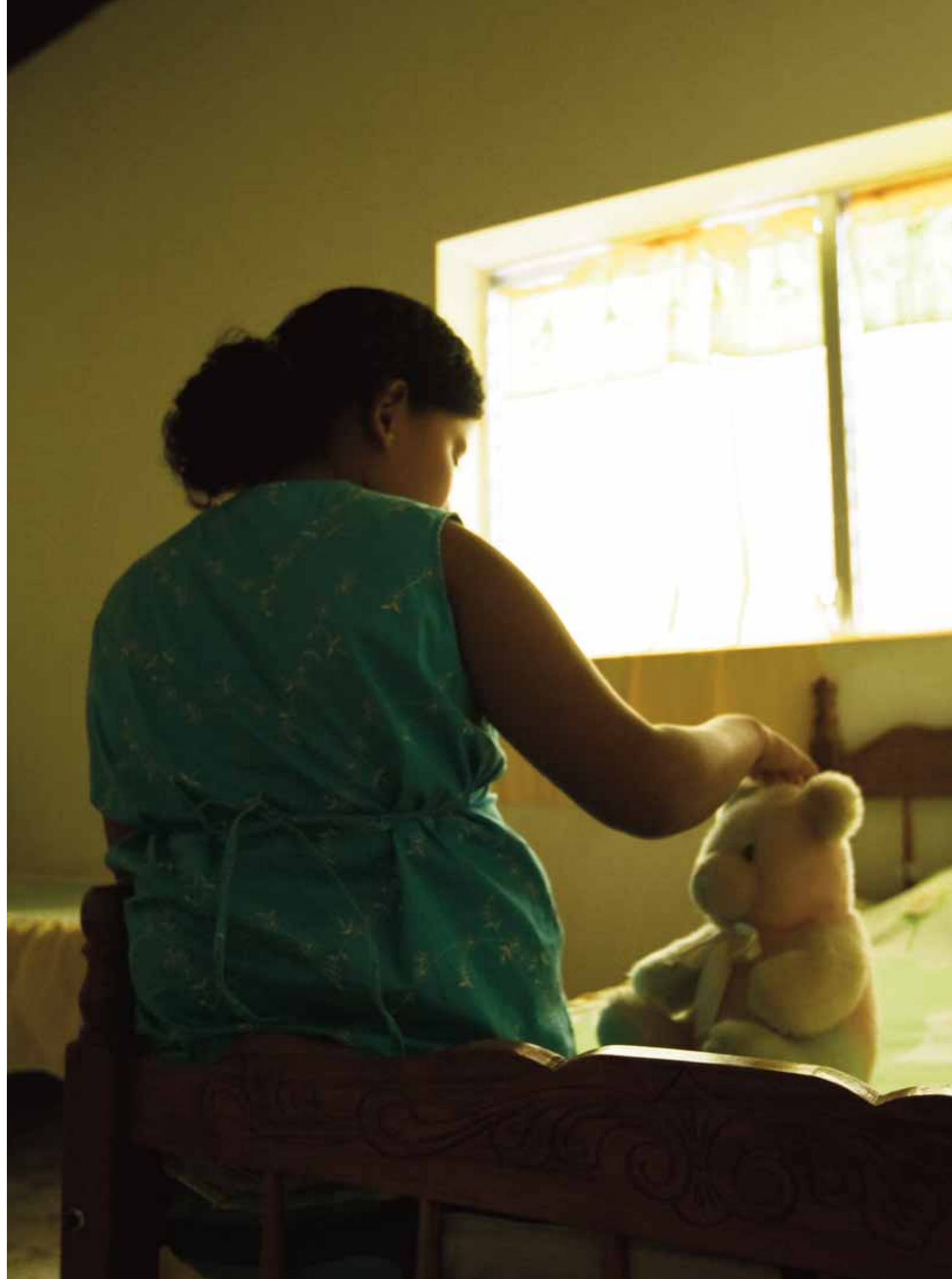


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Officers at a Police Station for Women and Children, Bluefields.

Specialized Police Stations for Women and Children have been set up to make the justice system more accessible. Across the country there are now 37 such police stations, but this is not enough to cover the whole country and many are under-resourced.

