

Learning from experience

Strengthening organisations of women with disabilities

Solidez, Nicaragua



Mission statement

One World Action is working for a world free from poverty and oppression in which strong democracies safeguard the rights of all people.

To this end, we provide money, expertise and practical help to organisations committed to strengthening the democratic process and improving people's lives in poor and developing countries. In all cases they initiate and work on the projects that we support, ensuring that local needs are genuinely understood and met.

As well as supporting our partners' work on the ground, One World Action represents their interests in Europe, putting forward their views in debates on policy towards poorer countries, and helping them to

forge closer links with decision makers in Britain and the European Union.

These 'partners for change' include other voluntary organisations, community and co-operative movements, women's organisations and trade unions. Though diverse in kind, they have a common commitment to strengthening local institutions and giving people a say in the decisions that shape their lives.

Central to our work is the belief that defeating poverty goes hand in hand with promoting human rights and good democratic government. Only if we pursue these goals in a coherent way can we build a just and equal world.

One World Action's Policy Change Programme aims to inform and deepen the debate in the UK and at the European level on democracy, governance, rights and development issues. We publicise the work of our southern partners in building and strengthening democratic organisations, particularly at the local level, their engagement in local, national and international political structures, and their work for basic social, economic and political rights.

We have commissioned a number of in-depth profiles of some of our southern partners. These are analytical and constructively critical studies which examine the approaches and activities of each partner and the context in which they work. In particular, the profiles discuss how partners' approaches and activities strengthen democratic decision-making structures and promote greater gender equality and equity. We are publishing these profiles to contribute to development thinking by providing examples of 'good practice', and to document the views and experiences of our partners and the communities with which they work.

**ONE WORLD
ACTION**
FOR A JUST AND EQUAL WORLD

Front cover: The beauty salon provides an income for women with disabilities but also makes women feel better about themselves, Granada.

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1 Introduction

Despite important advances made by Nicaraguan women in recent years, Nicaraguan society is still highly sexist and misogynous. As such, all women in Nicaragua are prone to gender-based discrimination and violence. Its manifestation is also linked to factors such as social class, place of origin, racial or ethnic roots, age, and sexual preference, to name but a few. Women with disabilities, however, experience specific problems of their own.

For women with disabilities, inadequate roads, transport and communications exacerbate their physical isolation, and social and economic opportunities (health, education, work) are practically inaccessible, thus increasing their levels of poverty. This intensifies their dependency on family members, many of whom unwittingly foster discriminatory attitudes, and render the women particularly vulnerable to

abuse. Indeed, a high number of women with disabilities experience domestic and sexual violence, often from a young age.

The other major problems that women with disabilities have to face include the ignorance, paternalism, discrimination and violence wielded by institutions and people without disabilities. These inevitably provoke traumatic personal experiences and an accumulation of unexpressed pain and anger.

As a result of these problems, many women with disabilities have low self-esteem. This is one of the major barriers to their being integrated and to their potential being developed as full members of society.

Since its founding in 1988, the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Solidez

has focussed on socially integrating people with disabilities in Nicaragua and moving them into the workplace. In 1991 it established the Women with Disabilities Programme, which strengthened the organisation's gender perspective. Developing this programme has been an important learning process for Solidez and for the women with disabilities involved. The aim of this profile is to highlight and analyse the lessons that they learnt, in four areas:

- ▶ Organisational work and projects
- ▶ Empowerment and personal growth
- ▶ Awareness raising
- ▶ Advocacy.

Having an income, but also looking smart, helps women with disabilities to improve their self-esteem, Granada.



2 Developing a programme for women with disabilities

Before embarking on a programme for women with disabilities, Solidez carried out two studies: one on the Pacific side of Nicaragua, the other on the Atlantic coast. These studies enabled Solidez to identify the women's needs and priorities, and to root the programme in their experiences. Although the methodology used was not based on participatory research techniques, the studies differentiated between the varying levels of difficulties that the women were facing and their causes.

Solidez also established key contacts, which enabled the organisation to move forward in encouraging people to set up new groups and consolidate existing organisations. In addition, in the programme's work with local groups, women members of the organisations carried out 'self-diagnosing' studies, to keep track of their changing needs and priorities.

As the Women with Disabilities Programme developed, Solidez formed a technical team to

reinforce its work. Until then, this work had been carried out by the programme co-ordinator. As well as supporting local organisations, the team ensures co-ordination with their boards of directors and

support commissions. It is made up mostly of recruits from local groups, and this greatly enhances its work.

Local groups, however, do not always recognise the change in the role of the women who join the technical team and the additional responsibilities that this entails. The additional responsibilities mean that women on the technical team do not have as much time as before for involvement in the local groups. Also, this has meant that some groups have lost a key leader at a relatively early stage in their consolidation.



First steps using crutches provided by Solidez.

