

*Citizens defending their rights*

**Lessons for women's political participation in Central America**

*Michael Clulow*

*Revision: Felicity Manson*



LAS DIGNAS



*Las Melidas*



**Grupo Venancia** is a feminist popular education collective based in Matagalpa, Nicaragua where it has worked for over 13 years. The group's principal objectives are: the strengthening of collective and individual leadership of women of all ages; the transformation of discriminatory beliefs, attitudes and practices; and the promotion of a culture of equity, diversity and creativity.



**The Women's Association for Dignity and Life "Las Dignas"** was founded in El Salvador in 1990. Since then Las Dignas have sought to contribute to the struggle of the

women's movement through four principal areas of action: anti-sexist education; the improvement of women's economic conditions; gender violence; and political participation and leadership.



**The Mélida Anaya Montes Women's Association (Las Mélidas)**

celebrated its tenth anniversary in July 2002. During those

ten years, this Salvadorian organisation has been active in widely varying areas of work including: feminist education; political participation and citizens' initiatives; health; domestic and gender-based violence; socio-economic development; and workers' rights.



**The Women's Support Centre, Tierra Viva**

was created in Guatemala in 1989 with the

mission to confront the inequality, subordination and discrimination of women. The group seeks to influence political decision-making; support the creation and growth of local women's organisations; and to contribute to raising the awareness of all Guatemalans about women's rights.



**The Women's Study Centre-Honduras (CEM-H)**

has worked for 16 years to promote: women's human rights; participation and leadership; the eradication of violence; and sexual and reproductive health. The centre's principal strategies are lobbying, public mobilisation and the strengthening of the women's movement.



**One World Action** works for a world free from poverty and oppression in which strong democracies safeguard the

rights of all people. To this end, it provides money, expertise and practical help to organisations committed to strengthening the democratic process and improving people's lives in poor and developing countries. One World Action also helps its partners to forge closer links with decision makers in Britain and the European Union, and influence them.

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***With the support of the Community Fund, UK***



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## *Introduction*

Although it is ten years since the Beijing Conference on Women launched its historic platform for action, and a similar length of time since the end of the internal wars which afflicted Central America, women in this region continue to be second-class citizens and are exposed to violence on a daily basis. Similarly, although four decades have passed since the so-called sexual revolution, many women must still submit to men in all decisions on their sexuality and reproduction.

This continuing discrimination, and the difficulties women face when seeking support from the State in their struggle for change, led five Central American feminist organisations—CEM-H from Honduras, Grupo Venancia from Nicaragua, Las Dignas and Las Mélicas from El Salvador and Tierra Viva from Guatemala—to put together a programme of joint and individual activities to promote and facilitate the exercise of women’s active citizenship in their region. Under the title “Building Women’s Citizenship and Governance” this project was funded by the European Commission and the UK National Lottery Board’s Community Fund.

For three and a half years, the five partners have implemented diverse activities focusing on: the strengthening of women’s leadership in civil society organisations and government; the development, approval and implementation of public policies which promote gender equity; and, the promotion of a culture in which women’s rights are respected. Some considerable success has been achieved both in terms of women’s mobilisation and organisation and in the approval of local and national laws, policies and mechanisms which promote gender equity and women’s rights.

The present document seeks to systematise the experience of the programme, principally through the identification of its most important lessons. It is our hope that these may help inform not only our partners’ future work but also work by other organisations on women’s political participation, international aid activities which promote gender equity, and the activities of the women’s movement in the region and elsewhere.

### **Note**

Many of the matters touched on briefly here have been dealt with in greater detail in publications produced during the course of the project. These can be obtained free of charge from One World Action or any of the five participating organisations. A list of these documents is appended at the end of the present systematisation.

# 1 What is happening in Central America?

Over the last two decades, the face of Central America has changed considerably. The wars and dictatorships which typified the region were consigned to the past. Guerrilla leaders became politicians or formed NGOs. Electoral democracy flourished. Economies were opened to the “logic of the market”. Local governments began to assume a more prominent role while decentralisation and participation became watchwords of public life.

In this context, many feminist and women’s organisations were created and have become familiar national and local actors. They have made their presence felt in the media and in the streets and have had some success in lobbying for public policies to address women’s problems.

Unfortunately, this “extreme makeover” is only skin deep. The scars of war are yet to heal and Central American societies are, if anything, more violent than ever. Old political and economic elites have proved extraordinarily resilient, with historic right wing parties and their allies still in power. The new parties of the left have been unable to pass from opposition to power; even where they are strong, as in Nicaragua and El Salvador, they have not been able to move from governing municipalities to controlling national government. Decentralisation is something of a myth and local governments remain chronically under funded.<sup>1</sup> Participation is taken by central government to mean the convening of consultations with civil society organisations which are much publicised and photographed but the results of which are flagrantly ignored.

In the economic realm, market liberalisation has caused increasing disparities of wealth

with the great majority of the population excluded from the benefits of economic growth. The region’s governments have been enthusiastic disciples of neoliberalism, especially when reducing social spending. The pressure exerted by the international financial institutions makes any deviance from this course extremely difficult. For example, an IMF mission to Nicaragua in January 2003 openly threatened to block all official aid to the country if congressional proposals to modestly increase public sector salaries for police, teachers and health workers were passed.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, previous language about the eradication of poverty has been watered down; under World Bank guidance, the governments of the region have now developed poverty *reduction* strategies.

Similarly, the advocates of women’s rights have discovered that the region’s *machista* culture is difficult to change. True, there have been changes in laws and new policies which, on paper, represent great strides forward: measures on violence against women, policies to improve reproductive health, quotas for participation in elections and others. At the same time, public attitudes and public discourse reflect changing sensibilities. Nevertheless, even in relation to violence—the area of greatest activity by the women’s movement and greatest progress in legal reform—it is difficult to argue that there has been real change. In fact, the numbers of murders of women are growing, reaching alarming proportions reminiscent of the much publicised situation in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. But the response of the authorities—police, courts, government—and society in general to this situation is very weak.

## 2 What do women want?

When the “Building Women’s Citizenship and Governance” programme was designed, the focus was on getting women involved in public decision-making and the political process, and on increasing their effectiveness in those spheres. This was related to analysis of the situation of women in each country so as to clarify national and regional priorities, but without tying the project implementing agencies (from here on referred to as “partners”) to specific themes of political action. Once the programme began, annual planning meetings updated the original exchange of information so allowing fine-tuning of regional activities.

The themes which the partners chose to focus on reflect those which are causing most concern to feminists and other members of the women’s movement in Central America. This prioritisation of issues has involved literally thousands of women—members of grassroots organisations, feminist networks and mixed-sex NGOs, community leaders, local mayors and councillors—who have expressed their concerns and contributed their ideas through the many meetings, forums, training courses and other events held under the programme.

So, on this basis, what can it be said that Central American women want today? Essentially, they want freedom from all types of discrimination based on their gender. More specifically, four dimensions of freedom have been highlighted without which, true citizenship is not possible.

### **Freedom to participate in public office and decision-making**

Women’s ability to participate in the political process—from community level up

to national governments—is restricted by a series of undeclared barriers. The political parties are controlled by men who overtly and covertly resist women’s participation. Where quotas exist they are written or interpreted in ways which limit their effectiveness, or are simply ignored.<sup>3</sup> To participate as candidates, campaign costs must be covered and the parties also require that quotas be paid, something which is frequently more difficult for women because of their limited financial independence. Women who present themselves as candidates or are elected are exposed to destructive criticism, innuendo and denigrating comments about their private and public life or any of their physical or personal characteristics. Their abilities and their proposals are questioned or even ridiculed, they are marginalised by their own party members and mostly they are limited to positions that are considered to be of limited importance.

As a result of these factors the numbers of women in elected office are low. For example, women make up only 7% of Honduran legislators and 9% of Salvadorian Legislative Assembly members, while in Guatemala only eight of the country’s 361 mayors are women. While women’s participation in government does not guarantee that women’s rights and needs will be emphasised, without more women in power the possibilities of their priorities shaping public policy are much reduced.

