

**An Interview with M.U.J.E.R.**

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[M.U.J.E.R.](#), the Spanish word for woman, is a culturally-specific organization in Homestead, Florida serving the Latino immigrant community of this rural agricultural area of south Florida between Miami and the Keys. M.U.J.E.R., which stands for “Men and Women United in Justice, Education and Reform,” was founded by Susan Rubio Rivera 16 years ago. Susan grew up as a field worker in South Florida and speaks publicly about her experience of sexual violence as a child and how it led her to be a leader on issues of violence against women.

In Florida, SASP funding goes to the Florida Department of Health and is passed through the Florida Council Against Sexual Violence by formula to certified rape crisis centers. M.U.J.E.R. is one of the certified centers. They receive \$12,231 annually in SASP formula funds which pays for 4.5 hours of therapy per week for victims of sexual assault and also pays for 5% of Susan’s salary.

Susan says the key to their success is that they are part of the community: “You have to understand the fears that immigrants live with on a daily basis. I was taught by my Grandmother to stay invisible. We are all taught to stay invisible. So we knew when we began that the community wasn’t ready to just start talking about sexual violence.” M.U.J.E.R.’s first event was a back-to-school fair with a general focus on helping kids get ready to start school. As Susan says, “These are impoverished people from rural areas of Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. You can’t ignore their basic needs. We never came in and told the community what they needed. We’ve always asked.”

Asking what was most helpful has led them to some innovative approaches to providing direct services and community intervention. M.U.J.E.R. has fully utilized local universities including Florida International University and the University of Miami to help them implement a community mobilization model. To learn more about the best ways to approach the issue of sexual violence, they held focus groups where they paid community members for their participation and provided full meals and childcare. From these focus groups, at least two strategies emerged.

They host “charlas” or community conversations that may have wide-ranging content but include issues of sexual violence. Susan has said that it’s not uncommon for victims to disclose as a result of participating in a charla. When a disclosure happens, the person is referred for services through their care coordination model and may eventually see the SASP funded therapist for individual therapy.

M.U.J.E.R. has also developed “fotonovelas” on sexual violence topics including incest, marital rape and acquaintance rape. The fotonovela is a type of comic book on real and serious topics. While they contracted with someone to write the scripts, the stories came from the community and the project was

directed by a group of community advisors that included everyone from business leaders to “fischeras” or women who are paid to dance with customers at a bar. These fotonovelas serve as awareness and outreach tools but are also part of shaping the community’s norms around sexual violence and dealing with a taboo topic.

Susan feels her willingness to talk about her experience of sexual violence is a critical part of her community leadership, “How can I tell people it’s okay to tell unless I’m also willing to tell the truth.” She believes their overall approach, including involving all of the non-offending family members in counseling at times, has meant that more people have come forward. They now have children, women and men coming to them for counseling and assistance about how to report. Susan says, “We’ve earned the trust of the community when it comes to the issues of rape and sexual assault.”