

Women as citizens

Participation for women's rights in Central America

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Ten years after the Beijing Conference on Women, Central American women continue to be treated as second-class citizens. What lies behind the intractability of discrimination and how can women effectively claim their citizenship and exercise their rights?

Work by five leading feminist NGOs from the region provides some answers and points out directions for the way ahead.



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What is happening in Central America?

Over the last two decades, the face of Central America has changed considerably. The wars which typified the region ended. Dictatorships were replaced by electoral democracy. Economies were liberalised. Local governments began to assume a more prominent role while decentralisation and participation were promoted.

Unfortunately, this “extreme makeover” is only skin deep. The scars of war are yet to heal and Central America is more violent than ever. Old political and economic elites have proved extraordinarily resilient, with historic right wing parties and their allies still in power. Local governments remain chronically under funded, while central governments only pay lip service to decentralisation and participation. The neoliberal economic model has been implemented with enthusiasm, but at the price of increasing disparities in wealth.

During this period, women’s organisations have become established in the region and have made their presence felt. However, they too have discovered the difficulty of promoting deep change. True, there have been changes in laws and policies, while public attitudes reflect changing sensibilities. Nevertheless, even in relation to violence against women—the area of most action by the women’s movement and where there has been greatest progress in legal reform—it is difficult to argue that there has been any real change. In fact, the numbers of murders of women are reaching alarming proportions.

What do women want?

The programme “Building Women’s Citizenship and Governance, Central

America” represented a coordinated effort by five Central American feminist organisations—CEM-H from Honduras, Grupo Venancia from Nicaragua, Las Dignas and Las Mélidas from El Salvador, and Tierra Viva from Guatemala (from here on referred to as “partners”)—to strengthen women’s participation in public decision-making at all levels.¹ Activities were related to women’s priorities through continuous analysis of women’s situation by the partners and interaction with several thousand women from grassroots organisations, feminist networks, NGOs, and local government. On this basis, it can be affirmed that Central American women’s are urgently demanding freedom from four dimensions of gender-based discrimination. Without freedom in these areas, true citizenship is not possible.

Freedom to participate in public office and decision-making

Women’s ability to participate in the political process is restricted by many barriers. 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. The financial cost of participating as candidates is difficult for many women to pay. Women candidates or those in elected office face rumours and innuendo; their abilities and their proposals are questioned or even ridiculed, and they are marginalised in positions with little power.

As a result, there are few women in government. For example, only 5% of Honduran legislators are women, and in Guatemala only eight out of 361 mayors are women. While women’s participation in government does not guarantee that women’s rights will be prioritised, without more women in power the possibilities of those rights shaping public policy are much reduced.

Freedom from poverty

The daily struggle of most Central American women to make ends meet is of fundamental importance. At present, the effects of neoliberal globalisation are of particular concern, especially with the recent signing of the Central American Free Trade Agreement. Women lose out as competition from transnational companies and cuts in public spending reduce jobs and income in sectors that traditionally employ high numbers of women, including small-scale agriculture, markets, health services and education. Spending cuts also reduce their access to low cost health care and education.

Women's poverty is exacerbated by their limited access to local services, including public transport, footpaths, street lighting, household electricity, drinking water, sewerage, and child care. Women tend to bear the brunt of such deficiencies, yet public spending decisions reflect men's priorities and leave few resources for issues prioritised by women.

Freedom from violence

The lives of Central American women are marked by violence of many types. Domestic violence has been given much attention but continues to be a daily reality for many women, and is intimately linked to sexual violence. Many adolescent girls and children are abused or raped by members of their own families, while the sexual relations of many adult women are marred by the violence of their partners.

