

*Women and local democracy*

**Lessons from Central America**

*Michael Clulow*



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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*March 2005*

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## Introduction

In Central America, both the State and civil society tend to be highly centralised and the feminist and women's movement has not escaped this tendency. Because of this, women's rights have been promoted at national level, with the tacit understanding that central government has exclusive responsibility for legislation and policy in this area. Nevertheless, an increasing number of experiences demonstrate the possibilities of dealing with this issue at municipal level. Municipal gender equity policies have been approved, women's offices and centres have been established, networks of women in local government have been organised and different kinds of action have been taken to encourage local governments to assume their responsibility for the promotion of women's rights.

These experiences led 220 women to meet in Suchitoto, El Salvador in September 2003 to participate in the Central American Women's Encounter "Sharing Experiences of Political and Citizens' Participation at Local and Municipal Level". The participants included:

- ◆ 176 Salvadorians, including 42 councillors from 19 municipalities, five ex-councillors and more than 100 leaders of local organisations.
- ◆ 15 Nicaraguans, all from Matagalpa.
- ◆ 14 Guatemalans, from Guatemala City, San Juan Sacatepequez, Chiquimula and Quetzaltenango.
- ◆ 10 Hondurans from Tegucigalpa, Valle de Angeles, Nacaome, La Esperanza and Choluteca.

The event generated so much interest that the organisers were obliged to allow the participation of many more people than originally planned. This interest was also demonstrated by the enthusiasm and intensity with which the participants exchanged experiences and aired opinions during the two days of the encounter. Part of the time was spent in discussion of men's opposition to greater participation by women and to the promotion of gender equity. However, they devoted more time and energy to sharing the ways in which they are progressing in the defence of women's needs and rights and their successes in developing new approaches to politics. Participants' comments about the event include:

*'This is my first meeting with women from other countries and I enjoyed it because I have learnt several things that I didn't know and that as women we have the opportunity to liberate ourselves, to express our opinions, vote and participate in our community.'*

*'As Latin American women unite, we can make progress in our communities, countries and internationally.'*

*'I have realised that we are not alone in this struggle but that there are more people fighting for the same objective who haven't given up in the face of the obstacles.'*

*'Looking at the work carried out in the different countries to institutionalise municipal women's offices, I have resolved to bring this about in my municipality.'*

*'What I liked is that many women participate in public office and I am going to fight to participate this way too.'*

The present document seeks to present a synthesis of the experiences and lessons learnt by Central American women working in the area of local democracy, based on the experiences and opinions presented and debated during the encounter, as well as some material from other sources. It is our hope that this will be of value for women and organisations that promote women's political participation and development with gender equity at local level, both in Central America and in other regions. We also hope to encourage those civil society organisations, local governments and international aid agencies that are yet to analyse the relationship between gender equity and local governance to integrate this theme into their work.

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# *1 Decentralisation and participation: opportunities and obstacles for women*

## **1.1 Decentralisation and civil society participation**

Since the 1990s, international aid agencies and financial institutions have promoted decentralisation as a means of increasing the “efficiency” of governments and promoting “good governance”. Within this approach, or as a more recent addition, they have also promoted the participation of civil society in public decision-making through diverse consultation mechanisms.

According to the official point of view, these processes will increase the possibilities of building a state in which local power has influence and where there are better opportunities for women’s effective participation. For example, Lily Caravantes of the Guatemalan Presidential Secretariat for Women (SEPREM) has written ‘it is considered that, by facilitating citizens’ participation in social control and public administration, decentralisation also contributes to the construction and exercise of women’s citizenship through their integration into spaces which permit the development and implementation of their advocacy and negotiation’ strategies at the local level.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, these processes have also been linked to goals such as poverty reduction and the extension of health service coverage.

Despite this public discourse and the various decentralisation mechanisms that have been officially established,<sup>2</sup> the Central American states continue to be governed in a top down and centralised manner. The lion’s share of resources, services and

power are held in the capital cities. Morena Herrera of Las Dignas affirmed that ‘central government is resistant (to decentralisation) and does not see local governments as part of the state. The two are not seen as parts of the same state at different levels.’ Although she was speaking about El Salvador, this reality affects the whole region. Functions and responsibilities are transferred to local government but without the necessary budgetary resources or autonomy. The proportion of the national budget transferred to the municipalities is only between four and ten percent.<sup>3</sup> There are a number of different mechanisms for raising funds locally to supplement the transfers but, as Mirta Kennedy of CEM-H explained, in most cases very little is raised due to problems such as out of date property registers and strong resistance of local landowners and business owners both to the updating of property registers and to tax payment itself.<sup>4</sup>

Even when decentralisation is actually implemented, it is of little benefit to women. In the opinion of Suyapa Martínez of CEM-H, in practice it tends to be implemented in ways that exclude women and is linked to privatisation in areas such as education and health. The latter have particularly negative consequences for women as they are forced to accept increased responsibilities in these areas.<sup>5</sup> Given this, the view expressed by Herrera during a meeting of women in local government held in El Salvador in 2002<sup>6</sup> is important. On that occasion, she observed that women have participated very little in the debates on decentralisation and suggested that women in local government

should overcome this shortcoming by ‘building alliances with those women’s organisations and institutions that are concerned about decentralisation’.