### **Freedom from poverty**

While it would be counterproductive to place the eradication of poverty before the elimination of gender discrimination, there is no question that the daily struggle of most Central American women to make



ends meet is of fundamental importance. Women make up a disproportionate percentage of people living in poverty. For example, women in El Salvador make up 80% of the population earning less than \$45 per month and 58% of all the poor.<sup>4</sup>

The effects of neoliberal globalisation are of particular concern as unequal competition from transnational companies squeezes out small producers, market traders and others, while public sector spending restrictions reduce jobs and wages in health, education and other sectors that employ high numbers of women. In this context, the recently signed Central American Free Trade Agreement will further disadvantage peasant farmers and small and micro-businesses. At the same time, cuts in public spending and the privatisation of public services, mandated as part of the neoliberal model, also increase women's poverty as they have less and less access to free or low cost health care and education—either for themselves or for their children whose care is largely seen as women's responsibility.

Women's poverty can also be seen in their limited access to a whole range of services. Not only health and education but public transport, local roads, pavements, street lighting, household electricity, drinking water, sewerage, day-care for children and vocational training among others. Many of these problems also affect men but women tend to bear the brunt of deficiencies in services which affect the home and the local neighbourhood. The ways in which decisions are made on local or national government spending tend to reflect men's priorities and leave few resources for addressing issues prioritised by women.

### **Freedom from violence**

The lives of Central American women are marked by various types of violence, including domestic and sexual violence as

well as non-physical violence, such as institutional and economic violence. Domestic violence has been given much attention but continues to be a daily reality for many women. It is also intimately linked to sexual violence. Although this form of violence is often portrayed as being perpetrated by strangers, most often the attackers are partners, fathers, relatives or family friends and the scene of the crime is the home. The first sexual experiences of many Central American women are the result of abuse or rape by members of their own families, often while still children. Many adult women are subject to aggression and outright violence from their partners who feel that they have the right to demand sex with or without their partners' consent. Sexual violence also includes the coercion which attends the many forms of sexual exploitation.

A new area of concern is femicide. This new term, used to characterise murders of women, is justified partly by the deliberate nature of many murders, as opposed to those which occur as the unintended effect of other types of violence. The term is also justified because of the alarming increase in these murders. Femicide is taking on epidemic proportions, especially in those areas where there is a concentration of transnational investment and female employment in export-processing (*maquilas*) and in tourism. In Honduras, every three days, two women are murdered. Half of these are die due to domestic violence, the other half are killed by men with whom they have no kind of "domestic" relationship.<sup>5</sup> During 2003 more than 200 women were killed in Guatemala City alone.<sup>6</sup> Rates are lower in El Salvador but rising, from 42 women murdered in 2003 to 73 in 2004.<sup>7</sup>

## **Freedom to take their own decisions on sexuality and reproduction**

Many facets of Central American culture lead to the demand that women should be submissive to men, sexually faithful, and that they become exemplary mothers dedicated to the care of their menfolk and their children. Most men consider that they have the right to decide when and how to have sexual relations and whether “their” women should use contraception. Often they will decide not to use condoms even at the risk of transmitting disease or making their partners pregnant. Lesbianism is anathema and those who promote respect for diverse sexual orientations are vilified. Motherhood is practically an obligation and, at the same time, converted into a myth which seduces many young girls. Abortion is completely illegal or severely restricted. Many women, especially among adolescents and the poor, have limited access to appropriate contraceptive methods and advice is limited. School curriculums do not include sex education.

All in all, women have very limited ability to determine how to live their sexuality or to take their own decisions on reproduction. They are nominally citizens—women may vote and be elected to public office, they pay taxes, they are considered subjects of human rights—but at the most elemental level, the control of one’s body, their citizenship is denied.

It would be a mistake to think that physical health and reproductive indicators are the most important expressions of this denial of women’s rights, nevertheless they provide graphic illustration of its effects:

- ◆ Maternal mortality is one of the most important causes of women’s death, due to factors that include unsafe abortions and premature pregnancies. According to the World Health Organisation, the rates of maternal mortality per 100,000 live

births range from 110 in Honduras to 150 in El Salvador, 230 in Nicaragua and 240 in Guatemala.<sup>8</sup>

- ◆ The HIV/AIDS epidemic is becoming increasingly feminised with the numbers of related deaths of women of reproductive age reaching alarming levels. Over ten years, the proportion of women among Guatemalans infected with HIV has increased from one in eight to one in three. In Honduras, women now make up 41% of AIDS cases. Among Nicaraguan adolescents, 44% of affected people are women.
- ◆ There are vast numbers of unplanned and unwanted pregnancies and the rates of premature pregnancies are very high. According to Save the Children, Nicaragua has the tenth highest rate of teenage pregnancies in the world with 135 births for every 1,000 women between 15 and 19 years old.<sup>9</sup>

In all this, church leaders—especially the hierarchy of the Catholic Church but also the leadership of new evangelical churches—bear much blame as they foment conservative and fundamentalist ideas, pressure politicians and denounce those who promote sexual rights and reproductive rights as abortionists and promoters of homosexuality.

### 3 Do Central American governments promote or undermine women's rights?

Even in countries of the “North” and in the sphere of international politics, it is still common to hear the concept of women's rights being questioned. In particular, the validity of sexual rights and reproductive rights is strongly contested while the need for measures to ensure greater participation of women in political office is called into question. In Central America, where the *machista* culture still dominates, such attitudes abound. Very many people, politicians included, openly express or privately hold traditional views concerning women's place in society. As a result they fail to recognise many women's rights and they do not see women's issues as a valid category for policy formulation, still less as a priority.

Consequently, it is no surprise that Central American governments' support for women's rights has been uneven. On the positive side, pressure from the women's movement and from multilateral agencies has led to some progress. Important laws and public policies that have been approved in the region include Nicaragua's Law 230 on violence against women, the Honduran Equal Opportunities law, successive National Women's Policies in El Salvador and the Guatemalan “Plan on Equity and Public Policies for Women, 2001–2006”. Similarly, official bodies charged with the promotion and defence of women's rights have been established in all four project countries. On the international stage, all the countries of the region have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and are signatories to important international agreements

including the Programme for Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and the Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Sanction and Eradicate Violence against Women (Belem Do Pará, 1995). Negatively, implementation of these initiatives is obstructed in several ways:

- ◆ Failure to draw up regulations for the implementation of new laws.<sup>10</sup> Five years since approval, the Honduran Equal Opportunities Law is still without regulations.
- ◆ Failure to provide funding. Guatemala's Social Development Law, which was approved in 2001 and recognises gender equity as a basic principle which should be promoted by the state, specifies that the Finance Ministry should assign an annual budget for implementation but this provision is yet to be respected.
- ◆ Contradictions with other legislation and official policies. Policies and programmes which seek to reduce maternal mortality are limited in their effectiveness by the prohibition of abortion. The tendency to promote conciliation in cases of domestic violence reduces the effectiveness of legislation in this area. For example, the new Nicaraguan Penal Process Code blocks the application of preventative measures until a formal accusation has been made and legal proceedings begun.
- ◆ Opposition of public officials. Patriarchal attitudes block the access to justice of women who are often treated by police and the courts as if they were the guilty party in cases of domestic violence and

sexual assault. Moralistic attitudes and religious beliefs lead some health personnel to provide sub-standard or even inhumane treatment to women suffering from post-abortion complications, and to deny adolescent women access to contraception. In Nicaragua, Ministry of Education officials prevent the National Commission on Action against AIDS from even mentioning condom use.

