



SALUD

# How to detect if a woman is being battered? Costa Rica will test 54 questions that measure the cycle of violence

The instrument is already used successfully in the United States; our country will validate the translation done by a Costa Rican researcher. It will be useful to help women and may be used as evidence in legal battles such as divorce, restraining orders and custody of children.

By: Irene Rodríguez. Irene Rodríguez Journalist in the Global Village section. Master's in public health with Emphasis in Health Management at the University of Costa Rica. She won the Conicit National Award for Scientific Journalism. Irene Rodríguez



The instrument will be validated in 400 women patients of INAMU offices throughout the country. Photography: Shutterstock

"Aggression towards women kills. That's the reality. We see it constantly, many die at the hands of their partners, ex-partners or people who become obsessed with them. It also produces many physical and emotional damages. It's something we work on every day"

This way, the doctor in psychology Lenore Walker justified the need to look for ways to face this great social problem. Precisely, for more than four decades she has studied these victims and was the first to describe the battered woman syndrome, which is characterized by the different phases that this population goes through exposed to violence and also explains, to a large extent, why many affected remain next to their aggressor.

Dr. Walker developed an instrument in the United States with 54 questions that can only be applied by properly trained professionals and seek to measure more accurately when a woman suffers from this syndrome, which is often not so easy to identify, the name is BWSQ.

This has been a useful tool in the treatment of these people and their families, but at the same time serves as scientific evidence in legal battles that include divorces, restraining orders and custody of children.

Now, in Costa Rica, the first Spanish version of this test will be validated. Why is this important? In the Costa Rican context it has a lot of weight, especially if one observes the figures of the Justice Department which indicate that 127 people go every day to the domestic violence courts to request restraining orders after suffering aggressions or following a threat of their occurrence.

The questions are not made known to the public to prevent people without proper preparation from administering the questionnaire or applying it to someone else.

So far, there was no equivalent for this questionnaire in our language, but Costa Rican psychologist Wendy Cook, a Walker student in the Doctorate in Clinical and Forensic Psychology at Nova Southeastern University (South Florida, USA). She gave herself the task of translating it. She did it not only in Spanish, but also used very Costa Rican language, so that women can better understand the questions and feel more identified.

The idea of validating the instrument in the country is to make sure that what works in the United States and other English-speaking nations can also be valid to detect the syndrome of women assaulted in the Spanish-speaking population. With this, in addition to better understanding the phenomenon, victims can be helped in a comprehensive manner.

"For me, having translated the instrument into Costa Rican Spanish and being involved in its validation process is like being able to put a microphone and a seal of guarantee on the violent stories that many women have to tell us. BWSQ-S will be able to give scientific evidence to the psychological ramifications that many of them develop for being exposed to repetitive interpersonal violence," said the Costa Rican, Wendy Cook.

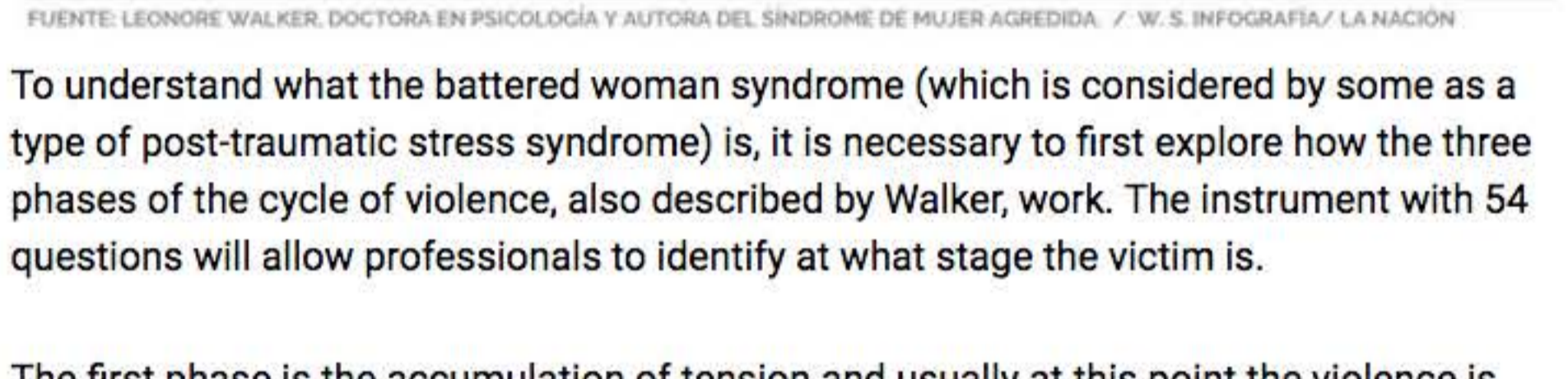
To administer it among the Costa Rican women, the team led by Walker and Cook visited Costa Rica recently with the idea of training the psychologists who will participate in this validation and making sure that they have all the necessary information and knowledge. Over the course of eleven months, starting soon, the professionals will pass the questionnaire to 400 patients of the services of the Delegation of Women of the National Institute of Women (INAMU) throughout the national territory.