## 1.2 Official mechanisms for citizens’ participation

In Guatemala, the principal legal instrument that promotes citizens’ participation is the Urban and Rural Development Councils Law. This law characterises the system of development councils as ‘the principal means of participation by the population... in public administration of the democratic planning process...’.<sup>7</sup> The general principles of this law include gender equity, and the national, regional and departmental councils are required to include representatives of women’s organisations. However this requirement does not apply to the municipal and community councils. In addition, it is notable that decisions on the funding of the municipal development councils are left to each local government while the funding of the community councils is not even mentioned.

The Guatemalan Municipal Code also establishes the right of residents of every municipality to participate in local decision-making,<sup>8</sup> but the majority of mechanisms for this are not specified. In those cases where they are explicit, the conditions that are established may limit the exercise of those rights in practice. For example, although the code establishes the right to ‘participate in neighbourhood consultations’ and to ‘request a municipal public consultation in matters of great importance for the municipality’, for these rights to be exercised there must be either a local government decision supported by two thirds of the members or a public petition signed by at least 10% of the registered voters. With regard to women’s rights,

the only provision of the code is the requirement that municipal ‘family, women and children’s’ commissions be established.

Laws of the other countries also provide for citizens’ participation. In the case of Nicaragua, the Citizens’ Participation Law was approved in 2003 and its regulations were passed the following year.<sup>9</sup> However, the Local Development Network (*Red para el Desarrollo Local*) has made a legal challenge to the law on the grounds that it gives too much power to the national government in the naming of the members and authorities of the municipal and departmental development councils. In El Salvador, women’s participation as citizens is promoted by the National Women’s Policy.

In Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador, the principal means of participation at municipal level is the open forum (*cabildo abierto*), which is similar to the municipal public consultation in Guatemala. These forums are provided for in the Municipality Laws of Nicaragua and Honduras and in the Salvadorian Municipal Code. The latter mandates that forums be held ‘at least every three months’ and specifies not only that they are open to ‘all residents of the municipality’ but also that ‘invitations should be extended to... the trade, social and cultural organisations of the community’. The outcomes of these forums are not binding. In contrast, the outcomes of public consultations, which are also provided for in Salvadorian law, have to be implemented. Unfortunately, as Dilcia Marroquín of Las Dignas has noted, this fact leads to them not being held at all.<sup>10</sup>

The Nicaraguan law establishes that the residents of each municipality may participate in the open forums, ‘without any impediment, freely and voluntarily so that they can be informed, constructively

criticise and contribute to municipal administration... (and that) they will meet ordinarily at least twice a year to deal with the Municipal Budget Proposal and its implementation, as well as to be informed about the Municipal Development plan'. The law also establishes that extraordinary forums may be held and that they may be convened by citizens in coordination with the local council to deal with 'those matters which the citizens have requested should be dealt with publicly... with the aim of improving municipal administration and the participation of local residents in the solution of those same matters'. The law specifies the right of residents to participate 'individually and collectively', which implies that civil society organisations (CSOs) have the right to participate as such in the forums. Another important provision of this law is the obligation of the municipalities to promote respect for human rights 'especially the rights of women and children'.

Other legally mandated mechanisms for local citizens' participation include community associations in El Salvador (ADESCOs) and municipal development committees in Nicaragua. Nicaraguan law also mandates support for 'the creation of residents associations which promote municipal development'. Margarita Gutiérrez of Grupo Venancia related that, in accordance with this legislation, many of Nicaragua's 152 local governments have created municipal development committees and commissions. Both types of body include CSOs but in most cases there is no participation by women's organisations.

In relation to the Salvadorian community associations, Herrera saw as positive the relative ease with which they are created and legally recognised as this has permitted their rapid growth. Nevertheless, local governments only call on them for

consultations, not to participate directly in decision-making. In addition, there is a risk that they can be organised according to the tastes of individual mayors. 'If they don't behave themselves, it is easy for the mayor to withdraw recognition and create another, thereby weakening citizens' participation.' She also commented that various women's associations in districts of San Salvador have been organised according to all the norms for ADESCOs but have not been recognised by the mayor because they only include women. However, some mayors have recognised the right of women to organise in this way, for example in San Rafael Cedros where the "Association of Women for a Better World" (*Asociación de Mujeres por un Mundo Mejor*) has received official recognition.<sup>11</sup>

At national level, a number of different consultation mechanisms have been instituted in the countries of the region, for example the National Council for Economic and Social Planning (CONPES, *Concejo Nacional de Planificación Económica y Social*) in Nicaragua, in which diverse social actors participate, including the women's movement which is represented by the Network of Women against Violence (*Red de Mujeres contra la Violencia*). Nevertheless, these mechanisms often have very limited power. In the case of Honduras, Martínez affirmed that 'the president has called the country to participate in a great debate but in an authoritarian manner, the government sets all the rules and determines the priorities'. 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 the consultation, rather than to change government proposals in any important way. In practice, women have been excluded and their organisations

have withdrawn from the process as they consider that there is virtually no real dialogue.

### 1.3 Participation of women in elected office

Throughout the region women have limited access to decision-making positions. This is true even when there are quotas established by law or by internal regulations of political parties. In Honduras, the Equal Opportunities Law requires that women make up at least 30% of the candidates in the electable positions of each party list. Nevertheless, in the most recent elections the percentages of women among national representatives and local councillors fell from 9% to only 5%. In Nicaragua, the principal parties have defined participation quotas for women: 30% in the case of the main opposition party, the FSLN, and 40% (including women and youth) in the governing PLC. However, the percentage of women elected as national deputies has been less than 25% in all three of the most recent elections.<sup>12</sup> The regulations of the principal left wing party in El Salvador, the FMLN, mandate a minimum of 30% women among election candidates but this is not fulfilled in practice.