While approved laws and policies are poorly implemented, other initiatives are blocked or distorted while some measures actively limit women's access to their rights. In Nicaragua, a proposed equal opportunities and rights law was approved by the Women, Youth, Children and Family Commission of the National Assembly in 2001 but not by the full assembly. In 2003, the assembly returned the proposal to the commission which decided to consult with the Catholic Church. The Bishops' Conference then proposed 30 modifications which have been incorporated wholesale into the bill, distorting the proposal almost beyond recognition. Even so, the bill is yet to pass. In the course of debating Honduras's Equal Opportunities Law in 2000, despite action by congresswomen with vigorous outside support, congressmen managed to greatly reduce the effectiveness of the article which established quotas for women in party lists for elections. They achieved the elimination of the alternation of women and men throughout electoral lists and added a provision that the quota be defined in relation to the number of seats won during the last three elections.<sup>11</sup> Similar restrictions were incorporated in the Electoral Law reform of 2004 which ratified the 30% quota for women but did not approve the alternation of women and men.

The clearest examples of laws which infringe women's rights are the complete prohibition of abortion in Honduras and El

Salvador. This prohibition not only limits women's reproductive rights but also the right of women to life by eliminating even therapeutic abortion to save women's lives. In Nicaragua, therapeutic abortion is legal in theory but in practice only available through private services. Even this is under threat as proposed modifications to the Penal Code, while not criminalising abortion directly, would introduce the crime of causing "lesions in the unborn" establishing severe penalties for whoever causes "a grave physical or psychiatric change in the foetus".

## 4 Lessons for the promotion of active and effective citizenship

Over the last three years, through joint and individual action in the framework of the programme as well as other actions to promote women's active citizenship, the partners have reaffirmed the validity of the strategies chosen and identified other newer lessons which could guide future action. Some of the most important of these lessons are discussed here.

### 4.1 The value of regional action for women's participation

Regional action to promote women's effective participation was not the most immediately obvious strategy in Central America. Although all the partners had participated in regional initiatives prior to this programme, they were initially a little hesitant regarding the value of such approaches in this area. One reason is that Central America is not sufficiently integrated for regional actions by themselves to induce national change. In addition, the need to address national particularities and to support women's groups within each country limit the ability of the partners to concentrate on regional action.

Consequently, the balance of programme activities was heavily skewed in the direction of the individual activities of each partner with regional activities limited to annual planning and evaluation meetings, two workshops—one for women in local government, the other for sharing and discussing experiences in political advocacy—and the production of a series of short publications.

However, in practice the regional nature of the project has become one of its aspects which is most valued by the partners. As they have deepened their understanding of each other's work and the current reality of their countries, the similarity of the challenges they face has been reinforced time and time again. This appreciation of the value of regional sharing led to the addition of more regional activities including a workshop to discuss the creation of a Central American association of women in local government (*see below*), and the participation of all the partners in regional meetings on abortion and issues around the promotion of secular states.

In the opinion of consultant Gema Chacón who conducted an external evaluation of the programme, "The regional focus... (converted) the programme into a tool for strengthening and joining-up the women's movement. Interest has been reawakened in a regional feminist movement through the theoretical, methodological and political support for the Central American feminist project. By facilitating closer political relations between the five organisations, strengthening the areas in which they coincide, other joint activities have been made possible outside the programme, such as the Mesoamerican Encounter<sup>12</sup> and the 28th September campaign.<sup>13</sup>

The regional workshops organised through the project met with an enthusiastic response from the women invited. In fact the workshop on women and local government—held in Suchitoto, El Salvador in September 2003—caused so much interest that the number of participants increased



from the originally projected 30 to 220, while the meeting to discuss strategies for political engagement—held in Tela, Honduras in May 2004—brought together some 84 women from around the region.

The first of these events provided a boost for the newly created Central American Network of Women and Local Government for Local Development with Gender Equity (CANW; *la Red Centroamericana de Mujeres Municipalistas por el Desarrollo Local con Equidad de Género*). This network was created through the programme a few months previously, but was not originally envisaged among its activities or goals. Its existence is another example of the increasing appreciation of the partners for regional work on women's participation. The Suchitoto meeting also provided impetus for the construction of a movement of women in local government in Nicaragua and the development of gender equity policies in several municipalities of that country.

The development of regional publications drawing together and developing the experiences and proposals of the partners has proven to be a powerful means of advancing in the design of strategies to promote women's rights. According to Chacón "the regional systematisation has contributed to the development of theory which has in turn supported training, awareness raising and advocacy". The studies show the marked similarities between the four countries and demonstrate the validity of developing common strategies.

The decision to develop national studies on sexual rights and reproductive rights—with a subsequent regional systematisation—led to this issue being given much more importance in the work of all the partners, especially in the case of Tierra Viva from

Guatemala who have made this one of their principal areas of activity as an organisation.

## 4.2 The importance of strong women's organisations

At the heart of the programme strategy is the strengthening of women's organisations and networks. This is a direct reflection of the partners' vision of themselves as first and foremost members of the feminist and women's movement and of their understanding that collective action is one of the principal means by which change can be achieved.

The importance of strong organisations can be seen in the part they have played in the development of public policy, both through actions implemented with programme support as well as others documented in programme publications. Their successes cover a broad range of issues and levels of government, from practical needs in individual communities to national legislation (*see box*).

In addition to the development of proposed legislation, policies etc. and traditional lobbying, one of the most important ways in which women's organisations have had this impact is through their support for women politicians, whose minority status and relative isolation make it difficult for them to push through legal and policy reform in favour of women without outside support. Several of the examples cited above have involved the coordinated action of women's organisations and women legislators or councillors while many women mayors and councillors have received training and participated in other programme activities.

## Successful advocacy by women's organisations

### Local needs

In El Salvador, in response to lobbying by local women's organizations, the San Rafael, Cojutepeque and San Marcos municipalities have taken action in relation to women's demands in a number of areas including housing, street improvements and lighting, disaster prevention measures, drinking water connections, literacy and access to medicines. Young women from Nacaome and Maraita in Honduras successfully lobbied their mayors to include funds for scholarships in the municipal budget.

### Municipal Gender Equity Policies

The first such policy in the region was approved by the San Salvador Municipal Council at the end of 1999, having originated as one of the points included in the Women's Platform 1997–2000 promoted by the organisations which participated in the "Prudencia Ayala" Coordinating Committee. Those organisations' actions were not limited to political pressure but included the provision of many necessary resources, especially through participation in the consultative commission and also through training and by obtaining funding. Subsequently, action by local and national women's organisations has led to the approval of similar policies in nine more Salvadorian municipalities and to negotiations on their development in other municipalities of El Salvador and Nicaragua.

### Matagalpa Municipal Gender Equity Commission

The Matagalpa Women's Network teamed up with women councillors, successfully pushing for the creation of this commission and for their participation within it. The commission has obtained funding for women's projects and, in coordination with other women's movement bodies, for actions on violence against women.

### Municipal Women's Offices

In three Honduran municipalities – Nacaome, Ojojona and Maraita – local women's networks

supported through the programme successfully lobbied for the creation of these offices.

### National legislation and policy

- ◆ Action by the Honduran Collective of Women against Violence was critical in the approval of various measures including: the National Women's Policy; the Equal Opportunities Plan; the National Action Plan on Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Girls, Boys, Adolescents and Women; increased sentences for men who murder their wives or partners; the creation of a congressional commission to investigate violence against women including femicide; reform of the electoral law to recognise the 30% quota for women's participation in the party lists of election candidates; the requirement that all political parties adopt gender equity policies; and the incorporation of women's movement representatives in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Consultative Council.
- ◆ In Guatemala, the 28th May Coordinating Committee, which campaigns on women's health, provided inputs for the creation of the National Reproductive Health Programme and women's organisations were involved in the assignment of 5% of the national budget to the Presidential Women's Secretariat.
- ◆ The Nicaraguan women's movement has been able to insert some attention to gender equity into planning processes at national and local level through participation in the discussions of the National Council for Economic and Social Planning.
- ◆ In El Salvador, women's organisations were behind reforms to the Export Processing Zone law which ban obligatory pregnancy testing for new employees and mandate child care facilities in firms with more than 100 employees. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal has responded positively to the ongoing campaign to promote women's access to elected office, promising to conduct a public forum and produce posters in support of the proposals.

