



## Legislative Advocacy for Women's Rights: Training Candidates for Local Elections in Cotabato, Philippines

*The Center for Legislative Development*

Despite the multiple roles women play in social and economic realms, in most countries they are underrepresented in elected offices and government agencies. In the Philippines in 1995, women comprised less than 8 percent of candidates for the national Congress and made up only about 10-15 percent of Congressional members. Representation of women candidates in local government elections was just a bit higher, ranging from 9.6 to 11.3 percent.<sup>1</sup>

This report describes a legislative advocacy project initiated in 1996 by the Center for Legislative Development (CLD) as part of its Women in Politics Program. Since the early 1990s, CLD has focused on involving women throughout the Philippines in public advocacy (viewed as a tool with which to challenge gender discrimination) and to achieve gains for women in development.<sup>2</sup> To this end, CLD publishes popular materials and conducts training sessions in partnership with local women's organizations.

The project, "Legislative Advocacy for Women's Rights," aimed to facilitate women's full, informed participation in political life by increasing their presence in local elections and government. CLD chose the strategy of legislative advocacy to empower Filipino women because serves to both introduce favorable policies and prevent disadvantageous ones from being passed. In addition, advocacy is essential to ensuring citizen participation and democracy-building, particularly in Cotabato Province in Mindanao, the southernmost island of the Philippines. The large Muslim population has only recently become involved in political processes, with just a few women (primarily from prominent families) ever running for public office.

### Objectives

In launching the Cotabato advocacy project, CLD aimed to train women in a variety of skills necessary for running in elections, and then to provide support to help them become effective and responsive legislators. A political reality was envisioned in which legislators from all parties know that women in

Cotabato are a force to contend with, and that women should be consulted and involved in every step of the legislative process. Specific objectives of the two-year (1996-1998) project were to:

- ▶ Increase women's political awareness and consciousness;
- ▶ Promote women's full, equal, and informed participation in local legislative decision-making;
- ▶ Form an alliance of women to conduct ongoing legislative advocacy work.

<sup>1</sup> Figures from the Philippine National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> CLD's membership in SIBOL, a coalition of 12 women's groups throughout the Philippines, has provided an avenue for establishing advocacy networks. SIBOL calls national attention to rape and other issues crucial to women's lives and was instrumental in assuring governmental passage of an anti-rape law in 1997.

## The Advocacy Process

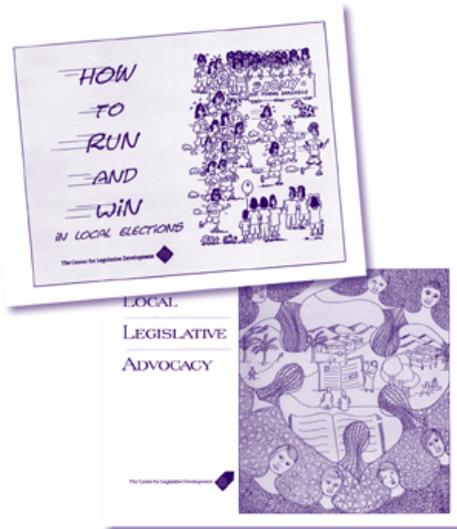
In order to translate target objectives into reality, CLD (with the assistance of volunteer coordinators from Woman Health, a national organization of women's health advocates) carried out the advocacy project in two phases: training and planning.<sup>3</sup> Local elections that occurred at a point between these phases allowed project participants to test their new advocacy and campaign skills. Participants, mostly in their 30s and 40s, included farmers, health workers, schoolteachers, and unemployed college graduates. Only half had ever been involved in political activities.

### Phase I: Training

Training centered on a series of seminars held in 21 communities throughout Cotabato. Session topics included political awareness, consciousness-raising, gender issues, legislative advocacy, developing legislative proposals, the electoral process, and campaign organizing. In addition, two manuals, *Local Legislative Advocacy* and *How to Run and Win in Local Elections*, were

developed and distributed to all participants, women's organizations, and other interested parties.

