

Waves of Healing in PERU

Thousands of Peruvian girls and women suffer in silence after being sexually abused. But today a new ministry is introducing them to God's healing power.

Sandy slumped forward in a chair as strands of black hair drooped over her eyes to hide her embarrassment. Tears stained her brown face as she told a story of unimaginable pain: how she was sexually abused by an older boy, how she was raped countless times by her father, then by an uncle, and then by a man she met in church.

When she was 6, her father spread her hands on a table and used a knife to stab her between her fingers. Once he punctured her elbow with a nail. Another time he held her palms down on a hot stove. Sometimes he would bend her fingers backward to break them.

Jagged half-inch scars between her fingers, an L-shaped scar on the inside of her elbow, burn marks on her palms, and deformed fingers are awful witnesses to the truth of her words.

"When my father would come to the house, I would hide under the bed," Sandy said, noting that he also kept a book about black magic in their home.

The older boy raped her when she was 11. She got pregnant at age 13 but lost the child after he beat her. She conceived again at 14, this time giving birth to a son, who he lets her visit only in exchange for sex. To cope, Sandy began using a crude form of heroin.

Sandy's story is but one of thousands of horrific tales told by women in Peru. The problem is so vast—yet so hidden—that it's easy to pretend it doesn't exist. But the facts say otherwise.

Records from the Maternity Hospital in Lima, Peru, indicate that 90 percent of young mothers ages 12 to 16 became pregnant because they were raped, the vast majority by their fathers, brothers, stepfathers or friends. Violence against women seems to be woven into the fabric of Peruvian society.

An estimated 28,000 women are victims of rape annually. The majority of the victims are under age 14. In Lima alone, five rapes are reported daily. But most crimes against women here probably go unreported.

Although the problem seems overwhelming, a new ministry called Daughters of Peru, founded by two Atlanta-area evangelists, has taken a first step toward healing. A historic two-day women's conference—the first of its kind in Peru—was held in the Lima suburb of San Juan in May, drawing more than 1,200 women each day.

"We're helping this generation cope with the abuse, but we can also put things into motion to stop it in future generations by changing attitudes," said Bruce Carter, 40, co-founder of the ministry. Carter said he expected the large turnout but was surprised by the overwhelming response to altar calls.

"We're talking about 75 percent of the women in the church who are saying, 'I'm hurting,'" the evangelist said.

Alberto "Tito" Salazar, 45, founder of The World Needs Christ

Ministries, is Carter's partner in the effort. He said he was overwhelmed by the women's stories. "I heard so much suffering and pain, the only thing I could do is cry out and say, 'Lord, do something,'" he said.

Women like Sandy spur these men to fulfill their mission. During Charisma's interview with her, Sandy matter-of-factly admitted that she loves no one. Then she told how she was filled with so much hatred that she has been tempted to commit murder.

She also told of hearing footsteps at her house when no one was home. "Sometimes I feel like I'm possessed," she said.

When Sandy indicated that she wanted to be free of demonic possession, the interview ended. Three Daughters of Peru ministry team members arrived, and a deliverance session began. Sandy's quiet voice soon turned to chilling screams, and her body contorted. Sandy growled hideously through clenched teeth, spitting as she shook her head from side to side.

After two hours, she returned to being a quiet teen-ager. There are multitudes of women in Peru who need a similar spiritual breakthrough.

Overwhelming Pain

Approximately 70 percent of all crimes reported to police in Peru involve violence against women, according to the Institute for Women's Health. Until April 1997, a law allowed men to escape prosecution from rape if they proposed marriage to the victim.

Medical examinations of rape victims are cursory and incomplete, minimizing serious injuries. Women who file a rape complaint must pay for their own forensic examination. Of the reported crimes against women, only a small percentage are successfully prosecuted. In many cases, either no arrest is made or the man is released after being detained only briefly.

When asked how only two men can attempt to solve such a huge problem in Peru, Carter's response was blunt.

"How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time," he said. Although he has just begun this ministry, he knows he and Salazar have made an impact.

"I feel like we just scratched the surface," Salazar added. "We gave these women some answers, but they are going to have more questions, and we are not going to be there," he said. "Our hope is that the pastors will be touched by the Lord and see the reality of their situation."

Salazar was born in Lima and moved to the United States seven years ago. He says domestic abuse in Peru and other Latin countries is in epidemic proportions, spanning across class lines.

Some researchers say the weak economy in Peru is a contributing factor to domestic violence. Men who do not cope well with the pressures of having to work longer hours for less pay bring their frustrations home, they say.

To respond to the epidemic of violence, Peru passed the Family Violence Law in 1993. Even after amendments strengthened it in

1997, the Law offered very limited protection for women. Its definition of "family" excluded entire groups of women and didn't cover marital rape at all.

Women who attended the free Daughters of Peru conference received a workbook produced by ministry team members to help them work through issues of domestic abuse. They also were fed a modestly priced lunch each day.

"Because of the culture and the oppression, in some of these homes it's just accepted," Carter said of the pattern of abuse. In addition to bringing emotional healing, Daughters of Peru teaches women to say no to unwanted sexual advances. Carter and Salazar plan to bring a team of 25-50 female counselors to the next conference set for February in Lima.