Strong organisations are also necessary as a counterweight to some of the dangers implicit in dialogue with the state (*see section 4.9*) and so that the women's movement can develop and advocate its own agenda and priorities. Otherwise, there is a tendency to respond to the initiatives of governments, politicians or international aid agencies which may or may not reflect the real needs of Central American women.

### **National feminist networks**

All of the partners are members of feminist networks, action committees and informal alliances and most of the national advocacy work conducted in the framework of the programme has been carried out by the partners in their role as members of these spaces.

Nevertheless, these networks' vision of political priorities and of the nature of the women's movement has tended to be limited by their concentration in the capital cities. In addition, they have often been dominated by a small elite of individuals and organisations. These tendencies limit the participation of many women, especially young women and those from outside the capital cities, and have contributed to division, a lack of innovation and reduced impact.

In response, the partners have worked from within to strengthen these spaces and to promote renewal of their leadership. At the same time, they have placed considerable emphasis on work with organisations from outside the feminist mainstream including newly established grassroots groups in rural towns and poor urban neighbourhoods, as well as provincial networks, organisations of women in local government and others. In this way, they seek to develop a broad movement which enables women from all parts of their countries to promote change at all levels of society and in relation to the issues which particularly concern them.

### **Grassroots groups**

During the programme, four of the five partners have been involved in the establishment and strengthening of new grassroots women's organisations. CEM-H has been working with local women's networks located away from the capital city which had been created in the framework of the Women's World March in the year 2000. This work has paid off with 12 local networks now active in their areas, developing their own proposals and lobbying their municipal governments. Among the results of their efforts is the creation of Municipal Women's Offices (OMM) in three municipalities. More recently, these groups agreed to form a loose alliance –the Local Networks Feminist Connection (*Articulación Feminista de Redes Locales*).

Guatemalan project partner, Tierra Viva has been working with women's groups, midwives, NGOs and others in a number of towns around the country. Recently, it has begun to work with some of these people to establish local groups which will focus on the promotion of sexual rights and reproductive rights. In El Salvador, Las Mélicas supported the creation of the Ataco Women's Committee and the San Rafael Cedros "Association of Women for a Better World". Also in El Salvador, Las Dignas facilitated the establishment of the Salvadorian Union of Local Women's Organisations (*La Unión*) with 22 member organisations based in poor urban areas and rural communities. *La Unión* is developing relationships with the Salvadorian association of women councillors and mayors (ANDRYASAS, see below) and together with that grouping has already been active in promoting women's rights at national level.<sup>14</sup>

### **Associations and networks of women working in and/or on local government**

Through the programme, CEM-H and Las Dignas have been able to support two such



networks in their countries—the National Alliance of Honduran Women in Local Government (ANAMMH) and the National Association of Women Councillors and Mayors of El Salvador (ANDRYSAS). Las Dignas' work with ANDRYSAS dates from the creation of the Association in 1998 while the involvement of CEM-H with ANAMMH began during the implementation of this programme.

Until recently, neither Grupo Venancia nor Tierra Viva had close links with women in local government. However, the experience of the other countries encouraged them to become involved in this area. The Nicaraguans have taken a leading role in the creation of a new body which brings together women in their country concerned with the promotion of gender equity through local government, while Tierra Viva aim to promote a network of women councillors and mayors in their main areas of intervention outside Guatemala City.

At the regional level, the Central American Network of Women and Local Government for Local Development with Gender Equity (CANW) was established through an initiative of the partners in 2003. Its mission is “to be a Central American forum for coordination, connection, advocacy and the sharing of experiences, actions and proposals which promote women’s autonomous political participation in processes of local development with gender equity”. CANW has national liaison committees in all four programme countries and has held meetings in El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. The Salvadorian national liaison committee has already been active, supporting the organisation of the First Santa Tecla Women’s Congress in 2004. Bilateral links between the national associations are also developing, for example, ten members of ANAMMH took part in the annual congress of ANDRYSAS in 2004.

All these networks seek to promote local government action on women’s rights but, at the same time, they provide a response to the isolation of many women in local government. Most are in a minority within their councils and lack contact with women in other municipalities. They are also isolated by the negative attitudes and discrimination they face from men, even those within their own parties. Through membership in networks, these women make contact with other women in similar situations to their own and are able to learn from their experience. The growth of these organisations demonstrates the value which their members consider them to have.

A further level of isolation affecting women in local government is their physical separation, exacerbated by the poverty of their municipalities, the dispersal of population centres and poor transport and communications infrastructure. One strategy to counteract this being attempted by ANAMMH is the establishment of decentralised, regional networks to allow closer links between the Alliance and the women councillors, and the integration of other women into the network.

While all of these groups are quite new, their experience to date is encouraging. They are already strengthening their members’ abilities in administration and management and in the promotion of gender equity. Among their principal achievements is their success in bringing together women from diverse parties to work on women’s rights despite the women’s loyalty to their parties and the rivalry and different visions of those parties. Most of these organisations are also diverse in that they include women councillors and mayors, ex-members of local governments, leaders of grassroots women’s groups, feminist activists and others. This diversity means that these networks can provide

important support for the strengthening of local women's organisations' ability to engage with local governments and favours the development of positive relationships between the different social actors.

### **4.3 Empowerment and training are vital for women's participation**

Women will be unable to fully exercise their citizenship if they are marginalised by a lack of self-esteem or because they lack training in the basic skills necessary to participate in public decision-making. All women need to understand their rights. The leaders of women's organisations need leadership and negotiation skills and understanding of government structures and legislation. Women councillors require skills in public administration. All women involved in politics need to learn to value themselves if they are to survive the attacks of their male colleagues and opponents.

Given this understanding, the provision of skills and the empowerment of women have been central concerns of the programme and have been addressed through numerous workshops, study days and courses. More than 3,000 women have participated in training events, including some 300 public officials. In addition public forums and other events have reached out to other women so that, in total, around 1,500 leaders and 5,000 members of local and national women's organisations plus 600 public officials have been involved in some way in training, awareness-raising and debates.

The range of issues covered has been wide including basic themes of women's rights, organisational matters, political and citizens' participation, sexual rights and reproductive rights, and issues of concern to the social movement in general, such as poverty and

globalisation. Specific training for local government officials and election candidates has sought to increase their ability to promote gender equity both by raising their awareness and increasing their capacity in areas directly related to women's rights, for example in gender-sensitive planning, and by providing them with greater skills for municipal administration and democratic governance.

#### **Empowering members of women's organisations**

Las Méridas report that leaders and members of women's groups they support have become more willing to denounce violence and increased their participation in political advocacy. Similarly, the women who received training from Tierra Viva have been able to strengthen their political position and the leadership which they exercise in their communities. Grupo Venancia reported that study sessions and the provision of copies of the Nicaragua municipalities law to members of the Northern Women's Network have strengthened their ability to make demands of local governments; for example, women from Waslala successfully claimed a small amount of funding that had been assigned by the council to other activities.

A number of the women who participated in training were motivated to negotiate positions as candidates in local and national elections. In Honduras, ten women from four municipalities participated in the primaries of four different political parties in February 2005, seeking nomination as candidates for positions of mayor, councillor or congresswoman in the elections due to be held in November the same year; four of these were successful. In addition, four members of the Collective of Women against Violence were accepted as congressional candidates with the left wing Democratic Union Party (*Partido Unión Democrático*).

Similarly, a number of members of the Nicaraguan Northern Women's Network participated as candidates in the 2004 local elections, some successfully.

### **Training of public officials**

This has paid off with increases in their ability to develop initiatives to promote women's rights and to implement a gender sensitive style of administration. The Salvadorian partners report that women councillors receiving training and support through other programme activities have participated more effectively in budget discussions, including the successful negotiation of budget lines for women. Some councillors have drafted by-laws mandating the inclusion of women's secretariats in community associations. Grupo Venancia reported that the position and arguments presented in the Matagalpa Gender Equity Commission by a local councillor who has regularly participated in training sessions have very clearly been changed and strengthened by that training.