Initial plans to involve 50 women in five training sessions soon expanded to 139 participants in seven sessions. Another 83 women took part in two orientation meetings on women's political participation and how to run for elected office. A program on gender and women's issues was also conducted for local elected officials.



At the same time that women participated in project workshops, they conducted seminars on ordinance drafting in their communities.

### Phase II: Planning

Soon after initial training occurred, project organizers recognized the need for an entity that could serve as a focal point for collaboration and training activities. This led to the establishment of KABARO,<sup>4</sup> a 200-member, province-wide alliance of women advocates and elected officials dedicated to studying and promoting the issues affecting women in local communities. KABARO chapters provide a venue for mobilizing support for election and campaign activities, while ad hoc committees carry out specific tasks. District meetings held to guide the development, goals, and constitution of KABARO helped to consolidate the skills that participants learned in training seminars. Participants formulated concrete proposals to advance their agenda and developed strategies for networking, planning, and advocacy.

## Results

The CLD advocacy project was assessed in terms of its three central objectives: consciousness raising, political participation, and alliance building. Goals were compared with outputs, and accomplishments were reviewed using indicators on increases in women's awareness of political and social issues, the number of women elected to office, and the extent to which lobbying initiatives were undertaken and

legislative proposals introduced. In addition, focus group discussions held in August 1998 yielded powerful perspectives on the impact of project activities on women's lives.

### Consciousness Raising

► KABARO members helped to organize more than 400 women in taking collective action on violence against women. For example, in *barangay*<sup>5</sup> Cannery,

KABARO helped local women leaders and the Women's Organization Network (WON) intervene in 16 cases of wife beating.

► Approximately 150 community women lobbied local government officials to improve delivery of various services, including clean water, health care, public safety, soil erosion and flood control, housing, literacy programs, and

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the CLD project was implemented during a time of conflict between rebel groups and government forces. The security risks posed by this situation made travelling to project areas somewhat precarious and affected the coordination of certain activities. Communication and coordination between Mindanao and Manila, between area coordinators, and between staff and local women were also problematic.

<sup>4</sup> KABARO stands for Kababaihan sa Adbokasya para sa Rurban na Oportunidad sa Mindanao, Inc. (Women in Advocacy for Rural/Urban Opportunities in Mindanao) and is also a colloquial Filipino term for "same sex" or "same dress," which in turn is often used to mean "common perspective."

<sup>5</sup> A *barangay* is similar to a village (in rural areas) or a neighborhood (in urban settings).

road construction. KABARO members in the town of Koronadal proposed an ordinance appropriating funds for the installation of safe drinking water facilities, negotiated with the electric cooperative to install electric posts, and secured funds for an adult literacy program.

- ▶ Three *barangay* councilors who received training through the CLD project proposed and supervised the implementation of a microcredit project for small businesses. A large number of women were able to access these funds for projects such as sewing, livestock raising, and the planting of asparagus beds.

### Political Participation and Change

- ▶ Project participants and KABARO members organized a parade and symposium with the theme “Women’s Month, Women’s Vote, and Women’s Political Power.” More than 600 women participated in the event.
- ▶ Of the more than 200 women who received advocacy training under the CLD project and ran in *barangay* and municipal elections, 47 percent won their seats. Of those elected, 40 percent had run for office for the first time; others who had ranked low in previous elections now found themselves among the top candidates. In addition, about 29,000 women—representing more than half of the voting population in project areas—voted in *barangay* and municipal elections.
- ▶ The CLD project spurred the participation of women in

legislative council activities and local governmental committee hearings. KABARO members also met with *barangay* leaders and introduced 20 legislative proposals directly benefiting women in their respective *barangay* councils.<sup>6</sup> Several *barangays* also voted to designate 5-10 percent of their internal revenue allotment to services and programs that benefit women. Model legislative proposals crafted during the training workshop were disseminated to all *barangays* where KABARO members live.

### Alliance-building

KABARO served as both a central project outcome and a facilitator of project activities and initiatives. The network is gaining visibility in official circles, as evidenced in the increasing number of appointments and consultations that policymakers have requested. KABARO members have spoken at a number of public events and participated in conferences, further spreading awareness and expanding avenues of collaboration with women’s advocates and both government agencies and nongovernmental organizations. Law enforcement officials and lawyers have turned to KABARO for information and guidance on gender-related concerns, while civic organizations have welcomed its input on community problems.