A new area of concern is femicide. This new term is needed to visibilise the alarming increase in the murders of women. During 2003, more than 200 women were killed in Guatemala City alone.ⁱⁱ In Honduras, two women are murdered every three days.ⁱⁱⁱ Rates are lower but rising rapidly in El Salvador, up from 42 women murdered in 2003 to 73 in 2004.^{iv}

Freedom to take their own decisions on sexuality and reproduction

Central American women's citizenship is denied at the most elemental level, the control of their own bodies. Men decide when to have sexual relations and whether "their" women should use contraception. Motherhood is practically an obligation. Lesbianism is anathema. Abortion is completely illegal or severely restricted. Access to appropriate contraceptive methods and advice is limited, especially for adolescents and poor women. Sex education is close to non-existent. Some statistics can illustrate the results of this reality:

- ◆ Maternal mortality rates range from 110 deaths per 100,000 live births in Honduras to 150 in El Salvador, 230 in Nicaragua and 240 in Guatemala.^v
- ◆ The HIV/AIDS epidemic is becoming increasingly feminised with women representing one in three Guatemalans infected with HIV, 41% of AIDS cases in Honduras, and 44% of affected adolescents in Nicaragua.

Central American governments and women's rights

Very many Central American politicians openly express or privately hold traditional views concerning women's place in society. 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.

Positively, important laws and policies have been approved, including Nicaragua's law 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”. All the governments of the region have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and are signatories to other important international agreements, including the Beijing Platform for Action and the Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Sanction and Eradicate Violence against Women. However, there are multiple obstacles to the implementation of these initiatives:

- ◆ Failure to draw up regulations required for the implementation of new laws. Five years since approval, the Honduran Equal Opportunities Law is still without regulations.
- ◆ Failure to provide funding. Guatemala’s Social Development Law, which mandates state promotion of gender equity, specifies that funds should be assigned for its implementation but this provision is yet to be respected, four years after approval.
- ◆ Contradictions with other legislation and official policies. The promotion of conciliation in cases of domestic violence reduces the effectiveness of legislation in this area.
- ◆ Opposition of public officials. 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.

Many initiatives are blocked or distorted. In Nicaragua, a proposed equal opportunities law was approved by a National Assembly commission in 2001 but is yet to be passed by the full assembly. Meanwhile, 30 modifications proposed by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference have been incorporated wholesale, distorting the proposal almost beyond recognition.

Other measures actively limit women’s access to their rights, the clearest example being the complete prohibition of abortion in Honduras and El Salvador. This not only limits women’s reproductive rights but also their right to life by prohibiting abortion even when needed to save women’s lives. In Nicaragua, therapeutic abortion is currently legal but is under threat as proposed modifications to the Penal Code would introduce the crime of causing “lesions in the unborn”.

Lessons for the promotion of active and effective citizenship

The value of regional action for women’s participation

The regional dimension of the programme has come to be one of the aspects most appreciated 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. As consultant Gema Chacón observed in her external evaluation, “The regional focus... (converted) the programme into a tool for strengthening and joining-up the women’s movement. 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 Women’s Encounter in July 2004.”

Regional workshops organised through the project met with an enthusiastic response from the women invited. The first 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. The second workshop on 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 demonstrating the increasing appreciation of the partners for regional work.

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.^{vi} In particular, the preparation of studies on sexual rights and reproductive rights led the partners to give much more importance and assume clearer positions in this area.

The importance of strong women's organisations

The heart of the programme strategy is the strengthening of women's organisations and networks, reflecting the partners' vision of themselves as first and foremost members of the women's movement and their understanding of the key role played by collective action in social and political change. The validity of this viewpoint can be seen in the wide range of laws and policies approved following action by women's organisations. Recent examples include:

- ◆ The approval of gender equity policies by San Salvador and nine other Salvadorian municipalities.
- ◆ The creation of Municipal Gender Equity Commissions in Matagalpa and Río Blanco, Nicaragua.
- ◆ The creation of municipal women's offices in the Honduran municipalities of Nacaome, Ojojona and Maraita.
- ◆ Approval in Honduras of the National Women's Policy; the Equal Opportunities Plan; the National Action Plan on Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Girls, Boys, Adolescents and Women; and electoral law reforms mandating a 30% quota for women's participation.
- ◆ The assignation of 5% of Guatemala's national budget to the Presidential Women's Secretariat.
- ◆ Reform of the Salvadorian Export Processing Zone law to ban pregnancy testing of new employees and mandate child care facilities.