Some committed police officers pay victims' and witnesses' transport costs out of their own pocket. In other cases, survivors and their carers have reported insensitive behaviour from under-trained officers. Sometimes, procedural mistakes by poorly trained police officers can result in cases being dismissed when they come to court.



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“The police told me to stop crying, that there was no reason for me to cry, that what I was saying was not true. I felt very bad when the police said I was lying, because I would never lie about things like this.”

Alejandra, 12-year-old survivor of sexual abuse

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A street in Granada.

In some cases, justice officials release alleged perpetrators from detention pending trial with no checks or supervision.

“We had a recent case of an 11-year-old girl who was abused. Her attacker was identified and detained. His defence lawyer argued that he was very ill and it was agreed that he could be released on bail and report to the police station regularly pending the trial. For two or three weeks he went to the police station to sign in. The next week he just disappeared.”

Lawyer at a women's centre in Granada



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“He was coming out [of the courtroom] and he laughed at me, and when he was at the door he turned to look at me again and said ‘look after her for me’, and the judge was there, and the police behind”.

Adriana, mother of Rosmery (pictured here), a 13-year-old rape survivor

Survivors of rape or sexual abuse whose cases get as far as prosecution often abandon the case before or during trial because the legal process is either too expensive for them, or too traumatic.



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The Director of a women's shelter embraces a young survivor of sexual violence.

A safe place to stay and psychosocial and legal support are essential for survivors of sexual violence to feel safe and begin to rebuild their lives.

Shelters for survivors of domestic abuse and rape in Nicaragua are scarce, particularly those specifically for children. There are 10 shelters run by NGOs; they receive no financial or other support from the Nicaraguan authorities. Non-residential women's and girls' centres across the country also fill the gaps in state provision by offering support services.



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A women's centre lawyer supports a young survivor of sexual violence as she tells her story.

“There is a significant difference in the recovery of those who receive medical, legal and psychological support immediately compared to those who do not get any support, or where there is a delay in getting support. This is because abuse starts to take its toll on the victim from the first moment. It is essential that children are given at least a minimum amount of support after this kind of abuse has happened... Sexual abuse is something that children and women who have suffered it never forget. It changes their lives forever.”

Psychiatrist at a women's and girls' centre in Managua

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A woman walking down a street in Bluefields.

“There are girls who sit in front of you crying and saying nothing. They feel that they’re letting down their families if they talk to you about sexual abuse because of the guilt they feel. When you work with them, they start to tell you everything that happened – ‘What my granddad did, that he shouldn’t have done.’ When recognition starts, the change begins – and most of all, they stop hiding their faces and looking away because they feel ashamed or not as good as you – you could compare raising their gaze with raising their spirits and lifting their hopes a little.”