Perhaps the worst situation at local government level is that of Guatemala. In the 2003 elections only eight women were elected as mayors out of a total of 361 (2.4%) and 168 as councillors out of 3,350 (5%). Nevertheless, these figures were better than those of the previous electoral period when there were only three women mayors and 127 councillors. The mayor of Maraita in Honduras, Reina Lagos, related how in her country in 2001 the number of women mayors had dropped from 33 to 26, out of a total of 298, and that only 40 women were elected as vice-mayors (18%) and 295

as councillors (15%). Martínez added that the majority of women mayors govern poor municipalities, a situation which is repeated in El Salvador. In Nicaragua, according to Gutiérrez, only 14 of the 154 municipalities were governed by women.

According to Herrera in El Salvador, not only is the proportion of women in local government low but it is also very difficult for those women to gain re-election. In those municipalities that have been governed by the same party for three electoral periods or longer, for every nine men who have participated as councillors for the whole time, only one woman has done the same. Given the “winner takes all” nature of the Salvadorian system,<sup>13</sup> this means that the majority of women councillors are not included in their own parties’ lists of candidates for re-election.

In the opinion of Janeth Castillo, a councillor from Matagalpa, Nicaragua, this reality demonstrates that, ‘Party quotas are not dependable. We are included to fill spaces in the party lists, for convenience, in the last places’. Gutiérrez considered that, ‘There is no political will on the part of the national government to promote women’s participation... The political culture is based on the exchange of favours for votes (*clientalismo*), women and their organisations are only taken into account during election periods’.

In Herrera’s view, the main problem is at the level of candidatures, ‘we focus on election results but who presents themselves as candidates?... There are few women candidates, especially in winnable positions.’ In this context it is important to note the existence of economic barriers to women’s candidature. The Nicaraguan Margine Gutiérrez has observed that ‘to become a pre-candidate one must pay a quota to the party and women are normally

in more difficult economic circumstances than men'.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, Herrera suggested that all the blame shouldn't be placed on men, 'The glass ceiling... hasn't only been put in place by men, but also by us'. Similarly, Celeste Ramírez, a councillor from Jocotán, Guatemala considered that, 'The problem is that there are few women who participate in party politics... (When I have) pushed for women to be given more opportunities the answer that I get is 'Where are they? If they want to be candidates they should be in the party'... (Nevertheless) the parties try to recruit interested women leaders as candidates because they know they will attract the votes of many women because of the work they have done in the community. We should exploit this opportunity so that more women have the chance to participate.' Similarly, Herrera observed that the parties need women to legitimate themselves. As a result, there is a kind of unwritten quota, although it is very limited.

In this context, Lagos upheld that many women are too frightened of the rumours that will circulate about them and the criticism that they will receive. She recommended that, 'We shouldn't think of politics as dirty and corrupt, it's the politicians that are that way. We need to get involved and show that not everybody is the same. Don't think about it too much, just by participating we win. And if you win a position, preach with your example which is the best way of encouraging women to participate.' As Jeronima Cotzoyay Mugus councillor from San Juan Sacatepequez, Guatemala saw the matter, 'We have to overcome the fear of what people are going to say'. Referring to the tendency of the parties to put women in the last places of their electoral lists she asked, 'How are we going to win like that? We have to fight for our place.'

## 1.4 The political system and culture

The obstacles to women's participation have their roots in the nature of the system that is characterised by an authoritarian political culture that discourages social and political participation, impeding in particular women's participation and leadership. Margarita Gutiérrez highlighted a number of the principal characteristics of this system.

- ◆ 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. At the same time, as Vivianne Dardón of Tierra Viva commented, 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. Alma López, a councillor from Quetzaltenango, Guatemala spoke about the same problem, asking, 'How can we get all the citizens to understand that the municipality isn't only the entity which provides services but rather that matters such as waste disposal, transport, water and social organisation are their responsibility too?'
- ◆ State institutions are dependent on the party in power: when the government changes, so does everything else. As an independent consultant Alejandra Massolo noted, 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.
- ◆ The political class is used to offering more than it can deliver, to lying and to failing to fulfil its commitments. This leads the

public to lose interest in politics, which reinforces its failings.

In Herrera's view, the political system is characterised by "patrimonialism" in which the states are at the service of governments. People come to consider that the parties own the municipalities; they don't conceive them as being theirs. This affects women in two ways. First, 'women don't own any municipalities, even where there are women mayors or a majority of women councillors'. Second, democracy is weakened, making women's participation more difficult. In Massolo's view, patrimonialism is mixed with corruption, contributing to the plundering of resources by local governments during and at the end of their elected periods.

Another important aspect of the political system is the influence of the churches, especially the Catholic Church but also the evangelicals. Gutiérrez considered that, in Nicaragua, 'the church is the most powerful political party' and that the churches relegate women and support the richest and most powerful in society. Both Gutiérrez and Castillo explained how, during 2003, the Catholic Church hierarchy had exerted great pressure leading to the withdrawal of a proposal for sex education in schools and to the distortion of the proposed law on equality.

In the case of Guatemala, Dardón identified 'the effect of the religious war (Catholics versus evangelicals) on the electoral process. In this panorama the role of women is seen in very traditional terms'. As Herrera commented, many political party members hold very traditional views and 'some say that we aren't interested in politics'. An example of such views can be seen in the case of Nicaragua where, in 2003, the bishops criticised the proposal to define a minimum quota for women election candidates as discriminatory against

men, arguing that, given the supposed lesser interest of women in politics, this would unfairly limit men's ability to participate.