One of the most important ways in which women's organisations have had this impact is through their work with women politicians, whose minority status and relative isolation make it difficult for them to push through initiatives 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.

National feminist networks

All of the partners are members of feminist networks and most of the national advocacy work conducted in the framework of the programme has been carried out through these spaces. Despite this important role, the networks have been negatively affected by their concentration in the capital cities and their domination by a small number of

individuals and organisations. This has limited participation and has contributed to division 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.

Grassroots groups

Four of the partners have recently been involved in the establishment and strengthening of new grassroots organisations. In Honduras, CEM-H is working with local women's networks based in provincial towns which were established during the Women's World March in the year 2000. Twelve such networks are now active, developing their own proposals and lobbying their municipal governments. Among the results of their efforts is the creation of Municipal Women's Offices in three municipalities. In 2004, these groups agreed to form a loose alliance—the Local Networks Feminist Connection (*Articulación Feminista de Redes Locales*).

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, and this grouping has already been active in promoting women's rights at national level. Also in El Salvador, Las Méridas supported the creation of the Ataco Women's Committee and the San Rafael Cedros "Association of Women for a Better World". In Guatemala, Tierra Viva has begun work to create local groups which promote sexual rights and reproductive rights.

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 (ANDRYAS). 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. This network 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 ANDRYAS in 2004.

While these groups are quite new, their experience to date is encouraging. They are already strengthening their members' abilities in municipal administration and in the promotion of gender equity. Among their principal achievements is the bringing together of women from diverse parties to work on women's rights despite the polarisation of Central American politics. Most of these organisations are also diverse in that they include current and ex-members of local governments, leaders of grassroots women's groups, feminist activists and others; this favours learning and the development of positive relationships between the different social actors.

These experiences have encouraged Tierra Viva and Grupo Venancia to become involved in this area. Tierra Viva aim to

promote a provincial network of women councillors and mayors while Grupo Venancia have already contributed to the creation of a new body in their country which brings together women concerned with the promotion of gender equity through local government, through the First Encounter of Women and Local Government held in September 2004.

Empowerment and training are vital for women's participation

Women will be unable to fully exercise their citizenship if they are marginalised by low self-esteem or because they lack the basic skills necessary to participate in public decision-making. Given this, the training and empowerment of women have been central concerns of the programme and have been addressed through numerous activities. In total, over 6,000 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 feminism and gender, leadership and organisation, political and citizens' participation, sexual rights and reproductive rights, violence, and globalisation.

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 training on the Nicaragua municipalities' law strengthened the ability of members of the Northern Women's Network to make demands of local governments; for example,

women from Waslala successfully reclaimed some funds that the council had assigned to other activities.

A number of the women trained were motivated to participate as candidates in 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 local and national office; four of these were successful and will be candidates in the elections in November.

Training of public officials has increased their ability to promote women's rights initiatives and to implement a gender sensitive style of administration, both by directly addressing issues of gender equity and by providing them with greater skills for municipal administration and democratic governance. The Salvadorian partners report that women councillors have participated more effectively in budget discussions, including the successful negotiation of budget lines for women; some others have drafted by-laws mandating the inclusion of women's secretariats in community associations.

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, autonomy allows movement members to determine their own agendas and activities without being conditioned by affiliations with political parties or other groups. During elections they have been able to continue prioritising women's rights 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.