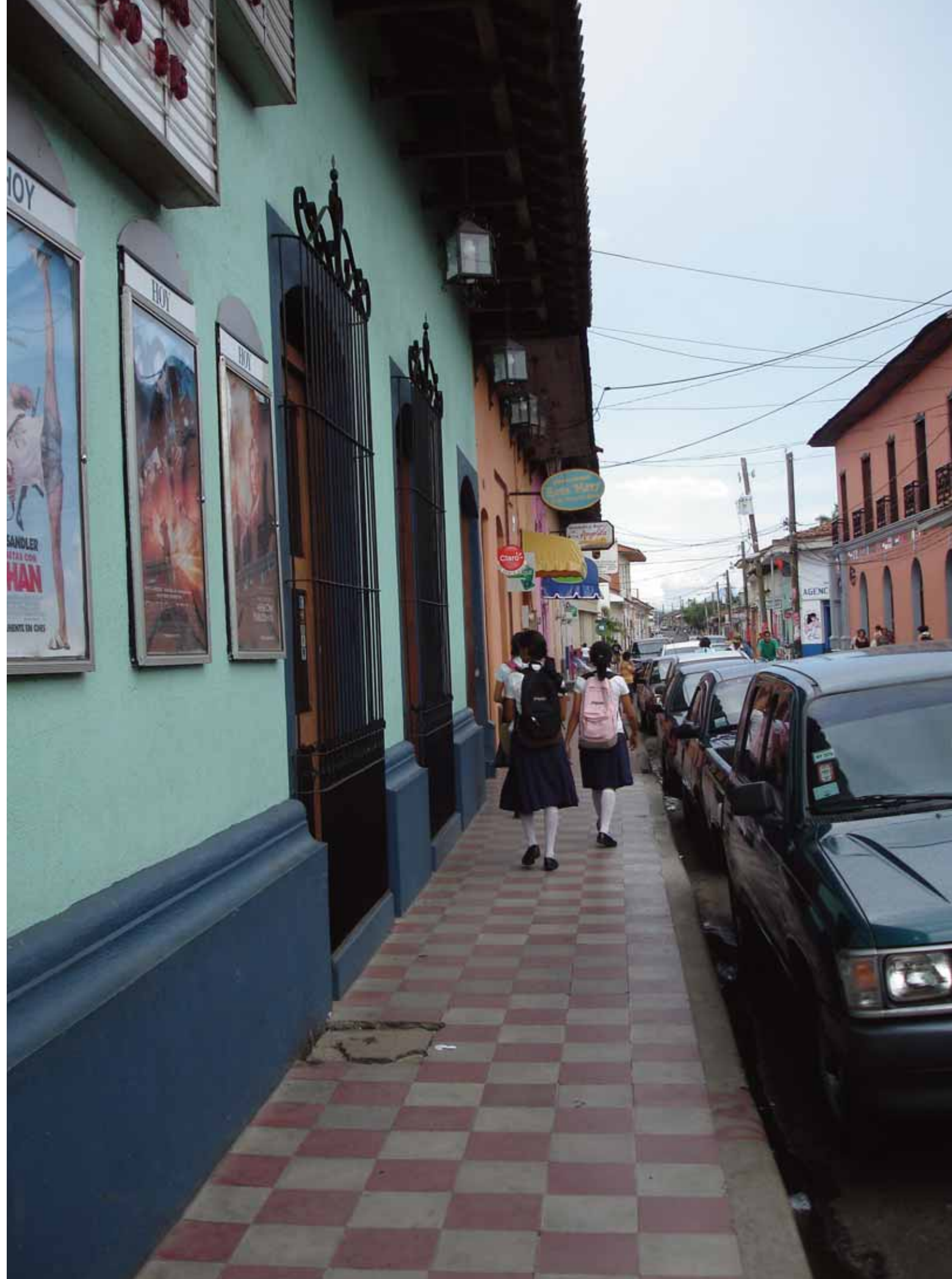
A psychiatrist at a women's and girls' centre in Bluefields



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**“This is the tree of my life.
The roots are everything that
happened to me, and the
fruit is what is to come.”**