## *2 Promotion of women's rights by local governments*

### **2.1 The experience of women mayors and councillors**

#### **Opposition to women in power**

All of the women councillors and mayors who made presentations during the encounter said that they had experienced opposition in their work. López observed that 'participation in local government isn't very easy. This has to do with how we are seen by others and by ourselves, and with the patriarchal structure... For a man to be listened to, he only has to sit in the council. We have to ask that a proposal be debated two or three times before our request is accepted.' She said that women are questioned when they present matters from a woman's point of view and that 'if we refer to gender this is taken to mean that we are all feminists, which is used to disqualify our point of view... The very fact that we sit in a space normally occupied by men makes us subversive. Everything we do every day is a political action to claim our citizenship. We shouldn't think that by being in an elected position we have won the battle, it has only just begun. We are accused of being lesbians, the lover of such-and-such a councillor, etc.'

Marta Elena Rodríguez spoke vehemently about her experience as mayor of Soyapango, El Salvador between 2000 and 2003, claiming that 'They try to push women into a nervous breakdown'. Lagos commented about the number of rumours that have been circulated about her, joking that, 'Before I was mayor... I was a decent woman but now I don't know who I am'. Both Lagos and Rodríguez noted that opposition to their administration came not only from the political opposition but also from their own parties.

A very common type of opposition is the obstruction of women's access to key positions. On the one hand, as López and Cotzoyay Mugus commented, women councillors are assigned positions related to social programmes but not those in administration, finance etc. On the other, as Dardón observed 'in some municipalities the majority of the senior management posts are held by men while the women are employed as sub-directors, secretaries etc., that's to say lower ranking positions'. Rodríguez noted that under her administration women held half of the posts of director but under the new mayor almost none remain, even though he is a member of the same party.

#### **Overcoming resistance**

Faced with opposition, the mayors and councillors recommended valuing one self and being strong. Cotzoyay Mugus considered that 'We are capable, we are intelligent, we can do "men's work", there are women mayors who are making progress. I've told my family that I'm going to cover myself in lard or oil so that everything slides off me... As women, if nobody is going to value us, we must value ourselves.' Rodríguez and Lagos warned against the temptation to behave like men. As Lagos put it, 'The secret is to believe in ourselves as women, and not to carry the pistol and put on the trousers (and) the cowboy hat that the mayor likes'.

Other important factors include the unity of women councillors and support by women in the community. Rodríguez recognised that she had been supported by several women's organisations during her administration. In her view 'a woman mayor can't sail these seas without the

support of women from all social sectors'. Castillo recounted how the women councillors in Matagalpa had worked together despite the opposition of their parties. Because of this they had been able to take forward programmes and activities to benefit women in relation to violence and the registration of property, organised public forums of women, and supported the establishment and implementation of a gender equity commission. María del Socorro Mendoza, vice-mayor of Tuma La Dalia, Nicaragua commented that, in her experience 'it is possible to prioritise women's problems despite party differences'.

### **Constructing municipal administration with and for women**

López explained how in her municipality they are working to develop strategies and policies that reflect women's points of view. To begin with, this has required an analysis of who are the real users of public services so that they are designed in relation to their priorities rather than the suppositions of male councillors. For example, so that public transport and water services are organised according to the needs of the true cross-section of the users who are mainly women.

Castillo observed that, although the Nicaraguan Municipalities Law mandates the promotion of women's rights, it requires a struggle for this to be put into practice. A great difficulty is the lack of budget lines for women. For this reason, the Gender Equity Commission, which includes councillors and representatives of women's organisations, has been working so that the budget for the following year be prepared with a gender perspective and using a methodology that permits women to express their opinions on which projects should be funded.

Lagos recounted that she began to reflect on the necessity of working with the women of her municipality after she participated in training on gender. In her opinion, the majority of women councillors and mayors lack gender awareness, 'We know nothing about gender. I hadn't received even a 10-minute talk.' Since receiving training, 'I have to and I am working with the women, because of the women and for the women of my municipality... I have put down the Liberal banner and raised the banner of municipalism with a gender perspective.' She is seeking to administrate the council in a new way and promote women's rights. Among the measures she has taken are:

- ◆ A different style of administration. The mayor doesn't define the agenda by herself; rather it is developed by all the individuals and groups that participate. Decisions are made clearly and by consensus, seeking that all involved feel that they have participated. Men's participation is sought, so that they become allies rather than enemies. All activities are managed transparently and all members of the council are treated with respect.
- ◆ Consultation with women. A public forum for women was held in coordination with women's organisations in the municipality; this had the support of the National Women's Institute (INAM) and the governor of the department, who is a woman. This was the first such forum held in Honduras and the experience has led to its replication by various municipal governments.<sup>15</sup> In addition, consultations have been held with women in their communities.
- ◆ Equal participation of women and men is promoted in all activities. Examples given by Lagos included a production project, the selection of representatives to participate in the national dialogue, and

the participation of communities in regular public forums.

- ◆ A gender perspective is being incorporated into the budget and care is taken to ensure that the budget is administered so that the majority of women benefit.
- ◆ A Municipal Women's Office (OMM, *Oficina Municipal de las Mujeres*) has been established in line with the National Women's Policy. This was facilitated by foreign aid but in the context of an agreement that the office's funding would be assumed later in its entirety as part of the municipal budget.