On the other hand, alliances with other social actors have enabled women's organisations to benefit from others' strengths and access opportunities for advocacy, while also gaining opportunities to raise the gender awareness of men and mixed organisations. Some of the most successful alliances include:

- ◆ Las Méridas participation in the San Marcos Intersectoral Committee which has implemented gender training, celebrations of International Women's Day and the construction of a women's centre.
- ◆ Support by the Salvadorian mayor's association, COMURES, for ANDRYSAS's activities.
- ◆ The relationship between the Honduran Collective of Women against Violence and the civil society coalition, Bloque Popular. This coalition has played a part in ensuring the inclusion of women's demands in the final declaration of the Fifth Mesoamerican Forum.

The potential of work with local governments

In Central America, work to promote women's rights through local government is unusual; when the programme was designed the only partner for which it was a major focus was Las Dignas. However, increasing evidence of the willingness of a significant number of municipalities to integrate the promotion of gender equity into their work has led all the other partners to begin work with local governments.

- ◆ In El Salvador, ten municipalities have approved gender equity policies, six have established women's offices, and at least two—Cojutepeque and Santa Tecla—have committed themselves to developing gender sensitive budgets.
- ◆ Matagalpa Council in Nicaragua agreed to the creation of a gender equity

commission. Subsequently it assigned 1% of the municipal budget for women's projects, included a gender focus in its strategic plan, and approved the development of a gender equity policy and the creation of a Women's Secretariat. Eight other municipalities in the north of the country have begun work on gender, including Río Blanco, Matiguas and La Dalia which have created their own equity commissions.

- ◆ In Honduras, more than 30 municipalities have created women's offices, and many of these have held public forums for women.
- ◆ In Guatemala, the Association of Mayors and Indigenous Authorities organised national encounters of women in local government in 2000 and 2004. Six municipalities have established women's offices.

Most municipal initiatives are relatively new and still face considerable difficulties, especially due to the shortage of funding and the opposition of many men. Even so they have already led to significant progress in a number of areas, for example:

- ◆ Increased numbers of women in positions normally reserved for men.
- ◆ Training on gender, or with a gender perspective for personnel, both women and men.
- ◆ The establishment of women's centres.
- ◆ The earmarking of funds for actions in favour of women.
- ◆ Public promotion of gender equity through advertising hoardings and posters.
- ◆ Official activities to promote women's rights, including celebrations of International Women's Day and forums on violence against women.

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

Work by the partners in this area has included lobbying, training and support, participation in consultative bodies, national forums, and other means. Las Dignas organised an annual competition on Positive Action for Gender Equity which has directly contributed to the implementation of various initiatives.

When working with politicians, realism and attention to detail 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 laws and policies to favour women, while a number of men have proven to be supportive of such initiatives, including several mayors. Nevertheless, the allegiance of elected officials to their parties, and their relationship with the electorate in general condition their ability to promote gender equity.

Agreements with election candidates

All the partners have been involved in the presentation of women's agendas to election candidates and the related signing of political pacts. However, the implementation of these pacts has often been poor or non-existent. Participants in regional workshops suggested ways of improving implementation, including the importance of developing agendas and signing agreements before the beginning of election periods; this may help overcome the tendency for such agreements to be seen as commitments by individual

candidates rather than by their political parties. Follow-up by the women's movement is the most crucial factor; without this, all pacts 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 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 realistic possibilities and taking advantage of other municipal objectives and strategies.
- ◆ Agreements should always be put into writing.
- ◆ It is important to keep in mind that most municipalities have few resources with which to fund new initiatives. However, this also means that even quite limited financial support can have positive effects.

The need for new ways of doing politics

The Central American political culture and system are characterised by problems that discourage political participation and block women's rights:

- ◆ The parties are dominated by men who tend to resist greater women's participation.
- ◆ Leadership is excessively individualised.
- ◆ Politicians are accustomed to offer more than they can deliver.
- ◆ Power and resources are highly centralised.

- ◆ State institutions are dependent on the party in power, when the government changes, so does everything else.
- ◆ Corruption is common at all levels of government.
- ◆ National politics are highly polarised and cross-party cooperation is rare.
- ◆ Although all the states are nominally secular, the churches have great political power which they wield to block sexual rights and reproductive rights. They also often oppose the growth of women's leadership.
- ◆ Consultations to identify the situation of women and their priorities.
- ◆ Integration of a gender perspective into municipal budgets.
- ◆ The creation and funding of official bodies responsible for promoting women's rights.