Although the team co-ordinator is not disabled herself, she is a founder member of the programme and the only academically-recognised professional. While recognising the conscious role she plays in empowering women with disabilities, other team members sometimes feel at a disadvantage. This apparent contradiction of the programme's values reflects the clearly hierarchical structure of Solidez and hinders the development of internal democracy both within the team and the programme itself.

Strategies and approaches to organisation

Solidez's approach to organising people recognises that imposing outside attitudes and approaches on a group often increases

The team is made up mostly of recruits from local groups, and this greatly enhances its work

resistance to change. As such, the particular characteristics of women with disabilities (defined partly by different local histories and cultural peculiarities often inherited from pre-Columbian times,¹ and by current day social, economic and political conditions) are a starting point for developing local groups. This invariably leads to different organisational ways of working and timeframes, and requires a flexible approach.

In some communities, prejudices fuelled by fundamentalist religions have had a detrimental effect upon women's participation in the programme. In one local area, for example, Jehovah's Witnesses forbade some women members from participating in Solidez's gender workshops, a reflection of culturally ingrained sexism. In another, an

evangelical sect fuelled prejudices and fears in the community, saying that disability is the mark of the devil.

A common problem for the organisation of local groups of women with disabilities is dealing with language and communication between hearing-impaired, voice-

impaired and visually-impaired women. In most cases, workers have overcome this difficulty with the support of those family members who do not have these disabilities. In others, women with disabilities that do not impede communication and who have had access to education in specialised schools have served others as interpreters using the tools acquired.

However, the failure of the educational system to provide sign-language skills in a systematic and uniform way has led to the development of myriad local adaptations, which combine formal sign languages and local

improvisations. For this reason, Solidez has veered away from investing resources in developing sign-language skills.

In general, the Solidez team promotes participation, emphasises the importance of women seeing each other as equals, and is working to change authoritarian styles. It sees the shift from 'technicians' to 'facilitators' as an important step forward towards middle- to long-term goals. The facilitators' primary role entails a shift in the vision of the team's leadership role. This involves understanding women's problems, guiding organisational processes and learning from local group members. It also involves playing a part in the struggle in reducing the dependency of women with disabilities and helping them to recognise their own skills and abilities.

As facilitators, the women on the Solidez team provide financial, material and human resources to 11 local groups. These include:

- ▶ Access to auxiliary devices (eg: orthopaedic aids, wheelchairs etc.) and cheap or free medicines
- ▶ Start-up funds on loan for local credit programmes and economic projects
- ▶ Economic incentives for local organisers
- ▶ Local visits providing technical assistance
- ▶ National training for co-ordinators, transfer of this training and follow-up on a local level.

The fundamental aim of this support is to help consolidate independent organisations capable of managing their own decisions and self-development. In this process, the methodology used, although often less visible, is an important element of the strategy and will become increasingly valued as the team is trained in participatory methodology².

¹ These conditions may involve: poverty levels over generations; land use and usurpation; access to resources, transport and communication; local gender traditions and other prejudices; political polarisation; religious conflicts and local hierarchies or traumas and upheavals of whole communities caused by different levels of involvement in generations of war and natural disasters.

² As Solidez implements a participatory model in its internal organisation, it can ensure success by applying the same approach to itself as an organisation. The women's team recognises—especially since the gender workshops—that it is important to work on their own empowerment in order to be able to facilitate processes, and that this in turn empowers others.

The fundamental aim is to help consolidate independent organisations capable of managing their own decisions and self-development



Young woman with cerebral palsy is delighted to have found a job as a shopkeeper. The shop is supported by SOLIDEZ, Managua.

As a national NGO, Solidez's policy of non-affiliation ensures respect for the social and political nature of local groups and their autonomy. It also means that these groups can access resources from other NGOs, as long as these are not duplicated. This approach is significantly different from that of other NGOs, which see people with disabilities as 'beneficiaries' of their projects.

In practice, its success depends on the clarity of relationships developed between Solidez

team members and local groups. Indeed, levels of dependence and autonomy vary greatly and are partly affected by the incentives that Solidez pays to the board members of local organisations – an issue that is some cause for concern for Solidez.

When the woman and family being visited see other women with disabilities in action it becomes clear to them that change is possible

The home visit has been one of the most important organising tools. While encouraging women to become involved, it also allows organisers to observe the conditions in which they live, their level of

self-esteem and independence and the attitude of family members or others close to them. They share experiences as women with disabilities and analyse the obstacles they face and how they have made changes. When the woman and family being visited see other women with disabilities in action it becomes clear to them that change is possible. These visits also serve to explain that the organisation does not 'give', but that it facilitates self-help. The visits also have an important impact on family awareness.

Another strategy has been to guarantee women easy access to meetings, and to involve the community from the start. Usually, when the groups start up, they take the form of women meeting in their homes, in a neighbourhood community house, or in a park under a tree. At the beginning, due to low self-esteem and internalised discrimination, the women are shy and loath to expose themselves to the gaze of others in the street or beyond known territory. However, the fact that meetings are held in their neighbourhoods contributes greatly to their visibility, and involves the immediate community in supporting organisational efforts.