The experience of the programme confirms the wisdom of concentrating training and support for public officials on women in local government rather than women and men. By strengthening women's capacity to promote gender equity they can then act as catalysts for change within government. In these circumstances, it is common for enough men to lend their support to the women's initiatives for those to be approved.

## **4.4 The need for autonomy and alliances**

The successful advocacy work of the women's movement has been achieved through a dual strategy of autonomy and alliances. On the one hand, by remaining autonomous the members of the movement have been able to develop their own

agendas and strategies and to take forward the actions that they consider to be necessary without being conditioned by affiliations with political parties or other groups. Among other results, during elections they have been able to continue prioritising women's rights at a time when the parties might tend to de-emphasise the issue. In fact, elections have been seen as a key period for advocacy with all partners lobbying local and/or national election candidates for commitments on the promotion of women's rights.

On the other hand, alliances with other social actors have enabled them to benefit from others' strengths and access opportunities for advocacy. Similarly, by participating in coordinating bodies, they have gained opportunities to raise the awareness of men and mixed organisations so that they collaborate in the struggle to meet women's needs.

Some of the most successful alliances have been made at local level. For example, mixed-sex NGOs, ADIC and ODESAR have been active members of the Matagalpa Women's Network for a number of years while Las Mélicas have participated in the San Marcos Intersectorial Committee since 1999. Despite the diverse membership of the "Intersectorial" – including the local government, other official organisations and representatives of the Catholic Church – this committee has implemented gender training, celebrations of International Women's Day and the construction of a women's centre.

Other positive examples of alliances include: the relationship between Las Mélicas and the major Salvadorian left-wing party, the FMLN which has worked on legal reforms to favour women; support by the Salvadorian mayor's association, COMURES, for activities of ANDRYSAS and Las Dignas to promote gender equity at municipal

level; and the relationship between Honduran civil society coalition, Bloque Popular and the Collective of Women against Violence. This coalition—which includes unions, NGOs, student groups, women’s organisations and CSOs working on themes such as human rights and the environment—has provided some support for actions on violence, women’s participation and sexual rights and reproductive rights. This coalition also played a part in ensuring the inclusion of women’s demands in the final declaration of the Fifth Mesoamerican Forum.

An important aspect of the construction of alliances is the need to address a wider range of issues than the core concerns of the women’s movement. During programme implementation the partners have participated in advocacy and campaigns led by other organisations related to free trade agreements, privatisation, and HIV/AIDS among other themes.

#### **4.5 The potential of work with local governments**

In Central America, both the State and civil society are highly centralised and it has tended to be assumed that the promotion of women’s rights is a matter for national governments. Consequently, work to promote local governance with gender equity is unusual and, when the programme was designed, the only partner for which it was a major focus was Las Dignas. However, there has been increasing evidence of the potential for progress at this level which has led all the other partners to conduct work with local governments, converting this from a minor component to one of the principal focuses of the programme.

This evidence includes the willingness of a significant number of local governments to

integrate the promotion of gender equity into their work.

- ◆ In El Salvador, the first municipal gender equity policy was approved by San Salvador Municipal Council in 1999 but, since then nine more have been approved. Several municipalities have hired staff to monitor implementation of the policies. Other initiatives include the establishment of women’s offices in six municipalities, while at least two—Cojutepeque and Santa Tecla—have committed themselves to developing gender sensitive budgets.
- ◆ In Matagalpa, Nicaragua the local council agreed to the creation of a gender equity commission and subsequently to funding, first for the commission, then 1% of the municipal budget for women’s projects. The municipal strategic plan now includes a gender focus, while the development of a Gender Equity Policy and the creation of a Women’s Secretariat have been approved. This experience is having a multiplier effect in other municipalities throughout northern Nicaragua, including Río Blanco, Matiguas and La Dalia—which have created their own equity commissions—as well as *Muy-Muy*, *Ocotal*, *Somoto*, *Palacagüina* and *Nueva Guinea*.
- ◆ In Honduras, more than 30 municipalities have created women’s offices (OMM). Public forums for women have been held in many of these municipalities, as well as in some without such offices, due to the joint action of women’s organisations, the National Women’s Institute and women members of the local governments.
- ◆ In Guatemala, the Association of Mayors and Indigenous Authorities has organised two national encounters of women in local government, in 2000 and 2004. Six municipalities have established OMM, all with the support of Women’s Association “*Vamos Adelante*”.

These and other actions by local governments constitute important achievements, in and of themselves, and are due almost without exception to women councillors, women's organisations or both. While a significant number of male mayors and councillors are relatively willing to promote gender equity, progress has tended to require that women act first. Fortunately, as was shown by the large number of women who took part in the regional workshop organised by the programme and the enthusiasm with which they participated, many women councillors and mayors see gender equity as central to their reality and that of their municipalities.

Most municipal initiatives are relatively new and still face considerable difficulties, especially due to the shortage of funding as well as resistance to their implementation from men at all levels of local government. Consequently, results beyond the formal approval of measures and instruments are only beginning to be seen. Even so a number of significant examples of progress can be mentioned, for example:

- ◆ Increased numbers of women in positions normally reserved for men.
- ◆ Training on gender, or with a gender perspective for municipal personnel, both women and men.
- ◆ The establishment of women's centres.
- ◆ Creation of community level consultation mechanisms.
- ◆ The earmarking of funds for actions in favour of women.
- ◆ Public identification of municipalities with the promotion of gender equity through advertising hoardings and posters.
- ◆ Official activities to celebrate important dates in the calendar of the women's movement, exhibitions of women's abilities, sporting events for women, forums on violence against women, etc.

- ◆ The naming of streets in honour of notable women.
- ◆ Monitoring of domestic violence.
- ◆ Income generation projects for women.

The partners have used diverse methods to promote and support these processes. In addition to activities already mentioned in this document: Grupo Venancia organised a national encounter, attended by 130 women from 28 municipalities; CEM-H organized an Encounter of Women and Local Government, in coordination with ANAMMH; and, Las Dignas and Las Mélicas organised a workshop for women from municipalities promoting gender equity, and both participated in the San Salvador Gender Equity Commission. Las Dignas also conducted a number of activities in this area independently of Las Mélicas including: a workshop with women from 11 municipalities to develop proposals for reform of the municipal code; the national encounter "Women in Local Government, conducted in coordination with ANDRYSAS and COMURES; support for the annual congresses of ANDRYSAS; and an annual competition on Positive Action for Gender Equity.<sup>15</sup> Twenty municipalities have participated in this competition and it has led directly to the implementation of several municipal initiatives including, the establishment of a women's office in Mejicanos, a gender equity policy in Cojutepeque, women's centres in Santa Tecla and Cuyultitán, and the creation of rural and urban women's associations in Cuyultitán.

#### **4.6 When working with politicians, realism, attention to detail and support are vital**

The partners and the organisations they support have had many positive experiences of working with elected



officials. Women legislators and councillors have been vital allies in the negotiation of legislation and policies to favour women, while a number of men have proven to be supportive of such initiatives; for example, the mayors of Matagalpa in Nicaragua, San Rafael Cedros and San Salvador in El Salvador, and Nacaome and Valle in Honduras, who were in office during most of the programme period.

Nevertheless, elected officials owe allegiance to their parties and, even in those cases where they have been elected with support from the women's movement, this allegiance and their relationship with the electorate in general condition their ability to promote women's rights. At the same time, women in public office experience political isolation and are affected by a series of negative situations including continuous criticism, conflicts between family, community, personal and collective interests, and the impossibility of proposing agendas and project budgets because of the chauvinism of male politicians. In these circumstances, mechanisms to support women in elected office have proven to be very beneficial, especially the associations of women in local government, as discussed earlier.

### **Agreements with election candidates**

All of the partners have at some time been involved in the development and presentation of women's agendas to candidates in local or national elections and the related signing of commitments by some of those candidates. The subsequent implementation of these pacts has been extremely variable. Some, such as the mayor of Matagalpa from 2001 to 2004, have proven willing to follow through on these commitments; others have proven to be less faithful to their word. In general terms, results have been better with local pacts compared to those made with presidential or parliamentary candidates.

