Women's Involvement in Local Leadership (WILL):
Facilitating Effective and Sustainable Participation in Community Organizations and Democratic Culture Building

PVC/ASHA Research APS: AFP-G-00-05-00028-00
Final Report

A schoolteacher from Colombia's displaced population

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Executive Summary

Research Mission:
The **Women's Involvement in Local Leadership (WILL)** research program was designed to examine the factors believed to contribute to the cultivation of sustainable and credible women's leadership at the local level in conflict-affected communities in **Colombia**, **Iraq** and **Serbia**. The research focused particularly on:

1) project formulation and implementation aimed at promoting greater and more democratic participation among women in local and community organizations; and
2) the respective roles that men and women play within the observed economic and social settings, and the impact of these roles on women's participation and leadership.

The research was designed to examine the impact that CHF International's programmatic approaches for enhancing the skills, experience and confidence of women have had to contribute effectively as leaders in organizations that built sustainable, representative and democratic change in their communities. Interviews in the three countries studied confirmed previous findings in the literature and the research team's assumptions that while the path to leadership for women is facilitated by a range of factors, particularly critical are access to education, some level of economic independence, and the existence of programs designed to give women leadership roles in their communities. Beyond these conditions, the WILL research led to several conclusions that have implications for future programming.

Summary Conclusions:
Several conclusions were derived from the WILL research. Some provided new detail in the analysis of the role of women and many confirmed factors identified by previous research.

> In all three countries, women who attained local leadership were sometimes seen by their male counterparts as credible leaders who bring **new and valuable perspectives** to the tasks at hand, though that credibility typically came only after time had allowed successful women leaders to demonstrate value. This credibility was built around perceptions that women in community decision-making bodies brought **substantive attention to a range of issues that may not have been considered without female participation**, such as the improvement of education and healthcare facilities, and practical community development needs. Women attributed their unique abilities in part to positive qualities associated with the nature of their family responsibilities, such as responsibility, discipline, reliable work habits and ability to solve practical problems. Due to dangers often inherent in challenging existing mores, programs that built on traditional family responsibilities avoided risks (see subsequent conclusions below).

> NGO programs were credited for creating the necessary **space to exercise and develop their leadership skills within organizations**, which was previously lacking due to the conflict or traditional gender norms.

> The research team found strong across-the-board commitment among female interviewees to **leadership defined as service to the community**, communication skills and rights advocacy, ideas which are congruent with democratic values.

> Most **female interviewees were ambivalent about national level female political leadership**, often attributing women's involvement at this level to mere quota-filling by male-dominated, often corrupt leadership. This view is compounded by a widespread distrust of national level politics reported by both men and women, although many hoped to see increased credibility for national female political leadership over time. Overall, interviewees in all three countries had much **more trust in and higher expectations for leadership at the local and municipal levels**.

> Establishing **a quota for women's participation appears to be a useful, although not sufficient, strategy to work toward gender equity** in visible leadership roles. To be effective, quotas should be coupled with sustained enforcement measures and interventions where necessary. Even within the quota system - and sometime due to the onus of perceptions of "forced' participation - women required support to find and perform in leadership roles.

> A particularly effective approach to building credibility was through programs that **combined tangible services** for income-generation and micro-enterprise projects with leadership building. These approaches were more effective in opening doors for women, particularly among vulnerable groups. Building incomes provided leverage

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for women in systems where credibility was difficult to attain. Training and support for tangible gains in health, education, and personal rights were also effective programmatic tools.

> **Programs that built women's abilities to assume leadership roles came with risks** in societies where visible female leadership was not accepted.

> **Programs aimed exclusively at giving women leadership roles are sometimes perceived as threatening to family unity.** To be effective, programs should consider adding to the community participation approach by including appropriate **interventions that help men** in conflict-affected communities accept and appreciate leadership roles for women. This may mean taking a family-centered approach in order to foster an integrated development solution that offers men incentives to change their attitudes toward women and reduces the potential for domestic backlash against women who become local leaders. The dynamics in conflict situations are especially complex and solutions must be creative, adaptive and risk-aware.

> Establishing **support systems, mentorship programs, and exchange of experiences** with other women in leadership may be helpful in building the confidence of women to seek and value leadership positions.