While the women's meetings are important, Carter and Salazar understand attention must be given to the root cause: the behavior of many Latin men, who view their sexual prowess as a sign of strength and who treat women as sex objects. Even in the church, women are often seen as instruments for their husband's ministry, not ministers themselves. Carter, a former Promise Keepers (PK) leader in Georgia, plans to use his PK ties to organize a "Peruvian Men of Integrity" conference to reach both church and unchurched men.

"The statistics are too bad for this problem not to be in the church," he noted.

Carter and Salazar also want to work with government officials to encourage the enforcement of existing laws. Abused women in Lima say they are rebuffed when they go to the police for help.

Many police won't help them, and there is no government agency to intervene or provide shelter if they flee violence.

Willing Vessels

While abuse is widespread in Latin countries, Carter understands it is a problem in the United States as well. As news of the Daughters of Peru came back to this country, he has received invitations to hold conferences at Atlanta-area churches.

Daughters of Peru represents a ministry shift for Carter, who is an evangelist at heart. He can speak forceful words yet shed soft tears. He admits he sometimes still gets nervous before crowds, but he issues stirring altar calls.

How did this soul-winner become involved in ministry to Hispanic women? Carter points to a crusade in 1998 in Linares, Mexico—his first missions trip—as a time when God brought a new dimension to his ministry. A female minister who had founded two children's homes prophesied over him at the end of one of his meetings, calling him “a man not just for America but for many countries.” She also said he would preach in large stadiums in distant lands.

When he returned from Mexico a message was waiting from Salazar, inviting him to a crusade in Peru. Not long after that, Carter found himself preaching to a crowd of several thousand in a bullfighting stadium in Lima.

As Carter preached in small churches on the nights preceding the stadium event, he would pray for emotionally troubled women every night. “We'd ask how we could pray for them, and

they'd say their brother or father was sexually molesting them," he said.

A young woman named Cinthia Marthans began following Carter from meeting to meeting. Finally, she told him how her father tried to abuse her when she was younger. Her story touched Carter.

"It was right there, at that moment, that I knew we were going to start this ministry," he said.

At one meeting, Carter began praying for the women before he preached, speaking a blessing over "the daughters of Peru."

"When I was finished praying, all of these girls were just weeping uncontrollably," he said. "I hadn't even preached the message yet." As he blessed the women, they were slain in the Holy Spirit in an unusual manner. Instead of falling backward, the women dropped gently as if they were falling asleep.

When Carter preached at the stadium, he abandoned his prepared message and instead spoke hard truth to the men.

"I didn't hold back," he said. By bringing this hidden national sin into the light, Carter and Salazar have opened a floodgate. "The ministry connected with the problem for the first time in their lives, I believe," Carter said.

Marthans, 22, whom Carter calls "the first daughter of Peru," spoke to Charisma about her troubled home life.

Her father began abusing her when she was 12. Later, when she was 15, he tried to take advantage of her while she was showering. Fortunately, Marthans was able to ward off his advances over the years, but she carried a deep hatred for him—until she prayed with Carter.

“That night is when God really touched me,” she said. Since that time, she’s been free of unforgiveness. “My heart is so full of joy now,” she said.

Marthans confirmed that many women in Peru suffer abuse but have nowhere to turn. She said women don’t waste their time turning to the government because they know they won’t be helped.

Victoria Herbozo Maguina is a woman who Salazar and his wife, Patricia, befriended. They even took her into their home for a period of time when they lived in Lima. She said her common-law husband would have sex with her and then leave money on the bed before he left, making her feel like a prostitute.

The man would hit her often and once beat her with a bicycle pump. “He used to say to me, ‘You are very hard to kill,’ and I would say to him, ‘You can kill my body, but my soul will not die,’” said Victoria, who has six children by the man.

“The only father they have is God,” she said.

Today, Carter is continuing his evangelistic ministry—but his commitment to the Daughters of Peru is deep. He and his wife, Beth, are planning to spend most of next summer in Lima in an effort to expand the ministry to women.

“We are waking up the church,” he said. “We are waking up the women and the men by saying, ‘This isn’t right.’”

Richard Daigle is an Atlanta-based free-lance writer. He traveled to Peru in May to file this story.

Regional Statistics: South America

Country with largest percentage Christian population: Ecuador (97.3 percent)

Country with smallest Christian population: Falkland Islands (2,000)

Country with smallest percentage of Christians in population: Suriname (41 percent)

Largest denomination: Roman Catholic Church, Brazil (144 million)

Largest Protestant or independent denomination: Assemblies of God (22 million)

Country with largest Christian growth over last five years: Guatemala (from 88 percent to 93 percent)

Largest non-Christian population: Nonreligious (8 million)

Fastest growing denomination or movement: Protecia del Sinai
(Prophecy From Mount Sinai) (33 percent)

Percentage of Pentecostals and charismatics in Christian population:

27 percent (140.8 million)

Most dangerous country for Christians: Colombia

Country with most evangelistic efforts per person: Ecuador

Country with most evangelistic efforts for size of population:
Brazil

Country with highest Christian income: Brazil

Country with lowest Christian income: Suriname