Participants in regional workshops made several suggestions for improving success in the implementation of pacts, including the importance of developing women's agendas and signing agreements before the beginning of election periods. However, as a participant in the Tela workshop observed "we are also aware that, in general (these pacts) are not accepted by the parties, that only the candidate signs them and that it isn't an overall commitment by the party." Another participant in the same event commented on the importance of follow-up, saying, "If pacts are not monitored by the women's movement they run the risk of being watered down or revoked."

### **Attention to detail**

A number of lessons were shared by participants in the Suchitoto workshop regarding means of achieving greater success in work with local politicians:

- ◆ Effective lobbying of local governments requires work to raise the awareness and gain the good will of their members, especially mayors. This in turn requires an understanding of their personal attitudes and their political and social positions.
- ◆ Initiatives must be framed in the reality of the local government, seeking to adjust them to the realistic possibilities of progress and taking advantage of other municipal objectives and strategies.
- ◆ Agreements should always be put into writing. In the words of Amelia Nassar of the Nacaome Women's Network in Honduras, "The mayor will never take into account anything which isn't written down".
- ◆ It is important to seek the formalisation and institutionalisation of agreements and initiatives through the signing of commitments, the creation of offices with direct responsibility for their implementation and the assignment of

funds. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that most municipalities have limited resources. In this context, commitments of financial support have a positive effect. Although the funds that women's NGOs can offer are limited, they have helped to stimulate the interest and commitment of several local governments and to ensure the implementation of their agreements.

## 4.7 The need for new ways of doing politics

The obstacles to women's political participation and full exercise of their citizenship in Central America have their roots in the authoritarian political culture that discourages social and political participation, impeding in particular women's participation and leadership (*see box*).

### A political culture that blocks democracy and women's rights

**The political system is dominated by men** who, as a result of the *machista* culture, tend to be resistant to the participation of women.

**Leadership is individual and not based on programs.** The system continues to be dominated by a culture in which leadership is excessively personalised (*caudillismo*) under which individual leaders seek to hold on to power permanently.

**Political power is monopolised by the leaders of major parties.** The participation of smaller parties and independent candidates is blocked. Despite major political differences, the hierarchies of some major parties have negotiated pacts behind the backs of their membership to ensure their hold on power.

**The political class is accustomed to offer more than it can deliver,** to lying and to failing to fulfil its commitments. This leads the public to lose interest in politics, reinforcing its failings.

**The common understanding of power is very paternalistic,** especially in local politics: the voters tend to look for a mayor who will resolve their individual problems.

**Power and resources are centralised.** National governments are reluctant to devolve control of decisions or finance to local governments, much less to civil society.

**State institutions are dependent on the party in power:** when the government changes, so does everything else. This leads to a lack of institutional memory and the failure to learn from the experience of previous regimes, even those of the same party.

**Corruption** is common at all levels of government.

**The political system is characterised by "patrimonialism"** in which the states are at the service of governments rather than vice-versa.

**Cross-party cooperation is rare,** in large measure due to the polarisation of national politics resulting from decades of dictatorships and internal conflicts.

**Christian churches exert excessive influence,** even though all the states are nominally secular. This is principally true of the Catholic Church but evangelical churches are also influential, especially in Guatemala while their influence is growing in Honduras. This interference of the church in the state presents a particular problem for women's rights advocacy. The churches are most strongly opposed to the recognition and exercise of sexual rights and reproductive rights, but their conservative stance and fundamentalist views also can lead them to oppose the growth of women's leadership. This was very clearly seen in Nicaragua in 2003 when the Catholic Bishop's Conference argued against quotas for women candidates in elections.

In the face of such a political culture, women need to develop and propose new approaches to politics. The strategic need to work together to promote women's participation and rights and the openings at local government level have permitted some moves in this direction. The associations of women in local government described earlier are all multi-party organisations showing that it is possible for women from different parties to work together to oppose discrimination against women.

### **Local administration from, with and for women**

During the regional workshop on women and local government, women mayors and councillors shared their experiences and ideas on the development of new approaches to politics and public administration, highlighting the need for transparency, respect and the promotion of the participation of all women and men. For this to be possible, solidarity among women—within local councils and with women's organisations in the community—is invaluable. Experience shows that such solidarity allows women mayors and councillors not only to resist the attacks they face but also to overcome them and make progress in the construction of a form of administration which has women as its starting point, and which works with and for them. Important elements in the construction of such an administration include:

- ◆ Consultations and other mechanisms to identify the situation of women and their priorities.
- ◆ Integration of a gender perspective into municipal budgets.
- ◆ Gender awareness raising and training for women mayors and councillors.
- ◆ The creation of official bodies responsible for promoting women's rights and gender

equity, and the assignation of resources for their operation.

## **4.8 Promoting change in public attitudes is an essential complement to political action**

To promote women's rights, it is necessary not only to promote legal and political change but also to promote the transformation of the dominant culture towards one based on values of inclusion, equity and respect for diversity. This is true both because the political culture has its roots in the general culture—with its conservative, patriarchal and *machista* characteristics—and because the effectiveness of legal and political change is dependent on the response of society.

In line with the concerns and priorities of the Central American women's movement, public awareness campaigns conducted by the partners and by the organisations which they support have concentrated on issues of violence, poverty and globalisation, women's political participation and sexual rights and reproductive rights. Many awareness-raising activities were conducted at local level, for example public forums on violence against women were conducted during 2003 in eight municipalities of El Salvador and seven in Nicaragua, and in four Honduran municipalities in 2004.

Another focus has been work to change women's public image. Both Tierra Viva and Las Mélicas organised events to publicly honour leading women, especially those who defend women's rights. Another initiative in this area was the re-naming by San Salvador Council of streets to honour notable women.

The promotion of cultural change is a particular focus of Grupo Venancia and has been reflected in the intensity of their work



in this area which includes a programme of cultural activities in the group's centre "The Guanaca Cultural Centre". Weekly activities there include theatre, music, dance, poetry, videos and presentations for children and provide a space for entertainment, recreation and culture with alternative contents in an atmosphere of respect towards women which is difficult to find in other venues. Average attendance has reached nearly 100, with a total of about 500, and Grupo Venancia has noted changes in attitudes of some of the people who regularly attend events, especially among youth and even some gang members.

Most media work has been directed towards the same themes. However, Grupo Venancia's weekly, hour-long programme of conversation and music on the national radio station "Stereo Yes" and a regular programme prepared by CEM-H and transmitted during two years on national radio have covered a wider range of issues. Radio continues to be an important means of reaching the poor and rural residents. For example, Tierra Viva coordinated with the Guatemalan Federation of Radiophonic Schools (FGER) to transmit campaign messages in 10 indigenous languages, with the potential to reach three million listeners.

In her external evaluation, Gema Chacón reported that campaigns and media work have helped contribute to greater interest in women's rights issues among the press, official human rights offices, NGOs and government agencies working to promote local development, local government associations, universities, and public sector teachers and students. In society in general, the partners report that there is greater public recognition of some of women's rights with concrete effects:

- ◆ The equal rights of boys and girls to education, which is reflected in the numbers of children in the school system.

- ◆ The rights of women to own their homes, which lead many housing projects to insist on the registration of homes in the names of women or as joint property of women and their partners.
- ◆ The right of women to live without violence, which is reflected in greater numbers of women filing complaints.

#### 4.9 The dangers of working with the State and of the institutionalisation of the women's agenda

Some members of the Central American women's movement are sceptical of the possibilities of promoting change through interaction with official organisations. They argue that far from being able to conduct meaningful advocacy, the members of the movement end up being used as "useful dupes". While this position is not supported by the evidence of what has been achieved by the partners and many other organisations in the region, it is important to be clear about the validity of several of the real dangers involved in dialogue with the State.

#### Co-option and misrepresentation

Political co-option is common in the region and has affected the women's movement in all programme countries, weakening individual organisations and contributing to divisions. One manifestation of the problem is that when women's leaders are hired by government agencies, they inevitably dedicate the majority of their efforts to the priorities of government rather than those of the women's movement.