"Once valid and admissible in the courts of Costa Rica, BWSQ-S could be used as evidence in cases of child custody, visitation cases, validity of premarital agreements, restraining orders and cases in which abused women use self-defense within the context of interpersonal violence, just to mention a few" explained Cook.

She added: "Years ago, when I did my professional practice of clinical psychology in the delegation of women in INAMU, I met many women. All with very similar traumatic histories. Those people and their stories changed my life. The number of women who are seen every day due to cases of violence in our country cannot be ignored. The worst thing that happens is that many times these cases are silenced, or nobody believes them."

Cases like those Cook heard are not few. Figures from the Ministry of Public Security indicate that in the first semester of this year 1,927 police reports were made for domestic violence and more than 16,100 notifications to aggressors.

## What is Battered Woman Syndrome?



FUENTE: LEONORE WALKER, DOCTORA EN PSICOLOGÍA Y AUTORA DEL SÍNDROME DE MUJER AGREDIDA. / W. S. INFOGRAFÍA/ LA NACIÓN

To understand what the battered woman syndrome (which is considered by some as a type of post-traumatic stress syndrome) is, it is necessary to first explore how the three phases of the cycle of violence, also described by Walker, work. The instrument with 54 questions will allow professionals to identify at what stage the victim is.

The first phase is the accumulation of tension and usually at this point the violence is mainly psychological. The woman perceives the aggression (sometimes it may take weeks or months for her to realize herself), but she does not understand it. The victim tries to calm the aggressor and tries to help reason so that he calms down. In this process she begins to move away from her support group (friends and family). She also tries to be nice to her aggressor and tries to please him as best he can. Little by little, tension intensifies with more signs of violence, such as shouting and insults.

The second phase is acute abuse, where already all the tension accumulated in the first phase bursts with greater psychological violence but could also add physical, sexual violence or both. This phase can be maintained days, weeks or months. Sometimes it registers high periods. For example, in our country 911 records more reports on holidays or sporting events. On the day of Costa Rica's debut match at the World Cup in Russia, a distress call was registered every three minutes. During this last Holy Week the complaints increased by 27%. To this we must add the women who can not call.

The third phase arrives after all this storm and manifests itself as "a honeymoon", where the aggressor perceives that he could lose his partner and insists on "re-loving" her. He blames her for his violent acts but assures her that they will not happen again. The stage is characterized by the absence of tension or violence, with which the perpetrator acquires a positive value in the eyes of the victim. This phase may last for fewer days than the acute phase, but for women it is sufficient.

"This phase convinces many women to stay," Cook said. Walker added: "It's a cycle that repeats itself over and over again and tends to get worse."

What happens with the woman while this cycle of violence happens? According to Walker, she also passes several phases inside her.

At first, when the first abuse occurs, the trust in the victimizer is broken, this produces doubts, disorientation and many begin to show depressive symptoms.

Later, the woman already has a reduced relationship with her family and friends and feels guilty about the situation. Then comes a coping phase, where, without success, she tries to handle the traumatic situation she is living. Many of them end up adapting and blaming themselves and their environment for what happened.