One of the most important challenges that the organisers face is to move women from a very limited world structured around their dependency to a new position based on self-reliance

A guiding principle of Solidez's approach is expressed in the maxim 'Instead of giving someone the gift of a fish it is better to show them how to fish.' One of the most important challenges that the organisers face is to move women from a very limited world structured around their dependency to a new position based on self-reliance. This is crucial for their empowerment, and in

breaking with the paternalistic approach typical of many organisations offering aid to people with disabilities.

The issue of dependency is central to these women's lives because of the traditional attitudes shown to both women, and people with disabilities—and the fact that they face institutionalised double discrimination. Initially, women who want to become more independent often transfer their sense of dependence from the family to other members of the organisation, or to Solidez. This affects

participation, and is one of the most difficult challenges in internal organisation, local leadership and the relationship between local groups and Solidez.

Solidez team members and other leaders have avoided this by being conscious of their role as facilitators and by involving others in taking on responsibilities and actions. This has also meant accepting limits in exercising their own leadership in order to let others assume roles as protagonists or representatives. Indeed, the organisations have worked best when the women in leadership roles have insisted that decision-making should be carried out with the full participation of women in the assembly or in the board of directors.

This participation depends on the personal values and self-esteem of everyone involved. It also requires roles to be explicit, and means that resources must be systematically controlled. To ensure this transparency in its relationship with local groups, Solidez works on the basis of written contractual agreements.

Two other elements have helped to promote independence: training at all levels, and setting up support committees for the boards of directors. In some local groups, the hierarchical structures and the ensuing dynamic led to authoritarian styles of leadership. Creating support committees has helped improve internal democracy and participation in decision-making.

The committees have addressed these issues of power and responsibility while simultaneously easing the workload of board members. The traditional organisational structure, however, is the only legally recognised one, and can often become an obstacle in women's collective and individual empowerment by continuing to sustain a culture based on inequalities and hierarchy.

Priorities for local strategies

For this profile, we asked women with disabilities in local organisations to complete a

Solidez has campaigned successfully to get access ramps installed in public places, like this shopping centre



matrix to establish their priorities. They all spoke of the sadness and isolation that they had experienced before becoming involved, and were acutely aware of the importance of their actions in supporting and defending women with disabilities from discrimination and violence.

The women related their access to auxiliary devices (eg: orthopaedic aids, wheelchairs etc.) to an increased sense of mobility and independence. When they were asked about which activities they valued most, they rated these factors above all others, although they also considered skills and gender training important for raising self-esteem, overcoming discrimination and widening opportunities.

In only one place did the women prioritise skills training for paid work over gender training, and only one local group felt that family awareness was more important, because of the obstacles that a woman with a disability can face within the family when she

Women with disabilities spoke of the sadness and isolation that they had experienced before becoming involved

wants to be become active outside the home. Similarly, they felt family awareness was more important on average than economic projects and credit. Conversely, in another group the women placed more emphasis on economic aspects, because of the work that had directly benefited them. All the women involved in these debates emphasised the

importance of an integrated approach alongside the components already included.

The following results are an expression of the average value or priority that the women gave to each activity in relation to others (1 being the most important):

- 1 Mutual support and accompaniment
- 2 Auxiliary devices (eg: orthopaedic aids, wheelchairs etc.)
- 3 Gender training

- 4 Work-skills training
- 5 Awareness raising within the family
- 6 Economic projects and credit
- 7 Awareness raising with institutions.

Empowerment and personal growth

Historically, Solidez has focused on two central strategies: organising and providing economic support (through projects, training women for integration in the workforce and providing credit). While contributing to the women's overall self-esteem, this focus does not allow for an open discussion of experiences and feelings related to the causes of low self-esteem, nor for a strategic vision to be developed.

The most difficult aspect of Solidez's work has been improving skills and knowledge, and developing awareness, autonomy and self-esteem

The team recognises that this focus has had later repercussions, in that the vision and dreams of most of the women are very limited, and their goals are very short term. This focus is also one of the reasons that the process of appreciating the importance of collective organisation was slow. It also meant that some of the women were not as willing as they might have been to participate actively in local groups.

The most difficult aspect of Solidez's work has been improving skills and knowledge, and developing awareness, autonomy and self-esteem. It was only recently that it introduced new elements—for example, gender, self-esteem and reinforcing of women's individual identities—as an explicit part of its strategy. These elements, however, are especially important for the success of the women's organisation and their projects, given that they are essential ingredients of their empowerment. They are analysed in this profile using a widely accepted four-part strategy based on the following categories:³

³ Ellesberg, Mary 'El camino hacia la igualdad: guía de evaluación de proyectos de empoderamiento de las mujeres' ASDI (Swedish Agency for International Development) 1997, and other sources including Almaciara D'Angelo 'Indicadores de empoderamiento de las mujeres', Musavia-FNUAP 1999, and Williams, Suzanne 'The Oxfam Gender Training Manual' 1994.