## 2.2 Institutionalising gender and affirmative actions for women

A number of different types of local initiatives were presented and analysed:

- ◆ Gender Equity Policies. Presentations were made about San Salvador, Nueva San Salvador, Zacatecoluca and Suchitoto (all in El Salvador).<sup>16</sup>
- ◆ The Soyapango, Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy, El Salvador.
- ◆ Affirmative Action Plans of Mejicanos and El Paisnal, El Salvador.
- ◆ Municipal Women's Offices (OMM) in Nacaome, Honduras and 30 other municipalities of that country.
- ◆ The Matagalpa Gender Equity Commission, Nicaragua.
- ◆ Women's projects in Tuma La Dalia, Nicaragua.
- ◆ Social Work Volunteers, Jocotán, Guatemala.

A common factor of these initiatives is that all of them were developed by women, either women councillors, local women's

groups and/or women's organisations working in the area. Some men have acted as allies but women are responsible for the initiatives and for following them up. In some cases, opportunities presented by other municipal initiatives have been exploited. For example, the Matagalpa Women's Network involved itself in the creation of the local development committee, becoming a member, and then was able to work from that space to promote the creation of the Gender Equity Commission. In other cases, local governments responded to the initiatives of women's organisations. For example, the Mejicanos affirmative action plan was developed in the context of the annual contest organised by Las Dignas to promote the development by local governments of diverse types of action in favour of gender equity.

### Successes and difficulties

Some of the achievements highlighted include:

- ◆ **San Salvador.** Significant increases in the proportion of local government senior management positions held by women and in the number of municipal police women; the creation of district-level gender equity round tables with the participation of representatives of community organisations; the establishment of three women's centres; and the approval of a municipal by-law prohibiting sexual harassment in public areas.<sup>17</sup>
- ◆ **Nueva San Salvador.**<sup>18</sup> Creation of the Gender Unit and the Women Citizens' Round Table.
- ◆ **Suchitoto.** The creation of a women's centre with council funding.
- ◆ **Soyapango.** The integrated policy on sexual health education is being implemented.

◆ **Mejicanos.** A women's office has been established and the women's committees of six inter-community boards<sup>19</sup> have been strengthened. The council has funded talks on women's rights and activities to mark "International Women's Day" and the "International Day of Action on Violence against Women". During the town's annual festivities, a day was set aside to highlight women's abilities. This included a women's marathon, craft exhibition and football tournament. A gender equity policy was in development.

◆ **El Paisnal.** Women's groups have been established in 11 communities. Women's forums and assemblies have been held and activities conducted to mark the "International Day of Action on Violence against Women". During 2004, the 11 community groups joined together to form an association, which has obtained legal recognition with support by the council. Recently, the Association, in coordination with the local council, has begun to work with young women and men.

◆ **Nacaome.** The OMM has been monitoring cases of domestic violence, seeking funding for production projects, and has a radio programme. Neighbouring municipalities have replicating the experience of this OMM.

◆ **Matagalpa.** The creation of the equity commission provided public recognition of the need to work in these areas and made visible women's demands and interests. Progress had been made in establishing bridges, alliances and common strategies with the members of the Municipal Development Committee of which it forms a part. The council had provided the commission with a budget of \$5,000.

◆ **Tuma La Dalia.** Projects being implemented included chicken farms, funding for housing construction, land

registration, and gender workshops with men and women.

◆ **Jocotán.** Some 400 women have been participating as social work volunteers. Women are now participating in elections in the municipality; eight years previously only men voted.

The limiting factor that was mentioned most often was the lack of funding, while a related problem was the lack of personnel. In El Salvador, during the first two years following approval of the San Salvador gender policy and again in 2004, only one member of staff was given direct and exclusive responsibility in the area. For example, Martínez considered that many of the OMM in Honduras had been created 'because it was fashionable'; the National Women's Institute had concentrated on the creation of women's offices but without defining clear objectives and without ensuring their funding.

As might be expected, not all of the initiatives were easily approved and there has been resistance to their implementation. According to Angie Largaespada of the Matagalpa Women's Network (*Red de Mujeres de Matagalpa*), the campaign to establish the gender equity commission met 'resistance from various sectors which refused to recognise the need to integrate women's particular needs and interests into the work of local government... We believe that resistance was due, in some cases, to lack of understanding even of the term "equity" while others were openly against anything that signified women's equality, equity or participation.' Some of the administrative personnel continue to oppose the work of the commission. In the case of Suchitoto, Ana María Menjivar, ex-councillor of that municipality, considered that the chief obstacle to implementation of the gender equity policy was the *machista* attitude of the men. This was found in San

Salvador too, where ‘*Machista* attitudes within the council have been shown by different types of resistance, especially in relation to the appointment of female personnel’.<sup>20</sup>

### Overcoming resistance

Lessons have been learnt in how to overcome opposition in all the cases that were analysed. There are even cases in which the participation of a wide range of official and civil society organisations has been achieved. Perhaps the best example of this is the Zacatecoluca Municipal Gender Equity Policy. Not only were women’s organisations involved in the development of this policy but also two NGOs (CIDEP and ISD), the Municipal Development Committee, the Salvadorian Women’s Institute, the Family Section of the National Police, the departmental delegation of the Human Rights Procurator’s Office, and three schools.<sup>21</sup>

A number of different factors that have facilitated the approval and implementation of these diverse initiatives deserve specific mention.