Another very real danger is that participation in official consultations can be distorted to make it appear that women's organisations are in agreement with government proposals. Various speakers in regional forums affirmed that the ways in

which women's organisations are invited to participate in these spaces, and the very limited use that is made of their contributions inevitably lead to the conclusion that they are only invited to make a show of consultation. However, it should be stressed that these reflections have not led the partners to reject all such consultations, only to be more selective and more cautious in their participation.<sup>16</sup>

### **The “gender technocracy”**

The institutionalisation of initiatives and spaces to promote gender equity is a key demand of organisations interacting with the state. Unfortunately, when this occurs it is all too common for government technocrats to so change the proposals that their original content and radical nature are lost. The demands and proposals of the movement are reduced to gender language and to the counting of how many men and women benefit from or participate in programmes and projects; meanwhile the reason for change—the transformation of gender relations—is forgotten.

Gender technocrats sometimes even oppose actions which prioritise support for women. For example, a consultant hired by the San Salvador Council to review the gender equity policy went so far as to propose that the women's department should be eliminated because it discriminated against men and proposed its replacement with an office for both women and men. Fortunately, in this case, women's organisations participating in the Consultative Commission on Gender were able to convince the council to reject the proposal.

These problems do not only affect Central American bureaucracies. International development and finance agencies are sometimes guilty of imposing “fashions” in relation to gender through their

management of funding, regardless of whether these respond to the demands and needs of women or the political agendas of the movement.

## 5 Ways forward

Following completion of this programme, the partners will continue to promote women's participation in public decision-making and to directly advocate laws and policies which promote gender equity and respect for women's rights. The following proposals will guide their work and can also provide pointers for other organisations –members of the women's movement, NGOs, official aid agencies, local and national governments–on how they too can contribute to building the active and effective citizenship of Central American women.

### 5.1 Key strategies

#### **Local, national and regional action**

Work with local governments and their members has considerable potential; certainly the interest of many women councillors and mayors in the area of gender equity provides an important opportunity for progress in the promotion of women's rights. However, local work must be articulated with advocacy with national legislatures and governments. It is at the national level that the details of municipal codes, funding for local government and electoral laws are decided, while presidents, national legislatures and ministries are responsible for the design and implementation of legislation and the overall policy environment which promote or hinder the development of more equitable societies. Regional action is necessary principally because of its proven worth as a means of strengthening the advocacy work of women's organisations and supporting women in government. In addition, regional campaigns allow

organisations from different countries to join forces in relation to international policy instruments, for example the Campaign for an Inter-American Convention on Sexual and Reproductive Rights.

#### **The personal is political**

All advocacy work on women's rights should include processes to raise women's awareness through the deconstruction of meanings and by politicising those aspects of their private lives which reflect and maintain gender subordination and oppression. This implies the need to work with women for their empowerment through a two-way process–from raised awareness and the politicisation of personal life to participation as citizens in the public sphere, and vice-versa–so as to question and transform the mechanisms which maintain even the most intimate aspects of gender oppression. Throughout Central America, the relationship of the personal to the political is seen very clearly in the reinforcement and extension of men's control over women's bodies and sexuality by legislation and public policies which legitimate and institutionalise patriarchal culture.

#### **Strengthening the women's movement and developing a shared agenda**

A strong movement is essential for effective action. Training of the type used in this programme will be an important component of this process and should be coupled with investigation and the development of clear arguments to support women's demands.

The movement also needs to address its divisions and develop more horizontal and cooperative styles of leadership and

organisation, avoiding the domination of the movement by the same small group of people and actively seeking the integration of those who are currently marginalised. The active participation and leadership of women from different ethnic, class and age groups should be sought. Similarly, the movement should become more decentralised, with local networks strengthened and increased coordination between the local and national level.

The development of greater consensus within the movement is of great importance for the strengthening of women's advocacy. While there is wide agreement on many issues, there is no clear consensus on several aspects of sexual rights and reproductive rights, in particular abortion and sexual orientation. To develop an agenda for action, the movement needs to engage in a wide-ranging process of discussion and debate covering all relevant issues, but especially those that are most controversial.

### **Minimum agendas, maximum demands**

There is a need for both a degree of pragmatism about what can be achieved and the identification and demand of what women really need and want. The development of minimum agendas will be an essential part of the development of alliances with other sectors while the prioritisation of those changes which are possible in the current context reflects the nature of the political process as "the art of the possible". Nevertheless, action cannot be restricted to this level, otherwise women will find themselves negotiating at the margins and from positions which are interpreted as signs of weakness. The radicalism of feminist discourse should be renewed with proposals and campaigns in favour not merely of what is possible but of what can be imagined: the exercise of women's full human rights.

In this context, the movement should be cautious regarding the present tendency to adopt a style of advocacy which avoids confrontation. Although the movement may seek to build consensus with state bodies, progress by this route will be slow and unsure. Consequently, it is very important that the movement also develops and strengthens its capacity for public mobilisation, defending its right and capacity for protest and resistance.

### **Building alliances**

A wide range of organisations and individuals already are, or could be, allies in the promotion of different aspects of women's rights. These include professional associations—such as doctors' or lawyers colleges', unions, NGOs, gay and lesbian groups, members of national legislatures, academics and progressive churches. Their support would provide the women's movement with greater political strength and help to gain wider public support.

As an important prior step and as a corollary to building alliances, it is important to identify and maintain an up-to-date description of the different social actors that influence public opinion and political decision-making. This should include an analysis of their positions and strategies and their relationships with each other and with the state. This would also permit the identification of major opponents and aid in the development of lobbying strategies and arguments.

While alliances can be of great importance, it should be recognised that many allies will not be in agreement with the more radical elements of the feminist agenda. Professional associations tend to be particularly conservative but even left of centre political parties and social movements can present opposition to the recognition of women's rights.

Consequently, while working to raise the awareness of these sectors great care must be taken in the management of these relationships. Encouragement should be given to the movement's allies to gain their fullest possible support but without sacrificing the radical aspects of the movement's own agenda.

### **Public awareness-raising**

Campaigns and other activities designed to change public attitudes and contribute to the transformation of the region's culture will continue to be an important component of the partners' work. Although the effects of such work are slow they are an essential complement to political action as they contribute to a social environment which can support and sustain political change. In the current context, it is particularly important that the general public are made aware of the impact of fundamentalisms and neoliberal globalisation on women's lives.

## **5.2 Promoting women's freedom**

### **Freedom to participate in public office and decision-making**

All of the strategies mentioned above can increase women's ability to participate in decision-making processes but others are also needed to increase their access to political office. These include:

- ◆ Promoting reforms in electoral law to introduce equitable quotas for women in party lists and to permit independent candidates, and carefully monitoring implementation.
- ◆ Encouraging women to take up leadership positions in community organisations.
- ◆ Working with the media to visibilise women's leadership.
- ◆ Promoting recognition by the feminist and women's movement of the validity of elected office as an option for women's political participation.
- ◆ Providing support and encouragement for women candidates and elected officials of all parties, but without falling into the trap of promoting the election of any woman solely on the basis of her gender.

### **Freedom from poverty**

One of the chief implications of women's demand for freedom from poverty is the need to oppose neoliberal globalisation. General strategies for action include:

- ◆ The development of a critique of the system as a whole and strategies to attack it at its roots. In this sense, feminism has much to offer, especially in its emphasis on the construction of just social relations and the development of alternative forms and understandings of power.
- ◆ Investigation and information systems to overcome the secrecy of economic and trade negotiations and to ensure that the general public is able to understand the characteristics and implications of globalisation.
- ◆ The women's movement must work to integrate a feminist vision and women's priorities into the spaces of the social movement which promote resistance and alternatives to globalisation.

In addition, given the importance of the poverty reduction strategies promoted by the World Bank in the formation of government policy on poverty, women's organisations should promote their critical analysis, and demand both their right to participate equitably in the supposed benefits, and that the strategies incorporate measures to address gender-based violence and women's sexual and reproductive rights and health.