- › Awareness, autonomy and self-esteem (psychological)
- › Acquisition of knowledge and skills (cognitive)
- › Organisation, participation and leadership (political)
- › Access to, and control of resources and services (economic).

Within each of these categories women advance in stages, often progressing unevenly or combining several stages at once, depending on their circumstances and experiences. These stages involve:

- › Survival or improving wellbeing
- › Widening their access to resources of all kinds, including knowledge and understanding
- › Participating more fully in decisions that affect their lives
- › Having control over their own lives in these different aspects.

Problems of self-esteem have also led to conflicts between some of the women,

especially about issues such as access to funding, power and leadership. Local meetings are sometimes charged with tension or even emotionally violent confrontations. When these issues are not dealt with directly by a board of directors, members have sometimes passed anonymous notes with

their complaints, reinforcing the dependence on leaders. It can also become difficult to ensure transparency and to adhere to rules and statutes.

When the rules have been adhered to, however, local leaders and women from the Solidez team have taken on an important role in conflict resolution—even though this means taking on additional responsibilities and heavy emotional burdens. Local leaders, however, have few formal tools to deal with the

complexity of emotional crises and conflicts and are frequently involved in these conflicts, either directly or indirectly. All of this tends to increase the dependence on Solidez as a ‘neutral’ arbitrator.

As such, there is widespread recognition of the need to develop tools for handling situations of disagreement, tension and conflict, as well as for dealing with emotional crises in meetings and participatory workshops.

Solidez also recognises that it needs to further develop methodologies for awareness raising and self-help groups and to train the women to implement them. For example, the video ‘La Dulce Mirada’ has provided women with a new space for catharsis and mutual reinforcement, but an

attempt to organise a self-help group in one of the local groups met with limited success and was discontinued. In spite of this, however, the experience was valued as very positive, if rather inconclusive.

As a result of becoming involved in organising themselves, most women have acknowledged personal changes and growth in their self-confidence, self-esteem, social mobility and interaction. As organised women with disabilities and leaders in their communities, they have also defended other women against discrimination and violence. This means that their empowerment is transferred to the social and political terrain—something Solidez encourages and supports.

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Introducing a gender perspective

The Solidez team and the co-ordinators of the local groups have attended a series of workshops on introducing a gender perspective. These workshops have covered:

- › Sex and gender identity (including the image of women)
- › The basis of oppression

Local leaders and women from the Solidez team have taken on an important role in conflict resolution



Hearing loss is no longer a bar to employment for this women who has found enjoyable and interesting work as a hairstylist.

- › Sexuality, pleasure and life stages
- › Violence within families and within couples.

Solidez plans to run workshops on reproductive health, leadership and empowerment, as part of the cycle. After these workshops have been carried out at the national level, they are then replicated locally with the boards of directors and support committees.

The women enthusiastically welcomed the participatory methodology used in the workshops. It is based on sharing intimate life experiences and analysing how the participants' experiences form part of identifiable patterns of behaviour, rooted in social formation and discrimination, or in their resistance to these negative traditions. The workshops also included work on the body—relaxation exercises, meditation and self-care—using bio-energy methodology.⁴

Speaking with the women on the Solidez team and in local groups, it was clear that gender

training was the most highly valued activity in relation to improving self-acceptance and self-esteem, understanding gender roles and traditions and in improving interpersonal relations. Because of this, gender training is seen as a high priority in organising strategies.

Members of the Solidez team valued the importance of seeing themselves in the mirror, working on themselves first as a way of preparing themselves to replicate the workshop and its contents. Rosa Salgado, a member of the Solidez women's team and a leader from Chinandega, explained: 'We have learnt to be able to analyse and judge our own selves, blame ourselves less and analyse the causes of our problems, our difficulties and successes as women with disabilities.'

The participatory methodology is based on sharing intimate life experiences and analysing how they form identifiable patterns of behaviour

Some of the themes that the women explored included issues that have traditionally been

⁴ Bio-energy is a methodology based on the intimate relationship between physical, emotional and psychological behaviour. It is used by some women's organisations and feminist popular education facilitators as a form of working on self-esteem, gender consciousness and mental and physical health.

taboo. The workshops encourage an intimacy amongst the participants, which empowers them to speak about issues that previously would have caused them embarrassment or shame, such as sexual relationships, contraception and pregnancy, and violence.

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There is also a broader vision of the relationship between mothers with disabilities and children, as previously many women saw their children in a more utilitarian way in relation to their own needs and dependencies rather than the children's own lives.

