

her...The leader does not speak for the others or represent them without previously having consulted them, ...and is committed to sharing power....”

(From the *Corporación Casa de la Mujer, Liderazgos: Participación de Mujeres y Representación en el Poder Local, Bogotá 2004*, p. 79 trans: pwf)

Clearly, these views of leadership are compatible with the objectives of CHF and similar organizations seeking to promote participatory practices in conflict or transitional countries, and the women who have expressed these views warrant international support and encouragement. The organizations in question set examples, as most have instituted democratically elected boards of directors. As noted above, the women encountered through the project had generally negative views on the political cultures they have observed and experienced in their respective countries, did not think of themselves as “political” leaders and did not aspire to join traditional political parties. Though it is something of a simplification, the organizations and movements sharing these views intend eventually to wrest control of livelihoods and decision-making from the traditional political leaders. The most relevant and effective initiatives appear to be taking place at the local and municipal level, within local government entities, in NGOs and advocacy groups working for improved human rights and peace.

Obstacles of Traditional Family and Social Structures

Interviewees underscored culture and traditional family structures as common and daunting obstacles to achieving their personal leadership objectives:

- Although the women in the three countries have long been incorporated into the workforce in varying degrees, they live in male-dominated societies. The **patriarchal structures**, combined in the case of Iraq with strong religious beliefs about male and female roles, are obstacles for women who want to participate in the public sphere and to assume positions of leadership in this sphere.
- Women from **ethnic minorities**, the Roma and Albanians in Serbia, indigenous groups in Colombia, and women from rural areas generally, were especially restricted by patriarchal structures from public activities, and hence from leadership opportunities.
- **Education and class (family prestige)** can open the way to leadership. Nevertheless, even such advantaged women face limits imposed from within their families and many complained they had not been taken seriously by colleagues.
- Because women are first and foremost seen as care-givers for their children, they must deal with **contradictory pressures**: first, the responsibility to provide for their children, and second, the expectation that demands of childrearing will take precedence – and should take precedence – over employment opportunities, education and community participation.
- The women interviewed in Colombia, Iraq and Serbia similarly noted, however, that their sense of **discipline, reliable work habits and ability to solve practical problems** were directly related to the nature of their family responsibilities. Women in Serbia and Colombia attributed a well-ingrained sense of responsibility to the fact that, unlike many men living in similar social and economic conditions, they had to see to the protection and care of their children.

Economic challenges

In the three countries visited, employment opportunities are scarce and the economic situations are dire. Both men and women experience major difficulties finding work, and make do with wages that barely cover basic needs. For the women, extreme poverty and loss of hope diminish much of the positive impact of programmatic efforts by CHF and other entities in terms of empowerment, self-confidence and social engagement.

Female labor is in greatest demand at the bottom of the economic ladder, in the services sectors. Wages and conditions in this sector usually are so poor that family survival remains difficult. To be sure, even low

level service jobs may be a lifeline, and those who take them learn some skills they may not have had otherwise. Yet, low level service jobs do little to enhance the kinds of skills that will help women rise economically; nor do they usually raise self-esteem. NGO projects that have enhanced women’s income generating capacity, i.e. micro-credits for small businesses, do enhance skills and self esteem, but they do not necessarily provide for more secure futures unless accompanied by other benefits like training, investments in marketing and growth, psychosocial support, and education related to personal rights. When these benefits have been made available, as they have to an extent by CHF and other entities, they have contributed significantly to women’s prospects for leadership.

Although the project interviewed relatively few males, it is clear their inability in many cases to support themselves and provide for their families has created tensions within families. Reportedly, the resulting frustration and loss of a positive self-image has resulted in a high incidence of domestic violence and abandonment in Colombia and Serbia.

Perceptions of Democracy and “Politics”

As already noted, the women interviewed tended to enter public life through **local level activity** and in civil society organizations. In discussions with women activists of varied social and economic standing as well as with the staff of organizations supporting participation in local and national level activities, there was an all but universal affirmation of democratic values. At the same time, virtually all respondents—including women who were working in government entities—shared an aversion for what they understand as “politics.” When the same people were asked about political activity, they denied

interest in engaging; when asked about involvement in advocacy, issue-based organizations, or efforts to change the *status quo*; many spoke with almost missionary zeal.



Programs that are designed to enhance the skills and knowledge base of local organizations, like CHF’s Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Program in Rwanda, are giving women the opportunity to grow in leadership roles at the local level.

The fact that there is very widespread disdain and distrust for the current political leadership gives the women, hitherto marginal to the political scene, a potential political advantage. Nevertheless only a few seem to have an appetite for trying to achieve change through formal political bodies except, importantly, at the local level where CHF and many other NGOs have operated effectively. Some Iraqi, Colombian and Serbian political leaders have advocated gender equity and sought formally to implement gender equity in government structures, especially in the legislative branch. Although the number of female faces should therefore increase, hardly any interviewees reported expectations of major changes on the national political front.