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

In the face of this culture, women need to develop new approaches to politics. Their strategic need to work together 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

Women mayors and councillors highlight the need for transparency, respect and the promotion of the participation of all women and men. They also stress the need for, and the realistic possibility of solidarity among women from different political parties within local councils and with women's organisations in the community. Their experience shows that such solidarity allows women to overcome the attacks they face 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 such an administration include:

- ◆ Gender training for women mayors and councillors.

The political culture has its roots in the general culture, while the effectiveness of political change is dependent on the response of society. For these reasons, the promotion of a culture of inclusion, equity and respect for diversity is essential for the successful promotion of women's rights.

Public awareness campaigns have concentrated on women's political participation, globalisation, violence, and sexual rights and reproductive rights, with activities at both national and local level. Another focus has been work to change women's public image; both Tierra Viva and Las Méridas organised events to publicly honour leading women. 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. The promotion of cultural change is a major focus for Grupo Venancia which organises weekly activities in the "Guanuca Cultural Centre". Theatre, music, dance, poetry, videos, and presentations for children provide an opportunity for entertainment and arts while promoting respect towards women.

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 areas of women's rights, especially their right to live without violence, and the equal rights of boys and girls to education.

The difficulties of working with the State

Although the experience of the partners and many other organisations shows that political advocacy for women's rights in Central America can often be productive, it is important to be clear about the dangers involved in working with the region's governments.

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 danger is that participation in official consultations can be distorted to make it appear that women's organisations are in agreement with government proposals when, in reality very limited use is made of their contributions. However, it should be stressed that this has not led the partners to reject all such consultations, only to be more selective and more cautious in their participation.

The "gender technocracy"

When proposals made by the women's movement are institutionalised by the state, it is all too common for government technocrats to reduce the implementation of those proposals to mere gender language and the counting of male and female beneficiaries; while 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 proposed that the women's department be replaced with an office for men and women because an office for women alone constituted discrimination against men. Fortunately, women's organisations were able to convince the Council to reject the proposal.

These problems do not only affect Central American bureaucracies. International agencies are sometimes guilty of imposing "fashions" in relation to gender through their management of funding, regardless of whether these respond to women's priorities.

Ways forward

Through these and other lessons, strategies have been identified which will orientate the partners future work, and which merit serious consideration by other organisations that seek to promote the active and effective citizenship of women in Central America and elsewhere.

Key strategies

Local, national and regional action

The responsiveness of many local governments and the interest of many women councillors and mayors provide important opportunities for the promotion

of women's rights. However, local work must be linked with national advocacy as it is at this level that decisions are taken on the laws and policies which constrain or facilitate local government action, women's political participation, and the exercise of women's rights in general. Regional action is necessary because of its proven worth as a means of strengthening women's organisations and to enable women from different countries to join forces in relation to international policy.

The personal is political

All advocacy work on women's rights should take the "personal" as its starting point, thereby implying the need to continue to work to raise women's awareness and to empower them. As Costa Rican academic Montserrat Sagot has put it "the construction of women's citizenship must begin by integrating political issues at the personal level given that the patterns of subordination are built from there".^{vii}

Strengthening the women's movement

Training must continue and should be coupled with investigation and the development of clear arguments to support women's demands. The participation and leadership of women from different areas and diverse ethnic, class and age groups should be promoted, and their organisations supported. The movement also needs to debate areas of disagreement, especially controversial issues such as abortion, and thereby work towards a shared agenda.

Minimum agendas, maximum demands

The development of minimum agendas will help to focus on opportunities for change, and is an essential part of the development of consensus within the women's movement and alliances with other sectors. Nevertheless, action cannot be restricted to this level; otherwise women

will find themselves negotiating at the margins. Proposals and campaigns on women's rights must focus not merely on what is possible but also on what is really needed: the full exercise of women's rights.