The Solidez team and local leaders are experiencing excellent results as they replicate and adapt these workshops to local conditions. Several women felt that facilitating these workshops had given them new abilities, as well as new ideas. For example, since the workshop on violence, which included a study of the law against domestic violence, the participants have felt capable of offering support and advice to women in situations of violence.

They are also passing on their knowledge and making better use of local resources, such as other women's organisations and NGOs, and the Commissariats for Women and Children.⁵

Facilitators have still faced some difficulty in ensuring participation when women are very timid or withdrawn, but in general, they felt that the participatory methodology had been very useful. It is not yet clear how they will follow up on this cycle of workshops.

Sexuality issues

The issue of sexuality is at the centre of work on self-esteem and gender awareness. As a result of discussing sexuality openly and positively, many women now feel free to

speak in a more daring way about sex and sexuality, even though this is limited by the prejudices of the dominant heterosexist culture in Nicaragua.

Some women have become involved for the first time in sexual and intimate relationships. This has resulted in some women experiencing further discrimination in new areas, although there have also been some positive experiences. The enthusiasm for sexual 'liberation' has also had an adverse effect on several local organisations, as it has resulted in a number of pregnancies and the women involved have withdrawn temporarily or permanently from their active involvement in the organisation. In some cases, pregnancy has had more serious physical and emotional consequences for individual women.

The Solidez team, while celebrating the fact that attitudes are becoming more open, is keen to discuss the women's different reactions to the way these issues have been treated. In addition to forthcoming workshops on reproductive health and high-risk pregnancies, the issue of sexuality needs to be addressed in more depth.

Leadership issues

A major achievement of Solidez's work is that it has developed leadership skills and qualities among women with disabilities, and that these women now take initiative and assume new responsibilities. There is one serious obstacle in developing democratic leadership in most local organisations, however—an underlying fear of change and of facing challenges. While the organisations' statutes provide for rotation in the boards of directors, it is more comfortable and safe to be a member of the assembly than to assume specific organisational responsibilities.

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⁵ These are specialised police officers and social workers who are organised in co-ordination with non-governmental organisations, women's groups and some state institutions.

A major achievement of Solidez's work is that it has developed leadership skills among women with disabilities

In addition to this, established leaders often feel that being rotated with others is a waste of what they have learned and worked to build, or is a loss of power. In practice, it also means a loss of income, however small the economic incentive may seem. As such, in many groups, leadership is

deposited in very few people, undermining, over time, the empowerment of others and the development of collective capabilities. Some local organisations have eased tensions and changed attitudes in this sense by shifting decision-making from the formal board of directors to a more open structure including support committees and sharing responsibilities and financial incentives.

The issue of leadership is difficult for any women's organisation and it is vital that

organised women with disabilities establish closer links with the autonomous women's movement and feminist organisations. This will not only benefit their collective self-esteem as women, but will also give them access to the resources, theory and practical experience of other local, regional and national women's organisations. This contact helps to break down barriers of mistrust, prejudice and discrimination among the women, who themselves have diverse identities and common interests. It also enables strategic gains in terms of lobbying and campaign work.

Raising local awareness

In order to raise the profile of women with disabilities in their own communities, Solidez has promoted neighbourhood meetings, and has organised meetings with local organisations and institutions, in which the

Active member of the local group in La Dahlia relaxes with her children.



women present their situation (often with the use of the 'La Dulce Mirada' video). In these meetings, participants are invited to commit themselves to different kinds of support for the local group.

In general, the best responses have come from non-governmental organisations, although some local authorities have also been supportive. In some cases, local NGOs have wanted to absorb the women's groups as beneficiaries and have had difficulty in managing relations between themselves, the groups and other supportive NGOs.⁶ In many cases, however, government and non-governmental services alike have merely paid lip service to the women's efforts in raising awareness. Even in those NGOs and institutions in which some form of action has been taken, the buildings themselves often remain inaccessible for women with disabilities.



Co-ordinator of local group in La Dahlia.

other women's organisations and local government members.

One highly successful strategy for community awareness has been developing local radio programmes—a highly economical and accessible medium that does not require literacy. The programmes reach women with disabilities isolated in the home, as well as provoking more awareness in their immediate friends and family. These programmes have challenged schematic and discriminatory views about women with disabilities. Most radio programmes are magazine shows and the women themselves are the producers and announcers, which helps to demystify the technology, raise self-esteem and enables them to gain recognition for their abilities.

This project has greatly increased the visibility of women with disabilities and the problems they face, while also covering topics of interest to women and the community as a whole, especially relating to health and gender. These programmes have also been used as ways of denouncing violence, discrimination and abuse against women as well as rallying support for the

One highly successful strategy for community awareness has been developing local radio programmes

In some areas, women in local groups have been quick to take advantage of the recent municipal elections in pressuring individual candidates to commit themselves to improving conditions for women with disabilities. Even so, very few of the local groups participated

in building local non-party agendas that were being organised by the women's movement and some NGOs. Some candidates committed themselves to support during and after Election Day on November 5.