> As has been identified before, **common obstacles** to women's involvement in local leadership include: traditional social and family structures, lack of financial resources, low levels of self-esteem, and contradictory pressures to provide economically for their children while also giving precedence to the demands of childrearing over employment opportunities, education and community participation.

Methodology:

The WILL study was made possible by support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and was conducted through a partnership between CHF International, a non-governmental organization (NGO) and the Institute for the Study of International Migration (ISIM), a Georgetown University-based research center. The findings are based on open-ended, in-person interviews with male and female program participants, NGO staff, and government stakeholders.

The location of the interviews and the particular people to be interviewed were determined prior to the arrival of the research teams by CHF field offices in the three countries. The team intentionally chose to interview women who had achieved some measure of leadership and sought to understand the factors that accounted for their achievements. The research team did not go to the field with a specific definition of the concept of "female leader." Rather, in order to work with definitions appropriate to each of the cultures and contexts studied, researchers asked the interviewees themselves to define leadership and the characteristics of a female leader.

Country Contexts:

> In **Colombia**, where an estimated two to three million people have been displaced due to the ongoing violence that has marred the country's last 40 years, CHF is managing a national program to provide humanitarian and developmental assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs). The WILL study focused primarily on women who had been displaced from the rural to the urban and peri-urban areas and were being served by a range of NGOs, including CHF International. Researchers identified women who had remade their lives, acquired advanced levels of education, assumed managerial responsibilities, and were directly helping other women develop their skills and experience.

> In **Serbia**, the research was conducted in a number of towns in the east and south of the country, a region heavily affected by unemployment and low wages due to the consequences of post-war economic transition. CHF's programs in Serbia have supported female leadership primarily through the establishment of Community Development Councils (CDCs) that are democratically selected to prioritize and manage large-scale community infrastructure projects. The CDCs require 30% of membership to be reserved for women, which combined with other components that award grants to burgeoning entrepreneurs, are addressing some of the clear obstacles women face in their paths to leadership.

> In **Iraq**, the WILL study was conducted in the more conservative rural areas where there are religious restrictions on free movement and social interaction. Even in these regions, CHF's activities are giving women the opportunity to participate in activities that benefit their society collectively. Women are actively encouraged to join Community Action Groups (CAGs), similar to CDCs, with the understanding that men and women will not necessarily meet together but must still coordinate with each other on community decisions. The CHF practice of imposing a 30% quota for female participation in the CAGs is gradually being put into effect over the next three years.

Introduction

Despite recent efforts emphasizing the importance of gender-sensitive programming, women still face the challenge of contributing meaningfully to the development process and are still often marginalized by community development processes that tend to be male-dominated. However, there is an increasing awareness that women's participation is a key element in a program's achievement. Meaningful participation of women is a matter of equity—as half of the population, women deserve to participate in all processes that affect their lives and well-being. Moreover, studies show that the exclusion of women is in fact detrimental to development programming: the involvement of women lends itself to the establishment of representative and responsive programs at the local level and to increased democratization of community structures and programming.[1]
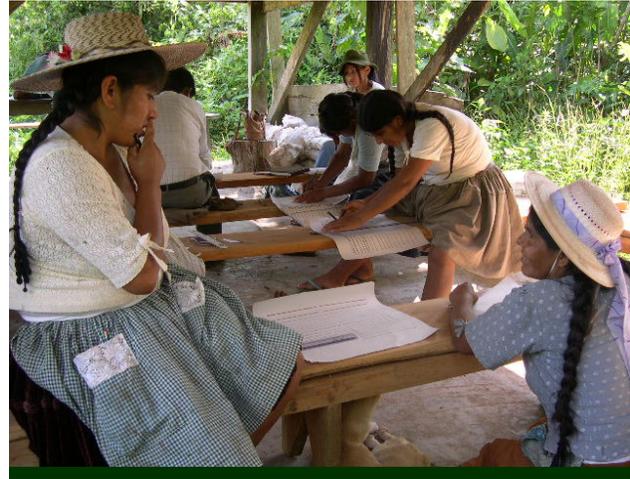
As half of the population, women deserve to participate in all processes that affect their lives and well-being. The women artisans in Bolivia are learning to play a lead role in designing their business work plans.

