

Imagine a world in which you can freely create your own story

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The movement of our lives is shaped, in part, by the social policies that develop over time, generating cultural contexts that determine our future and evolution. And in my opinion, in part, because there are many other reasons our lives can be built and take on their own meaning. It's about making choices and seizing opportunities that can be enriching for those who experience them, allowing them to flourish. By this I want to make explicit reference to the activities involved in international cooperation. In my particular case, as a nurse, a member of the university community of teaching and research staff, and under Article 30 of the current Spanish Organic Law¹, I had an opportunity to learn and gain such understanding by spending time with the non-governmental organisation (NGO), *I Am Hope Guatemala*.

Their mission² is to provide education, mental health services, and logistical and medical support to single mothers and children who have been victims of domestic abuse, in so promoting the values of solidarity, respect, social equity, participation, and unity. Among their many projects, here I will describe my participation in the *Colegio Hope* (translated as *Hope School*). In reality, I will share a dream of mine that I don't really want to wake up from, which began in October 2023 when I landed in Central America. My appetite had been wet and my senses sharpened over the two months prior. I was excited to learn from everything I could experience, without any pretension of being the protagonist of my own experience. My challenge: to analyse other horizons of care in a social, cultural, and political context other than Spain.

It could be said that my experience was based on 'Western ideas' and our 'health language', such as the World Health Organization (WHO) definition of the term health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".³ However, this concept is also valid for Guatemala, a state that joined the system in 1943 as a member of the Pan American Health Organization



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(PAHO)—the WHO regional office for the Americas.⁴

San Antonio Aguas Calientes is a town in the department of Sacatepéquez in the southwestern region of Guatemala, where the *Hope School* is currently located. Its people are citizens of the world, as am I, but in a unique context that has to be experienced to understand their way of life. In my first few days, I tried to carefully analyse different aspects of health, but I was overwhelmed by individual, cultural, social, political, and organisational factors, which all interacted with each other to shape my emotions.⁵ Indeed, far from a mere quantitative analysis, understanding their way of life meant I had to undergo an emotional process

to deepen my understanding. Finding the variables that influenced the health of these women was a challenge to me, as a nurse new to humanitarian work.

As time went on, I realised that the mere idea of a complete welfare state is a utopia for this population. In the context of *I Am Hope Guatemala* and, more specifically, the *Hope School*, mothers and their children are frequently victims of domestic abuse. The presence of patriarchy and the influence of Catholicism project the social future in which deep-rooted cultural traditions exist.⁶ Women 'accept' their role relegated to domestic life and their lives outside of this environment are part of a collective imaginary. I analysed this scenario, with the collaboration of fellow volunteer Claudia González Pérez. We observed invisible women who did not feel worthy of expressing their thoughts, feelings, and emotions, including their sexuality. Therefore, understanding the reality of these mothers became a priority for us.

Once we had reflected upon the situation, and always with due respect, we undertook to listen to these women in order to understand their health needs. For example, these needs included their dietary and rest habits, emotional state, religious needs, and taking care of their homes and children. This led us to think about the importance of applying the 14 needs set out

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by Virginia Henderson,⁷ by creating a programme of practical health workshops. To do this, we considered Madeleine Leininger's transcultural concept as a priority.⁸ The women with whom we worked lived in a specific time and space and so the implementation of any interventions required that we respect the values, beliefs, and cultural practices of Guatemala.

To develop the programme, we created spaces in which time was not a limiting factor. We created an initial proposal titled "Taking care of our well-being. Health Workshops", comprising a total of 12 sessions, which could then be continued with new volunteers in the future. Our objective was to work on the motivation and involvement of women regarding autonomy over their own health so that, over time, they would themselves come to manage and lead this empowerment training programme.

At the end of November, we put the workshops we had developed into practice. We started with introductions: sharing who we were, or who we thought we were. We continued with a session on food, adapted to their culture and socioeconomic context. And, my third and last practical workshop, in which we assimilated, together, the importance of our emotional states, was very special. We created a space of intimacy, respect, and trust in which we shared the role that mental health plays in our lives. In this sense, the emotional needs of women are by no means the last bastion of 'poor' societies but rather, one more example of how mental health is made invisible and stigmatised.

I returned home to Spain in December 2023 with a smile on my face and my heart full of emotion and fond memories of special and unique lives. I learned that care must be understood alongside culture, while navigating new scenarios and opening

oneself up to experiences, observing and feeling them. I learned that care is not our ultimate goal but rather, our destination as nurses (and for whomever wants to follow the same roadmap) can be reached by dedicating time and love to gaining knowledge of the experience itself. I learned that there are small NGOs that work with humble, local populations and that, with barely any resources, still show that the world can be a kinder place. A place where women can freely create their own stories.

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