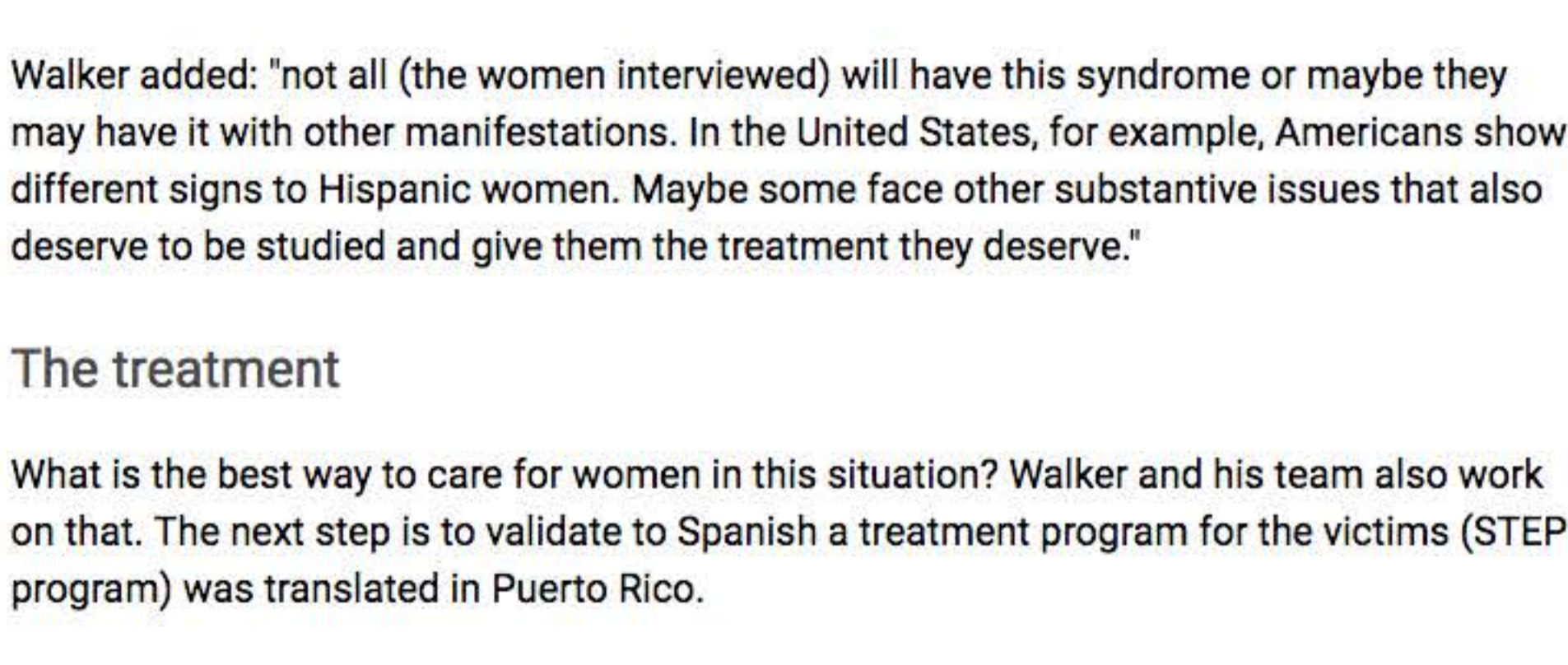
As in many situations, they pass other psychological experiences. In denial, they refuse to admit, even to themselves, that they have been mistreated or that there is a problem in their relationship. They usually offer excuses about the violence of their victimizer and firmly believe that it will not happen again.

This can be accompanied by a later stage of guilt, where she does recognize violence, but feels that she deserves to be treated that way because of her defects. In many cases they accept that they are being abused and that nobody deserves to live this way, however, they remain with their aggressor because they hope that the problems can be solved.

According to Walker, not all women show the same symptoms, but almost all of them manifesting low self-esteem (since it is the first thing that the aggressor blames) and passive personality, they are also victims of depression, anxiety disorders, insomnia, pain in different parts of the body. Some have suicidal attempts. Many also fear for their lives and the lives of their children, so they tend to overprotect their children. Others begin to see and listen to their attacker when he is not around.

The consequences of staying or trying to leave the circle without adequate protection can lead to death. So far this year, 11 women have been victims of femicide in the country.

## The Research in Costa Rica



This is the research team from Nova Southeastern University that came to train the psychologists who will validate the instrument. Photography: Brandon Cook

Walker explained to La Nación that the first version of the BWSQ-S instrument was so long that the interview could last up to six hours. She was aware that few people had the availability/time to answer it. Later the questionnaire was reduced to two and a half hours or three and finally they managed to have a version of 54 questions that can be answered in half an hour. The Spanish translation of this version is the one that will be validated in Costa Rica.

During the next 11 months, the psychologists of INAMU will offer this questionnaire to 400 women who, voluntarily and anonymously, want to answer it.

The facilitators will send the results in real time to a website to which only the research team has access.

Later, the analysis process will begin to see if this instrument really manages to measure whether the woman suffers from this syndrome, if she is at risk of suffering it or not. And, if he suffers, at what level he is.

"When the data arrive, we will analyze the severity of what women have. If what you see in Costa Rica is similar to what you see in the United States? What is the best way to treat them? Not everything is solved with psychological therapy," said Danielle Millen, the researcher who will mainly focus on primary data analysis.

Walker added: "not all (the women interviewed) will have this syndrome or maybe they may have it with other manifestations. In the United States, for example, Americans show different signs to Hispanic women. Maybe some face other substantive issues that also deserve to be studied and give them the treatment they deserve."

## The treatment

What is the best way to care for women in this situation? Walker and his team also work on that. The next step is to validate a Spanish treatment program for the victims (STEP program). The next step was translated in Puerto Rico.

The treatment is called Survivor Therapy Empowerment Program (STEP, for its acronym in English).

Not all women should have the same treatment, because not all women are the same or have lived the aggression equally or for the same amount of time. According to specialists, some also face judicial processes that can complicate the situation, and others depend economically on their aggressor, which makes it more difficult to leave and look for a "safe place".

For these reasons, each case is seen individually, and the treatment is personalized. For example, some will take some medication, others will not.

The next action for those who are detected with this syndrome in Costa Rica may be to carry a STEP program. If implemented, this can mean a higher quality of life for the 268 women who call 911 every day to report an incident of intrafamily violence.

## Violencia doméstica, ciclo de la mujer agredida, BWSQ-S



Periodista en la sección Aldea Global. Máster en Salud Pública con Énfasis en Gerencia de la Salud en la Universidad de Costa Rica. Ganó el Premio Nacional de Periodismo Científico del Conicit.



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