Facilitating women's participation and leadership is particularly important in conflict-affected countries. Often in these situations, women represent more than half of the adult population. Men may have died in combat or have left their homes in search of employment, leaving women and children behind. In societies emerging from authoritarian governments, women may be among the few populations that do not represent the prior regime's policies and actions, thereby having the greatest potential to serve as catalysts for change.

Critical to the success of women's participation are the structural elements of program design and the sensitivity of program design and implementation to gender issues. It is accepted in the development community that unless specific steps are taken to ensure the equal participation of men and women in community development activities, women are often excluded. For this reason, organizations are increasingly requiring the participation of women in community governance organizations such as community councils or committees to facilitate women's participation.

The **Women's Involvement in Local Leadership (WILL)** project, funded through a research grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) over a 12-month period, examined factors believed to contribute to the cultivation of sustainable women's leadership at the local level in conflict-affected countries. In order to explore how women can more effectively contribute to sustainable, representative and democratic change in a variety of settings, the WILL project undertook field research in **Colombia**, **Iraq** and **Serbia**. Two of the countries, Colombia and Iraq, are currently experiencing conflict; one, Serbia, is a post-conflict country experiencing a difficult economic and political transition. To varying degrees, women in these three countries have been on the margins of participation and leadership—politically, economically and culturally.

Separate reports for each country, analyzing the interaction between non-governmental organization (NGO) programmatic design elements and the dynamics of achieving effective female participation, are attached in an appendix to this report. The research has focused particularly on evaluating:

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[1] Notable examples are *The World Bank Participation Sourcebook Appendix II: Working Paper Summaries*: Gender issues in Participation, [http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/sourcebook/sba209.htm] and UNDP, Women's political participation and good governance: 21st Century Challenges, 2000.

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1. project formulation and implementation aimed at promoting democratic participation among women in local and community organizations; and
2. the roles that men and women play within the observed economic and social settings, and the impact of these roles on women's participation and leadership.

The findings of the report highlight three major themes that should be a part of every program seeking to directly or indirectly influence the leadership roles of women in their societies:

- A thorough **understanding and recognition of cultural gender norms and expectations** will contribute to context-sensitive program design, as well as help program participants begin to redefine those ideals that serve as barriers to participation for women. This includes recognizing and accommodating for the role of men, religious figures, existing support systems, and marginal groups in the context at hand.
- Specific participation **policies and their enforcement** can make the difference between maintaining the status quo and creating a subtle societal shift. For example, CHF/Serbia's introduction of minimum quotas for women's participation in local decision-making bodies, combined with sustained enforcement of the quota, has provided women with a forum to exercise leadership skills, while making their participation in community decisions more accepted and even valued among their male counterparts.
- An **integrated approach** that addresses the educational, economic, and environmental conditions vulnerable and disenfranchised women face is necessary to make a lasting difference. That means the program should consider components to provide training, income-generation and cross-sector coordination to ensure that the results are sustainable once the program ends. An integrated approach may often be most effective when programming is aimed at creating stability for the family unit as a whole, rather than just the female member(s).

Definitions

Because the WILL project sought to identify factors that are believed to contribute to women's leadership, much of the fieldwork in Colombia, Iraq and Serbia focused on women project participants who presently display leadership qualities. The research team did not go to the field with a specific definition of the concept of "female leader." Rather, in order to work with definitions appropriate to the cultures and contexts studied, researchers asked interviewees—both female and male—to define the concept of leadership as they saw it in their contexts, and to describe the characteristics of a female leader. The various responses yielded definitions that encompass all, or most, of the following characteristics:

- The capacity to be more self-sufficient.
- The ability to organize others in similar situations to her own.
- A will to speak out on behalf of women's rights.
- The willingness to represent and speak on behalf of her community.
- The ability to demonstrate success in winning respect for her abilities, actions and opinions from men and women alike.

The research phase of the project has examined CHF methods and the impacts of particular programmatic elements aimed at women. Where CHF projects did not encompass specific design elements to promote women's participation, interviews were held with a wider range of organizations. It is important to note at the outset that neither CHF projects nor those of other agencies visited were established for the purpose of creating female leaders. Their objectives did, however, include enhancing women's skills, experience and confidence so that they would be on equal footing with men in rising to positions of leadership.