Building alliances

A wide range of organisations and individuals already are, or could be, important allies in the promotion of different aspects of women's rights. However many will not be in agreement with all the movement's proposals. Consequently, while working to raise allies' awareness great care must be taken, seeking their fullest possible support but without sacrificing the radical aspects of the movement's 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. In the current context, it is particularly important that the general public are made aware of the impact on women of fundamentalisms and neoliberal globalisation.

Promoting women's freedom

Freedom to participate in public office and decision-making

In addition to the strategies outlined above, specific strategies to increase women's access to political office include:

- ◆ Promoting and monitoring legally-mandated quotas for women candidates in party lists.
- ◆ Encouraging women to take up leadership positions in community organisations.
- ◆ Working with the media to visibilise women's leadership.

- ◆ Providing support for all women candidates and elected officials who are committed to promoting gender equity.

Freedom from poverty

One of the chief implications of this demand 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, including the construction of just social relations and the development of alternative forms of power.
- ◆ Investigation and communication to overcome the secrecy of economic and trade negotiations.
- ◆ The integration of a feminist vision and women's priorities into the agenda of the social movement which promotes resistance and alternatives to globalisation.

In addition, given the importance of the poverty reduction strategies promoted by the World Bank, the integration of gender perspectives, and of action on violence, and sexual and reproductive rights and health should be promoted.

Freedom from violence

A wide range of approaches are required, including:

- ◆ Public debate on violence in all the forums and opportunities available.
- ◆ Awareness-raising on the multiple forms of violence against women.
- ◆ Research on the relationship between globalisation and increasing violence against women.
- ◆ Lobbying and auditing of police, prosecutors, courts and other state bodies so that they respond positively to women who have been attacked or abused, and

work seriously to confront the increase in femicide and to avoid the impunity of violence.

Freedom to take their own decisions on sexuality and reproduction

Action should include:

- ◆ The promotion of cultural change, including the understanding of motherhood as an option rather than destiny, and respect for lesbians and all people regardless of their sexual orientation.
- ◆ The defence of the secular state.
- ◆ The provision and promotion of reliable education and information on sexuality, contraception, and sexual and reproductive health, as well as improved access to contraception.
- ◆ Lobbying the region's governments to make sexual and reproductive health a priority.
- ◆ Advocacy on the decriminalisation of abortion based on the right of each woman to take decisions about her own body as well as arguments based on public health and social justice.

Beyond advocacy

Government lobbying and public campaigning will not be sufficient to ensure the full respect of women's human rights. Change must begin with women themselves taking ownership of their lives, regardless of political, cultural and legal obstacles. Women must be empowered to value themselves and their needs. Government decisions that violate their rights must be resisted. 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 serious attention by the state to the grave problems of violence, abuse, and sexual and reproductive health.

Notes

- i Implementation began in January 2002 with funding from the European Commission and the Community Fund (UK) and is due to finish in June 2005.
- ii Soledad Ortega "Por la vida de las mujeres, ni una muerte más", *Mujeres Hoy* 26/11/03. www.mujereshoy.com.
- iii 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.
- iv Ortega, op. cit. and Isabel Fabian, personal communication.
- v World Health Organisation (2004) "Maternal Mortality in 2000: Estimates developed by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA".
- vi A series of ten documents have been published dealing with the participation of the women's movement in the development of public policy, feminist perspectives on globalisation, the promotion of gender equity and women's participation through local government, and sexual and reproductive rights. All are available on the One World Action website: www.oneworldaction.org or as electronic or printed documents on request from One World Action, any of the partners or the author of the present document Michael Clulow (devgen@rcp.net.pe).
- vii Presentation during the "Central American Encounter: Governance and Gender", Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 2000.

COMMUNITY FUND

Lottery money making a difference

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