In some cases, this was only a device to capture votes. However, in general, those candidates who are critical of problems such as poverty and social discrimination in the community tend to be more sensitive to the difficulties faced by women with disabilities. So it is important to follow up on campaign commitments, and to form alliances with

While no formal studies have been carried out to measure the impact of radio, many women report changes in attitudes in the local population

⁶ This is generally a problem in Nicaragua. There are many NGOs, and they are not always clear about the difference between themselves and social movements, and about how their own leadership affects that of organised social groups. Also, NGOs often reproduce forms of dependency by relating to social organisations as 'beneficiaries'. This has the tendency to create a neo-feudal mentality, which has not been seriously questioned in public, and which does little in the long run to empower women or community organisations.

groups' specific needs from organisations and individuals and the community as a whole.

Many women have been trained to make radio programmes by people working at local radio stations, or by a women's organisation working in radio production. As well as giving them basic skills in writing for radio, production and in radio announcing, the training programme also represents an opportunity to establish specialised roles for active women in the organisation, and creates a more decentralised division of labour.

However, this outcome depends on the

particular talents of the women involved, and on the attitude of the women leaders in making room for new leaders.

While no formal studies have been carried out to measure the impact of the use of radio, many women report changes in attitudes in members of the local population and local

organisations as a result of the increased visibility in the community that radio guarantees.

The Solidez women's team has produced a flyer about its work with women. It has also set up TV and radio spots on local and national stations, and it has broadcast two videos on local cable television, and national TV channels. This has contributed to raising public awareness about the problems faced by women with disabilities, although its precise impact has not been measured. To quantify the results of the programme and develop its social communication skills and strategies further, Solidez will need to seek extra material resources and strengthen or expand its human resources.

Building sustainability

Solidez's attempts to build sustainability need to be seen within the context of the ongoing difficulties related to Nicaragua's national

economy and the lack of social stability. As such, it is a middle- to long-term goal. In terms of social sustainability, Solidez is investing a lot of energy in preparing team co-ordinators and local co-ordinators to make sure knowledge, tools of analysis and skills are passed on.

It is difficult to promote economic sustainability when Solidez members are living in extreme poverty. Raising their living standards through credit funds and collective projects has been a major priority. In the case of credit funds, more has been achieved by individuals than by projects organised collectively between several members that do not belong directly to the local group. Nevertheless, several groups have obtained very high repayment rates from loans to individual women, and have now established their own funds independently of Solidez.

If it is to be successful, Solidez needs to link its economic stability and empowerment building more closely to other forms of empowerment (such as acquisition of knowledge and skills, self-esteem and organisation).

Most of the training for economic benefit has been in traditional women's work (food and services, bakery, beauty salon, piñatas—a type of toy that is broken open and has gifts inside—and other handicrafts) that reinforces gender stereotypes, including traditional concepts of feminine physical beauty, which disempower women with disabilities. In addition, these types of work are undervalued, labour intensive and not very profitable.

In one town, however, where the bicycle is the most common and popular form of transport, some women are running a bicycle repair shop, a potentially profitable enterprise as well as an opportunity for women's empowerment. Other non-traditional women's projects like this one already exist elsewhere in Nicaragua, and promoting exchanges would open up opportunities for

Solidez's attempts to build sustainability need to be seen within the context of the ongoing difficulties of Nicaragua's national economy and the lack of social stability

It is difficult to promote economic sustainability when Solidez members are living in extreme poverty



Piñatas—large toys containing gifts—are broken open during parties. SOLIDEZ supports employment training in making piñatas and other handicrafts, in bread- and cake-baking, and beauty therapies.

further training and mutual support. It is also important that women with disabilities in local groups have more contact with the autonomous women’s movement as a whole.

Members of local boards of directors do not have access to credit funds but instead receive incentives from Solidez as recognition for the additional work and responsibility undertaken. The incentives are linked to

performance, and each woman must evaluate her monthly work and be evaluated by others in order to receive her incentive. In some places, the sum total of the incentives is shared out among all the women who collaborate actively. However, the incentives have been a source of conflict and gossip among members. Part of the problem is that these incentives are

given by Solidez rather than the women’s own organisations, so the members feel envious or mistrustful, or fear abuse.

In one town women are running a bicycle repair shop, a potentially profitable enterprise as well as an opportunity for women’s empowerment

One major challenge for Solidez is to build a collective strategic vision both for social and financial sustainability. This goal is fuelled by an analysis of women’s accumulated individual and collective experiences. Its success depends on Solidez promoting participatory processes of evaluation and planning, and searching for viable and sustainable economic alternatives that simultaneously allow women to achieve other goals for their empowerment.

Solidez’s work to transform the culture of dependency and to support the organisational work of local groups is in itself strategic because it links women’s individual and collective empowerment to the use of local resources and local awareness. This helps to ensure that the women’s independence is real and that it is not simply a transfer of dependence from Solidez to an international NGO or financial agency.