- ◆ Support by local and national women’s organisations has been critical in almost all cases. These organisations have participated in commissions, conducted or supported studies, coordinated actions with women councillors, lobbied mayors, councillors and local officials, provided funding and technical guidance, and acted in other ways. The creation of official bodies such as the San Salvador Consultative Commission on Gender Equity, in which representatives of women’s organisations participated together with council members, has provided important spaces of coordination and participation. Similarly, Kennedy has noted that, even though the OMM are provided for in the National Women’s Policy, the Poverty Reduction Strategy and
- the Government Plan, those that are working best are linked to women’s organisations.<sup>22</sup>
- ◆ The determination of women councillors was highlighted in several cases. The study of San Salvador’s case<sup>23</sup> emphasised the part played by women councillors during council debates to approve the municipal policy and even more importantly during the initial stage of implementation.
- ◆ The signing of political commitments by mayoral candidates during elections was the first step in the development of both the San Salvador Gender Equity Policy and the Nacaome OMM. However, the attitudes of the individuals involved are crucial if such commitments are to be fulfilled. For example, Rosa Delia Dimas, councillor from Mejicanos, El Salvador cited the personal interest and commitment of that town’s mayor as an important factor in the achievement of progress. Similarly, Largaespada was of the opinion that ‘the good will and shared values of some of the municipal officials and representatives of civil society involved in the process’ had contributed to the establishment of the Matagalpa Gender Equity Commission.
- ◆ Even limited amounts of financial support can have a positive effect. In Nacaome, CEM-H committed itself to pay the operational costs of the OMM during six months in exchange for a commitment by the council to also provide funding and to include the office’s budget in the local government budget within a specified period. In Suchitoto, Las Dignas signed an agreement with the council to provide technical and financial support. Similarly, the financial prizes in Las Dignas affirmative action contest stimulated interest and helped to ensure the implementation of the winning proposals, even though the amounts are not large.

Diagnostic studies and extensive consultations have been an important factor in the development of equity policies, providing them with a strong base and wide support. Herrera commented on the San Salvador case ‘...it is important that policies be based on wide consultations with the women in the municipality so that they reflect their aspirations and priorities. If this had not been the case in San Salvador, it would have been very difficult to involve women from community organisations.’<sup>24</sup> At the same time, interviews with high-ranking officials provided a means of involving them in the design of policy elements for which they themselves would have responsibility. Regarding the process in Soyapango, women’s organisation CEMUJER has reported that ‘great importance was given to the involvement of all interested sectors in the development of the policy, given that this would guarantee their subsequent support’.<sup>25</sup> In addition, meetings with state bodies operating in Soyapango helped to identify a number of elements that were missing from the proposal and to secure their support, an important point given that this would be critical for the policy to be implemented.

The experience of Soyapango provides a particularly good example of the possibilities of overcoming opposition given that the theme of the policy—sexual and reproductive health—in and of itself raises great opposition. ‘There was opposition within the council based on poor understanding and misinterpretation of the objectives... some (councillors) were worried that it would be understood as an attempt to institutionalise a policy in favour of abortion. This situation required careful lobbying to clarify the true intentions. This phase included work to raise the awareness of the council in this area and lobbying to meet with them in formal session to

inform them about the policy.’<sup>26</sup> Previous awareness raising work by CEMUJER in Soyapango and the fact that the organisation had already established relations with the mayor, some officials and various institutions facilitated the situation. All these factors allowed the opposition to be overcome and the policy was approved with 11 votes in favour, one abstention and two councillors absent; nobody voted against the measure.

Finally, it should be remembered that the local level is not independent of the national context. It is important that municipal codes and laws provide support for initiatives in favour of women, which, among other effects, will increase their sustainability. In this sense, Martínez considered that, ‘the OMMs (of Honduras) should be included in the municipalities law, otherwise they may disappear’.

## 2.3 Associations of women in local government

In recent years, various organisations of women in local government have been established. These provide important forums for mutual support among women mayors and councillors and for them to establish relations with other women who are seeking to promote women’s rights at local level.

### **The National Association of Women Councillors and Mayors of El Salvador** (ANDRYSAS, *Asociación Nacional de Regidoras, Síndicas y Alcaldesas Salvadoreñas*)

Founded six years ago, this is the oldest of this type of association in the four countries represented in Suchitoto. ANDRYSAS was created in 1998 during the First National Congress of Women Councillors in which 130 women from 68 municipalities participated. During its first year, the

Association combined organisational work with a campaign to encourage women to vote and in support of women candidates from the different parties. Since then, the membership has grown to 320 members, mostly current councillors but also including a number of ex-councillors.

As Blanca Rosa Olmedo of the board of directors related, the initiative to bring together all women councillors in one association came from Las Dignas. Originally, the association was restricted to councillors as they had no other organisation but was widened to include women mayors after several requested membership. According to an ANDRYSAS publication ‘...in 1998, women from several municipal governments and different political parties began developing projects with a gender perspective... we all met the same difficulties on the road to participating effectively in local administration, particularly when seeking to favour the interests and needs of women. In this context, we created the first regional committees and promoted an intensive process of reflection in different parts of the country, we participated in diverse forums and other national and Central American activities, we gained the support of several municipal councils and mayors, and we strengthened our vocation to build the organisation.’<sup>27</sup> ANDRYSAS’s objectives include:

- ◆ To encourage women to occupy more spaces within the sphere of local government.
- ◆ To raise the consciousness of municipal officials regarding women’s subordination.
- ◆ To bring together women municipal officials to fight for their rights to be respected and to strengthen their administrative and management capacity.
- ◆ To promote respect for the dignity of women municipal officials.