## **Freedom from violence**

Violence is both a central issue in women's action as citizens and a principal factor blocking the exercise of their citizenship. In the face of the persistence of this problem and the alarming increase in femicide, a wide range of approaches are required, including:

- ◆ Public debate on violence against women in all the forums and opportunities available.
- ◆ The public and official conception of violence against women must be widened to include many types of violence – domestic, family, sexual, economic, etc.
- ◆ Research is needed to determine how globalisation has increased violence against women, what new forms violence is taking and which women are most affected.
- ◆ Mechanisms are needed to “de-privatise” this issue, to convert violence into the sort of problem which women solve, not only in the courts, but through the support of the community and the local government which view it as their problem too.
- ◆ State bodies – prosecutors, women's police units, police in general, courts and others – should be lobbied and audited so that they respond better to women when they report attacks and abuses; work seriously to confront the increase in femicide and to avoid the impunity of violence; and provide clear information on their procedures.

## **Freedom to take their own decisions on sexuality and reproduction**

The promotion of sexual rights and reproductive rights should be a priority for the women's movement. Areas for action emphasised by the partners include:

- ◆ Cultural attitudes. Changes that should be promoted include a positive vision of

sexuality, the understanding of motherhood as an option rather than destiny, and acceptance and respect for lesbians and other people whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual.

- ◆ Defence of the Secular State. By persuading the region's governments to stop following the dictates of the most conservative sectors of the church, one of the principal obstacles to more progressive laws and policies would be removed.
- ◆ Globalisation. The relationship between neoliberalism and the negation of women's sexual rights and reproductive rights should be made clear. This includes the mutual reinforcement of religious fundamentalisms and the neoliberal agenda. At the same time, transnational companies should be lobbied so that they respect the rights of their women workers, including access to health.
- ◆ Information. It is crucial that young and adult women gain better access to education and information on sexuality, contraception and sexual and reproductive health.
- ◆ Health. The region's governments should stop relegating sexual and reproductive health behind other supposed priorities, giving it appropriate attention and resources.
- ◆ Contraception. Women and teenagers require improved access to contraceptives and quality advice in this area. In addition, programmes are needed to promote greater responsibility by men in relation to reproduction, both biological and social.
- ◆ Abortion. The right of each woman to take decisions about her own body should be a fundamental aspect of advocacy on this issue, in addition to arguments for decriminalisation based on public health and social justice.

### 5.3 Beyond advocacy

Government lobbying shouldn't be the only strategy to promote women's rights.

Combining this with the promotion of changes in public opinion and in Central American culture will also be insufficient. Because of this, it is important to strengthen and sustain the women's movement as the political movement which legitimately proposes and promotes the transformation of patriarchal relations into relations of equality and equity between the sexes through the full incorporation of women into the citizenry.

This implies in the first place, the restoration to women of the quota of power which is legitimately theirs as half of humanity. The central component of feminist action to resist government decisions which violate women's rights must be their personal and collective empowerment. Women's groups and networks need to be strengthened as centres of alternative culture. And support must be given to initiatives and services that supplement the lack of attention by the state to the serious problems of violence, abuse and sexual and reproductive health. Above all, structural change in society and the state must be promoted, so that women are able to fully exercise their rights

## *Appendix: Documents produced in the framework of the project “Building Women’s Citizenship and Governance, Central America”*

All publications are available for download as pdf files on the One World Action website: [www.oneworldaction.org](http://www.oneworldaction.org) or as electronic or printed documents on request from One World Action, any of the partners or project consultant Michael Clulow.<sup>17</sup>

### **In English and Spanish**

Experiences and strategies for women’s political advocacy:  
*Report from the Central American Feminist Encounter  
“Women’s Citizenship and Political Participation”*<sup>18</sup>

Women and Local Democracy:  
*Lessons from Central America*

Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Central America:  
*Towards an Agenda for Action*

Gender equity and local governance:  
*A study of the San Salvador gender equity policy*

The Central American Women’s Movement and Public Policy

Neoliberal Globalization – A Feminist View from Central America

### **Spanish only**

Derechos sexuales y reproductivos en El Salvador: *Análisis y propuestas*  
(Sexual and reproductive rights in El Salvador: *Analysis and proposals*)

Derechos sexuales y reproductivos en Honduras: *Análisis y propuestas*  
(Sexual and reproductive rights in Honduras: *Analysis and proposals*)

Derechos sexuales y reproductivos en Guatemala: *Análisis y propuestas*  
(Sexual and reproductive rights in Guatemala: *Analysis and proposals*)

Derechos sexuales y reproductivos en Nicaragua: *Análisis y propuestas*  
(Sexual and reproductive rights in Nicaragua: *Analysis and proposals*)



## Notes

- 1** Transfers from central government to the municipalities only represent 4% of the national budget in Nicaragua, 5% in Honduras, 8% in El Salvador and 10% in Guatemala. Local taxes ought to supplement this but are notoriously difficult to collect.
- 2** Nicaragua News Service, 13–19 January 2003.
- 3** Despite a legally mandated 30% quota in Honduras, the percentage of congresswomen fell from 9% to 7% in the last elections.
- 4** Statistics quoted by project partner Las Dignas.
- 5** Mirta Kennedy (2004) “Violencia contra las mujeres en el escenario de la globalización: Proponiendo alternativas desde el feminismo”. Presentation during the Central American Feminist Encounter “Women’s Citizenship and Political Participation”, Tela, Honduras, May 2004.
- 6** Soledad Ortega “Por la vida de las mujeres, ni una muerte más”, *Mujeres Hoy* 26/11/03. [www.mujereshoy.com](http://www.mujereshoy.com).
- 7** Op. cit. and Isabel Fabian, personal communication.
- 8** World Health Organisation (2004) “Maternal Mortality in 2000: Estimates developed by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA”.
- 9** “Niñas que tienen niñas: Estado Mundial de las Madres, 2004”. Save the Children, Spain.
- 10** Laws in Central America require a set of operating rules – *reglamentos* – to guide implementation, which are drawn-up and approved by the legislature after the law itself. Without such rules, a law is subject to the interpretation of individual authorities and often becomes a dead letter.
- 11** The law defines a 30% quota of women in “winnable seats”. This has been interpreted by the parties and the electoral court so that, for example, even though an electoral list might include 27 candidates, if a particular party had won an average of three seats in the last three elections, they would only be required to include one woman in the first three positions of the list and none in any other positions.
- 12** In the days before the Fifth Mesoamerican Forum “Building People’s Power for Self Determination” in July 2004, a women’s event was held for the first time: the First Mesoamerican Encounter of Women in Resistance for a Dignified Life. Las Dignas and CEM-H were among the organisers.
- 13** All the project partners participated in a Central American workshop in September 2004 as part of the Latin American campaign to decriminalise abortion. This was hosted by Las Dignas’ sexual and reproductive rights team.
- 14** In mid-2004, together with other women’s groups, *La Unión* and ANDRYSAS petitioned the newly elected president on a number of issues and, later, protested his failure to reply despite his election campaign slogan “Now women won’t be alone”. Sadly, the official response to a peaceful march of 1,000 women was the dispatch of riot police to block their approach to the presidential palace.

- 15** The competition was inspired by a similar competition at Latin American level organised by the United Nations Programme for Urban Management and UNIFEM in which the San Salvador Municipal Gender Equity Policy was one of the winners in 2000.
- 16** Current and recent examples of participation by the partners in official consultation mechanisms include the Matagalpa Development Committee, Gender Commission and Territorial Commission for Women's Police Units (Grupo Venancia), the San Salvador Council Commission for Gender Equity (Las Dignas and Las Mélidas), a discussion group formed by feminists and the Guatemalan Presidential Secretariat for Women (Tierra Viva), the Honduran Congress–Civil Society Liaison Commission and the Health Commission for the Honduran Poverty Reduction Strategy (CEM-H).
- 17** [devgen@rcp.net.pe](mailto:devgen@rcp.net.pe)
- 18** The presentations made at this workshop are also available; in Spanish only.



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