Solidez’s work to transform the culture of dependency and to support local groups links women’s individual and collective empowerment to the use of local resources and local awareness

3 Beyond local horizons

The local level work of the organisations of women with disabilities is complemented by some departmental or regional level activity and by a new National Council of Women with Disabilities. The Solidez programme also supports local organisations to build links with amenable local governments and local institutions.

Departmental or regional organisation of women with disabilities

Despite some co-ordination between municipalities in close geographical location, no structured departmental or regional co-ordination efforts exist independently from Solidez. In some regions, FECONORI⁷ is organising departmental human rights commissions with the non-governmental groups working with people with disabilities, and local group members are becoming involved.

Some local groups have also participated sporadically in meetings, political actions and campaigns of regional women's networks. However, these relationships need to be strengthened further, through participation that is more regular, and awareness raising within the women's movement.

National co-ordination between organisations of women with disabilities

In 1996, through the work of Solidez, the National Council of Women with Disabilities was formed, although this had not been part of the organisation's operational plans. The council's aims were to:

- ▶ Help consolidate and co-ordinate local organisations

- ▶ Raise the profile of women with disabilities nationally, among the general public
- ▶ Act as a watchdog to make sure Act 272 was implemented. (This law relates to preventing disabilities and providing rehabilitation, equipment and access to opportunities for people with disabilities.)

The council is made up of 10 organisations, two of which are new. At present, only those organisations working with Solidez are participating. The National Board of Directors has monthly meetings to review the situation of local organisations, and to follow up on needs that require national initiatives such as availability of medicines and auxiliary devices. They have also been involved in some actions sponsored by FENOCORI, such as working on the new legislation for rehabilitation and integration, as well as national campaigns and exchanges between organisations of people with disabilities.

However, the council is still in the process of strengthening its role, and seems to rely heavily on Solidez for advice and logistical help. In this sense, Solidez itself has had more impact in FECONORI in this period than the Women's Council. However, this situation will most probably change as other

A Solidez workshop in Masaya makes bamboo furniture for sale.



⁷ FECONORI is the Nicaraguan federation of non-governmental organisations that work with people with disabilities for rehabilitation and integration.

organisations of women with disabilities not tied to Solidez become involved, as council members receive more training and gain confidence and leadership skills, and as the council assumes direct representation in FECONORI and the women's movement.

The Women with Disabilities Programme has emphasised the consolidation of local groups and the development of relations with amenable local governments and institutions

Local and national advocacy work

In order to develop advocacy work directly from the perspectives of women with disabilities, the Women with Disabilities Programme has emphasised the consolidation of local groups and the development of relations with amenable local governments and institutions. This support

for women with disabilities translates directly into practical changes—it is easier now than it was before for women to make elected representatives and officials accountable for their promises and progressive language.

On a departmental or regional level, most advocacy work is tied to national initiatives in which Solidez has directly participated as an NGO. At the beginning of the last decade, Solidez was working directly with the National Council for Rehabilitation and Integration alongside non-governmental groups, co-ordinated by the Ministry of Health. However, government interest waned, and it effectively withdrew support.⁸ Consequently, state representatives abandoned many of the departmental commissions and their programmes, and many projects (for example, those in Chinandega and Belén) no longer function.

Following this experience, non-governmental groups formed FECONORI and began to focus on altering new legislation (Act 202) in favour of rehabilitating and integrating people with disabilities into the community. This law is an important instrument for changing

national state policies and practices, and provides for a series of mechanisms to guarantee changes. The National Council, supported by the Finnish government, has now been revived, but the ratio of government to non-governmental representatives is 9:3. The result is that government or state positions dominate in any negotiation.

FECONORI is now working on a proposal to reform certain aspects of the law in an attempt to gain civil society representation that is equal to that of the state (ie 50:50). It also aims to establish the National Council as an autonomous entity, removing the Ministry of Health as the sole co-ordinator, and to develop mechanisms to guarantee that state institutions fulfil the responsibilities prescribed to them by law.

In the advocacy work carried out by FECONORI, the approaches of member organisations have evolved from confrontational tactics at the beginning of the 1990s to today's more diplomatic style—negotiating with government and state entities. Through lobbying efforts, groups have formed alliances with key people, especially in the National Assembly.

FECONORI seeks to include and represent all the disabled people's organisations, as well as NGOs working in rehabilitation and integration. This approach allows for more autonomy from politically polarised positions, and for a more 'neutral' image that more genuinely represents the diversity of the disabled community. FECONORI has also begun a process designed to prevent duplication between different organisations and NGOs, encouraging unified organisation and actions where possible. FECONORI also carries out most of its work through relatively autonomous thematic commissions, such as:

The Solidez leadership is interested in the direct participation of women with disabilities in FECONORI

⁸ In general, the Nicaraguan government has withdrawn support from all social services directed at aid to the vast majority living at or below the poverty line. This is due to neo-liberal economic policies and to the personal attitudes of top officials in what has been widely recognised as a government plagued with political self-interest and corruption.