- ◆ To fight for women to be respected locally and nationally.

The Association’s principal activities have included:

- ◆ Annual congresses beginning in 1999. Recently, these have received support from the El Salvador Municipal Corporation and the Salvadorian Women’s Institute, while the 2002 congress was also supported by six councils, three governed by the principal left wing party, FMLN, and three by ARENA, the conservative party which has governed the country for more than a decade.
- ◆ An international exchange in 2001 with women from the Catalan Autonomous Communities, the Balearic Islands, Honduras and Nicaragua.
- ◆ Members’ training on diverse topics including the municipal code, gender, sexuality, feminism, and political participation. Beginning in 2002, courses have been organised on Local Development and Public Municipal Administration with Gender Equity. Coordination with various NGOs in 2004 has allowed the course to be more in-depth and offered at diploma level.
- ◆ Analysis of the municipal and electoral codes, development of proposals for their reform and related lobbying of the national legislature. In the case of the Electoral Code, ANDRYSAS coordinated with the Association of Women Parliamentarians and Ex-Parliamentarians (*Asociación de Parlamentarias y Exparlamentarias*), Las Méridas and two other civil society organisations.

In another meeting two years previously, a councillor from Soyapango, Alba Márques, highlighted several of ANDRYSAS’s achievements. These included the contribution of the Association to the

development of new approaches to political practice, and the way in which the political diversity of the Association's members enables women who previously saw each other only as adversaries to collaborate and recognise each other as allies.<sup>28</sup> To these can be added the way in which the Association helps develop relationships between local women's groups and the women councillors of their municipalities so that they can work together for the preparation and implementation of gender equity policies and the creation of local women's offices.

### **The National Alliance of Honduran Women in Local Government (ANAMMH, *Alianza Nacional de Mujeres Municipalistas de Honduras*)**

The alliance began its life as an initiative of women members of the Honduran Municipalities Association (AMHON), the association of Honduran mayors. According to Lagos, the women mayors decided to create their own association in 1999 because of the huge difficulties that they faced in being listened to in the association's meetings, or to be included in the board of directors. Gradually, the membership of ANAMMH was widened to incorporate vice-mayors, councillors and all women municipal officials and employees as well as local women's leaders.

The principal objective of the Alliance is to promote greater participation of women in politics with a medium term goal that there are women leading different party slates in the next elections. The appropriation of a gender focus by the members has not been easy. Some members have only become sensitive to the topic since joining the alliance. Several international organisations are interested in ANAMMH's work including, at the time of the encounter, SNV, GTZ and the official Spanish aid agency.

One of the principal obstacles that the alliance has faced, has been the difficulty of overcoming the tendency of the members to want their party to hold the presidency and the majority of the posts in the board of directors. It has also been difficult to ensure a good level of coordination and interaction because of the workloads of the members and their geographical dispersion. This is made worse by the lack of funds; especially as the majority of the women mayors govern poor municipalities and don't have the means to travel to meetings outside their areas. To overcome this problem, regional networks are being established which will allow closer links between the Alliance and the women councillors and the integration of other women into the network. At the time of the encounter five such networks had been created. Each network had a technical coordinator and a board of directors and had prepared or was in the process of preparing a five-year strategic plan.

### **Nicaraguan Municipalities Women's Association (AMUJERMUNIC, *Asociación de Mujeres de Municipios de Nicaragua*)**

The creation of this association was proposed and agreed during meetings held in 2003 by women members of the Nicaraguan Municipalities Association (*Asociación de Municipios de Nicaragua*), both councillors and mayors. That same year, the Association's statutes were approved, it received legal recognition and a four-year strategic plan was drawn up. AMUJERMUNIC includes current and ex-mayors and councillors but it does not have members in all of the country's municipalities, in part because not all include women councillors. In addition, many women face financial and other types of problems that make their attendance at meetings difficult. According to Castillo, the Association was seeking to expand to all the country's departments so that all women councillors can participate.

## Guatemalan groups

At the time of the Suchitoto encounter, there were at least two relevant groups in Guatemala: the Association of Women in Municipal Government (ASMUGOM, *Asociación de Mujeres en el Gobierno Municipal*) and the Political Association of Mayan Women “Moloj” (*Asociación Política de Mujeres Mayas “Moloj”*). At the time of publishing this document, the first of these groups had ceased to exist but another organisation, the Association of Women Weaving Development (*Asociación de Mujeres Tejedoras de Desarrollo*), had been established, under the leadership of the wife of the ex-mayor of Quetzaltenango. Moloj is an organisation of Mayan women who presently hold or previously held public office. Currently, it conducts courses on citizens’ participation for Mayan women’s groups around the country. Other organisations, which have recently become involved in the promotion of women’s participation as citizens at local level, include the Association of Mayors and Indigenous Authorities (*Asociación de Alcaldes y Autoridades Indígenas*) and the Women’s Association “Vamos Adelante” (*Asociación de Mujeres “Vamos Adelante”*).<sup>29</sup>

## The Central American Network of Women for Local Development with Gender Equity (*Red Centroamericana de Mujeres para el Desarrollo Local con Equidad de Género*)

In March 2003, women from around the region who were working in or with local government were invited to meet with Salvadorians to exchange experiences. During that meeting it was proposed that they form a regional network, a proposal with which all were in agreement. National liaison committees were formed and their representatives have subsequently held three regional meetings (as of November 2004). At those meetings, the basic characteristics of the Network have been

defined, ideas clarified and plans of action drawn up. Each committee includes at least one member of a local government and a representative of an NGO. At present there are committees in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, but it is intended to widen the network to include Belize, Costa Rica and Panama.