The predominantly female interviewees in the three countries were also ambivalent about female political leadership. They similarly commented that most women serving in political party or even legislative positions were “filling quotas” and being used by corrupt, male-dominated leadership. On the other hand, they saw clearly the advantages of political position:

- Serbian women seemed hopeful about the results of a proposed 30 percent quota for women in Parliament.
- Iraqis thought there might be some “interesting” results from the obligatory 25 percent quota for women in the recently formed Iraqi parliament.
- In Colombia, women were dismayed that an existing gender quota of 30 percent for labor unions and public sector positions has not been upheld and lamented that the number of women in the legislature was no more than 10 percent and falling.

For the present, interviewees in the three countries planned to devote their efforts to building democratic practices in local and municipal level organizations rather than national legislative politics.

Valuing the Contributions of Women

In all three countries, the women who attained leadership were seen to bring new and valuable perspectives to the tasks at hand. This was especially evident in the case of Serbia, where men who served alongside women in the Community Development Councils found the women to be more practical and realistic in their determinations about what kinds of projects were viable for implementation. In Colombia, women were praised by male counterparts for being focused and reliable workers who were more likely than men to find practical solutions to problems. In Iraq, there is evidence that public attitudes toward female leaders have improved as according to interviewees, they are increasingly seen as credible actors who produce results.



Community meetings, like this one in Azerbaijan, are effective forums for giving women the opportunity to voice their views, which many participants report bring practical and realistic suggestions to the conversation.

Programmatic Gaps

Various interviews called attention to gaps, common to CHF and many programs supported by international donors, which present obstacles to efforts to promote women’s leadership.

- First, programs are **short term**, especially in Colombia. Once the support for these programs that are meant to sustain women’s participation and leadership are over, there will be fewer opportunities all around.
- Second, with the exception of the CHF/Colombia project for IDPs which focuses on families yet lasts only a few months, the efforts to help women gain leadership are inadequately complemented by similar efforts to **work with men**. It is important to do so, not only because men are usually struggling with the social and economic challenges, but also because they have no incentives to change their attitudes toward women.

Programmatic Successes

The research missions to the three countries documented successful uses of specific program designs to create environments conducive to promoting women’s leadership potential.

- **Enforcement of the 30 percent quota** in Serbia, combined with CHF training and specific interventions in the ongoing process, produced the desired effects: Where CDC and similar entities have been created, there is increased participation and visibility of women, increased respect for women’s capacities, and greater skills and confidence among the female participants.
- CHF programs in the three countries have designed strategies to help women and, in the case of Colombia, families to **see themselves as participating members of a broader society** or community.
- A combination of **psychosocial support, empowerment and rights-based training**, along with help in finding economic sustenance has transformed some of the most vulnerable women into self-sufficient and confident actors in the case of Colombia. The programs put in place by CHF for the Colombian government feature **support at the family level**, intended to help families remain united during the tragic process of displacement, and to encourage all members of the family—men, women and children—to build meaningful lives.
- In general, women in urban areas in all three countries seemed to have less need than rural women did for specific programs to exercise leadership. They can move far more easily in public

spaces than rural women and are far more likely to enter the labor market. It is in urban rather than rural settings that women are more likely to be able to gather together, establish support networks, and learn from each other. On the other hand, there is sometimes a more balanced economic partnership between women and men in rural areas, where tasks tend to be shared across gender divisions. In Colombia, where the majority of women interviewed were of rural origin, women had learned skills that allowed them to be competent managers of economic projects. In rural areas of Serbia and Iraq, the participation of women in the CDCs or CAGs was seen as an important contributor to women’s involvement in community planning. The challenge is often to **help rural women make the necessary transitions and to recognize their own competencies.**

- In Iraq, several international NGOs supported **workshops and training activities at the community level**, often operated through local NGOs. These activities reportedly created greater awareness of women’s rights and civil law and fostered a willingness to engage in advocacy.
- International programs that have directly and indirectly trained women staff members to implement their programs have, at the same time, groomed these staff members for future leadership opportunities. Despite the fact that CHF’s offices in these three countries are headed by men, women comprise a significant majority of staff, not unlike most international NGOs. These women are strong candidates for future leadership positions in their communities.

Conclusions

The obstacles to women’s leadership are daunting in each of the sites visited. The combination of violent conflict, poor economic conditions and traditional constraints on women’s public participation serve as significant barriers for most women in these societies. Every story of success is sadly matched by a story of a woman who tried to participate in micro-enterprises, in community organizations or in advocacy organizations and was unable to continue. Many women retreat from participations due to the demands of caring for their families, complaints from their husbands, the pressures of low paid work, and the lack of monetary rewards for their efforts. These basic conditions are unlikely to change significantly in the short or medium term.

Yet, even when working in contexts of conflict and post-conflict transition, with people in dire economic conditions, and focusing on women who have been held back historically by tradition and culture, it is still possible to open doors, at least for a few, by means of well-targeted programs. There are reasons to hope that those who have gained will not lose ground when CHF leaves and/or when donors cease to financially support local organizations doing similar work. **This report has highlighted two principal conditions that contribute to women’s leadership: efforts to increase women’s education and programs that promote women’s leadership, particularly through the active and sustained participation of women in community-level decision-making.** In Colombia, Iraq and Serbia, such activities have helped enable women to gain greater independence as well as greater recognition of the important role they can play in building stronger, more democratic societies.