- › Organisation
- › Human Rights
- › Access to Work
- › Public Awareness.

Solidez believes that this is a more efficient way of organising while maintaining the information flow between all its members.

FECONORI has managed to gain membership on the advisory council of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports responsible for overseeing the educational curriculum. This allows FECONORI to have direct participation in the curriculum from primary school level onwards and also in sign-language training.

In the recent municipal elections, FECONORI co-ordinated with one of the national television channels to ensure that its members could participate in TV debates between local candidates.⁹ This alliance secured broad media coverage on a regular morning programme on this national channel.

FECONORI has also managed to establish relations with the communications media in general, as well as the faculty of communication and journalism at the Jesuit-run University of Central America, one of the largest universities in the country.

FECONORI has also turned its lobbying efforts to the private sector, and has managed to establish closer relations with private banks. As a result, it has received donations that have helped cover its organisational costs.

The Solidez leadership is interested in the direct participation of women with disabilities in FECONORI. In turn, it sees FECONORI's participation in the National Council as an opportunity for promoting closer relations between different groups of women with disabilities, healing historical rivalries, and articulating with a stronger unified voice. This would be a positive step forward for women with disabilities in empowering themselves politically in their dealings with NGOs and groups of men with disabilities, as well as state and government representatives.

⁹ The only debate in which local women's group were to intervene (in Estelí), was unfortunately cancelled because of heavy rain.



Members of local group in La Dahlia, a quite remote mountainous village.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

The strategies implemented by Solidez have contributed enormously to the empowerment of women with disabilities in all its dimensions, and the improvement of their

“For me the most important thing is that we are seeing women with disabilities leave their homes, win over their families, overcome their shame in public and carry out so many activities” —Member of Local Group, Belén

lives. However, in the future the organisation needs to continue to place emphasis on developing an integrated strategic vision. To enable this to occur and to continue to contribute to the strengthening and deepening of the empowerment of women with disabilities, it must implement ongoing internal processes of critical analysis.

As a starting point, it could focus on the following dimensions of its work:

Research, analysis, planning and monitoring

- ▶ Designing and implementing participatory research, diagnostics and evaluations that generate information and increase women’s awareness
- ▶ Establishing a more balanced programme team with strengthened professionalism and a clearer vision and methodology as facilitators of empowerment processes
- ▶ Further developing and implementing gender training and feminist popular education methodology (which recognises the subjective process, i.e. that personal issues are political ones) as key tools for building individual empowerment and self-esteem
- ▶ Developing self-critical tools for analysing power and leadership to enhance democratic, non-competitive leadership

- ▶ Strengthening strategic and yearly plans that allow for adequate human resources, clearer priorities and time for processes of reflection and training within the team
- ▶ Setting up mechanisms to monitor and measure the impact of radio and video, both as a means to increase self-esteem and to disseminate information
- ▶ Ensuring greater clarity within the programme team in relation to the implications of Solidez’s policy of non-affiliation and the promotion of organisational autonomy

Work with local groups

- ▶ Further developing formal and informal strategies that systematically promote the participation of women with disabilities in local groups, as well as enhancing their self-esteem, independence, social mobility and interaction
- ▶ Further developing appropriate methodologies that enable the largest possible number of people to participate, and for this work to be disseminated among the community
- ▶ Promoting flexible and creative ways of working with women with disabilities (participatory methodologies) that simultaneously guarantee the consolidation of local organisations and their capacity for critical thinking and analysis
- ▶ Promoting styles and models of leadership that guarantee transparency in communicating decision-making, especially in financial matters

By concentrating on people’s abilities rather than on their disabilities, Solidez has demonstrated its capacity to contribute creatively to improving the quality of life of people with disabilities



The co-ordinator of the La Dahlia Group walks around the village to gather women together for the group meeting.

- › Developing interpersonal communications' skills to enable conflict resolution to be carried out positively and creatively
- › Conceptualising economic projects in relation to other aspects of women's empowerment, prioritising human processes over technical or economic assistance and ensuring that necessary market research is carried out beforehand

Networking

- › Strengthening local, regional and national networks between women with disabilities and with other state, local government and civil society organisations, and forging links with other women's organisations

- › Democratising and consolidating local, regional and national structures and establishing mechanisms that ensure that women with disabilities are represented at a national level.

By concentrating on people's abilities rather than on their disabilities, Solidez has demonstrated its capacity to contribute creatively to improving the quality of life of people with disabilities. Solidez could increase that contribution by expressing a coherent and comprehensive strategy for the future. This, in turn, would greatly enhance the processes of empowerment currently being undertaken by women with disabilities.



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