### Focus Group Findings

The question “*What are women’s issues?*” was answered with concepts such as freedom from and legal protection against violence, economic and social status, roles at home and in the family, the need for

financial independence, and political participation. Many women also raised concern about broad issues that affect their lives, such as pesticide use, inflation, unemployment, and housing.

The question “*What would it entail from women advocates to work for women’s issues?*” elicited responses such as determination, courage, willingness to support women, unity among advocates, and convincing positions. When asked, “*Personally, what have you done to address women’s issues?*” participants said that they had advised women caught in problematic (and often violent) situations with their spouses, contacted the Department of Social Welfare and Development, conducted advocacy activities, ran for elected office, and initiated local policies.

In response to the question “*What did the CLD training seminars mean to you?*” participants indicated that the advocacy project had expanded their worlds, broadened their opportunities, helped them to believe in their goals, and encouraged them to collectively take steps to improve their lives. The training sessions were described as informative and inspiring and were seen as having helped encourage involvement in all aspects of society.

### Conclusions

Overall, the women involved in the advocacy project were sure about what they want: respect, recognition of worth, a fair share of the government’s social development budget, independent livelihoods, women’s health and crisis centers, and sufficient unity and action to

<sup>6</sup>The women-centered proposals focused on micro-credit assistance for women, gender sensitivity training for *barangay* officials, a legal rights awareness program for women, honoraria for day care and health workers, health care services for aging women, and an economic security program for female survivors/victims of violence. Proposals to set up a women’s crisis center, conduct gender sensitivity training for *barangay* leaders, and provide counselling on reproductive health to menopausal women eventually passed.

improve their situation. In their view, women should be able to consciously take part in politics and community affairs, be leaders, and

live free from domestic violence. The greatest contribution of the CLD advocacy project was the transformation of the legislative and elec-

toral process from something distant and alienating to an important strategy for women's empowerment.

## Recommendations and Lessons Learned

Specific recommendations for efforts similar to the Cotabato project include the following:

► **Expand consciousness.** Elected officials and the public should be educated on women's realities and concerns, the manifestations of gender bias in societal structures, and what being a woman in politics means. Women candidates need to learn about the gender aspects of issues relevant to their specific campaign and how to articulate the complexities of women's concerns. Women with experience in working on gender issues and legislation should be involved in project planning and training.

► **Conduct assessments.** Project managers should allow sufficient time to design innovative, responsive training modules that are based on actual situations and are suited to the expertise of participants.

► **Be community-specific.** Organizers should develop strategies for running in and winning elections and participating in political processes that consider the particular skills and

knowledge of potential officials. Area-based staff of local organizations should be consulted on project design in order to ensure that advocacy practices are appropriate to the community and culture.

► **Create publications.** Materials (such as training manuals) are most effective when they contain popular concepts and are user-friendly. The examples and stories they contain should be tailored to match the target audience. Mechanisms to obtain feedback on materials are essential for the development of future projects.

Lessons learned from the CLD project underscore the importance of including women in the legislative equation and of understanding how existing conditions discriminate against women. Some things to keep in mind when applying the CLD model in other settings include:

► **Legislative advocacy is long-term.** This endeavor doesn't offer quick fixes, but instead requires research, analysis, positioning, and active campaigning with a large

group of people. Many countries have governments and institutions that are largely unfamiliar with the concept of grassroots advocacy, and many citizens lack knowledge about the legislative process.

► **The personal is part of the political.** A central challenge of advocacy projects involving women is how to relate personal and intimate experiences (such as domestic violence or economic discrimination) to legislation and "official" practices. Translating this understanding into manageable actions so that advocates do not become frustrated is a critical step.

► **Support networks are essential.** Because advocacy projects exist for a limited period of time, organizers can only get participants started on work they will have to continue themselves. Providing women with knowledge, legislative tools, financing, communications, and a forum for discussion are essential. The networks that form will sustain momentum and political gains.

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