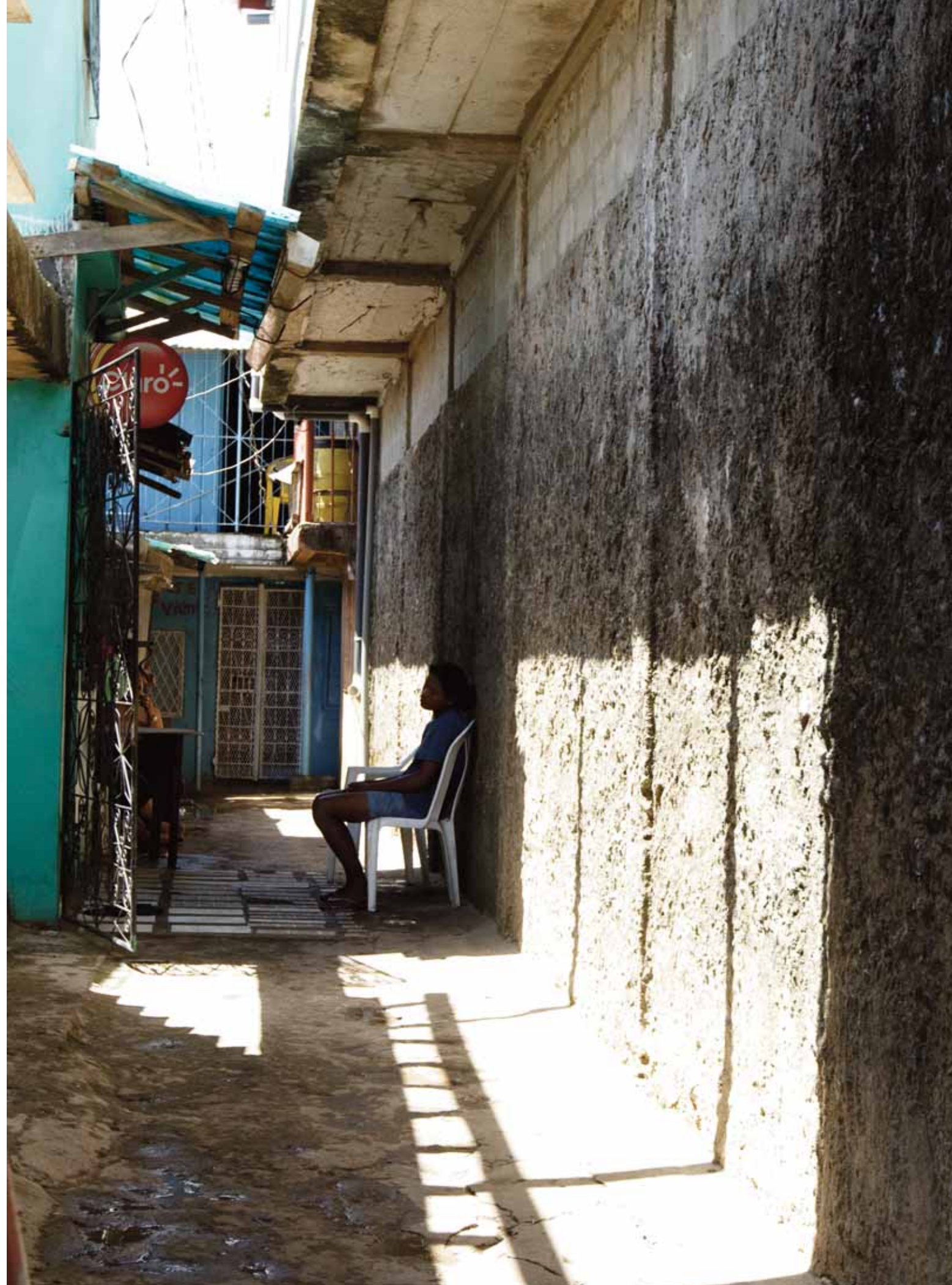
A 13-year-old rape survivor drawing her hopes
and dreams for the future, at a women's and
girls' centre



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Schoolgirls walking down a street in León.

Survivors of rape and sexual abuse must be free to make their own decisions about how to manage the consequences of rape and begin to rebuild their lives. Rape must not be the event which defines the rest of their lives.



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A woman shop keeper sitting by her goods in a side street, Bluefields.

Girls who have been made pregnant as a result of rape in Nicaragua currently have no choice about whether or not they wish to carry the pregnancy to term. Since 2008, abortion has been criminalized in all circumstances, no matter if a girl or woman is a victim of rape, or if her life or health is put at risk by a pregnancy.

“I would ask the government to allow therapeutic abortion ... if they had offered it to me, I would have said no, but it has cost me a lot to accept and take on this responsibility.”

Estefany, who was raped at gunpoint at 17 and had a child as a result

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“I would ask that the authorities at least *listen* to women and girls who have survived rape.”

Psychiatrist working with survivors of rape in Granada

“I would ask that the Police for Women and Children have more respect and take care of us. We are human beings and their equals. There are just some little details which are different, but we are essentially the same and we want to be treated with respect.”

Connie, survivor of rape from the age of nine and made pregnant at the age of 14 by her father

“[The government] must... make sure that in schools the teacher teaches girls what to do if something happens, and also about sexual health matters.”

Alejandra, 12-year-old survivor of sexual abuse

“Their words have power! This is the message girls must receive, they must feel, they must know, that their words have power.”

Director of a centre working with girls and women survivors of violence

Survivors of sexual violence with their carers and support staff at a women's centre.



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Amnesty International Sweden staff and volunteers with signed petitions to the Nicaraguan authorities.

TAKE ACTION!

Please write to President Daniel Ortega Saavedra, urging the Nicaraguan authorities to listen to the voices of young rape survivors, their carers, and the women's and girls' centre staff who work with them.

Many thanks, on behalf of all the young survivors of sexual violence who told their stories to Amnesty International and who have had the courage to speak out and to hold onto their hopes for the future.