The Network aims to provide opportunities for women involved in the promotion of gender equity at local level to meet and exchange experiences. Thus, all women who are interested in working in this area can join: current members of local governments, ex-mayors and councillors, local leaders, women’s activists and diverse civil society organisations. The Network’s overall objective is to “Strengthen processes of local development with gender equity so as to democratise public administration” and it also has three specific objectives:

- ◆ Raise women’s awareness and strengthen their participation in local government.
- ◆ Facilitate closer links between women who are working to promote local development with a gender perspective.
- ◆ Strengthen the member organisations of the Network so as to consolidate them and provide support for the achievement of their objectives.

As a new organisation without any direct funding, the Network has set itself modest goals. The regional committee—made up of representatives of each national committee—plans to meet twice per year while it is hoped to hold a regional encounter with around 80 participants during 2005, possibly in Nicaragua. That encounter would deal with various matters including:

- ◆ The reasons for establishing the Network.
- ◆ Why women want to be in power and what sort of power they wish to promote.

- ◆ An evaluation of women's participation in each country.
- ◆ Strategies to increase the numbers of women involved in municipal politics.

As a more immediate task, the national committees have agreed to prepare evaluations of local government policies and the participation of women in local government as the basis for the next meeting of the regional committee.

The participants in the Suchitoto encounter saw the Network as an important opportunity, expressing their hope that it would contribute to the strengthening and widening of women's participation in each country and regionally, and to the strengthening of the capacity of women working in local councils and outside them. Among the ideas that came out of discussions about the Network, a number can be highlighted:

- ◆ Through the Network, women in local government will be able to address situations that are common to the entire region. It should be possible to develop an integrated vision and a shared agenda so as to define, on the one hand, long term visions and strategies and, on the other, more short term goals.
- ◆ The Network could develop a training plan on gender, democracy and politics.
- ◆ The Network could function as a strategic mechanism for information and communication.
- ◆ It would be positive to establish contact with the recently created Latin American and Caribbean Federation of Women in Local Government (FEMUM/ALC, *Federación de Mujeres Municipalistas de América Latina y el Caribe*) and explore the possibility of links with the programme of the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) "Women in decision-making".<sup>30</sup>

### *3 Advocacy and lobbying by women's organisations at the local level*

To date, few women's organisations have promoted gender equity in the area of local government and many of those which have only become involved in this area recently. Given that, the degree of progress made is encouraging. As Isabel Fabián of Las Mélicas commented, 'Ten years ago, (women's organisations) had no knowledge about local development and now they have made progress; some municipalities have taken affirmative actions in favour of women, others have even approved municipal gender equity policies'.

Several presentations were made in Suchitoto about the organisational experience of women who in different ways are promoting women's rights at local level.

#### **3.1 Women's organisations and the San Marcos Intersectorial Committee** *(Intersectorial de San Marcos), El Salvador*

Violeta Hernández of Las Mélicas explained that her organisation has been working in San Marcos since late 1995. To begin with they established an Integrated Women's Support Centre, but very soon they became involved in local politics through the development of a municipal women's platform which was presented to local election candidates in 1996.

The study on which the platform was based also served as the starting point for local women's groups, originally in four communities with eight more established later. Organisational work was combined with training in feminism and other areas relevant to local development such as

leadership, local administration and risk management. At present, Las Mélicas work with 15 community and neighbourhood leaders, who in turn work with 500 women in the municipality. These women have taken action in relation to a range of needs, mostly of a practical nature, such as the construction of retaining walls for local safety, public transport, drinking water and nurseries. They have also made representations to the police so that cases of violence against women receive better attention.

Through the promotion of local development which has as its starting point women, Las Mélicas and the groups seek to put into practice a vision of local development with a gender perspective understood as: 'Integrated development of, from and with the communities, which resolves, with the equal participation of all men and women, the needs of all, particularly those needs which permit the improvement of the position and condition of women'. Within this concept, integrated development is understood as that which includes all types of needs: practical (for example, water, electricity, schools); strategic (for example, the eradication of discrimination and violence against women); environmental and others.

In 1999, women's organisations joined the Intersectorial Committee, an initiative that arose that year. This body, which is in effect, a local network, links the various social actors, which work with the people of the municipality. It includes NGOs, the social work department of the municipality, other official organisations, schools and

representatives of the Catholic Church. Despite their diversity, all its members agree on the need for integrated development in their area. According to Hernández 'We believe that we can increase the effectiveness of local action by working together and sharing resources, raising women and men's awareness of class and gender discrimination (for example through, on the one hand, collecting signatures for the re-establishment of the electricity subsidy or, on the other, campaigns against violence), and by addressing problems which concern local residents (for example, through campaigns to control the disease dengue)... In a country with many uncertainties, being able to work together gives us at least a minimum level of certainty and much satisfaction.'

The effectiveness of women's participation in the Intersectorial Committee is demonstrated by the fact that they were able to 'develop action plans which will allow us to develop a common practice designed to achieve integrated development, including women's practical and strategic needs'. The implementation of these plans has included gender training, celebrations of International Women's Day and the construction of a women's centre. In addition, the theme of violence has been defined as a line of action, with public demonstrations, discussion forums and celebrations of the day of non-violence.

### 3.2 Suchitoto Women's Alliance (*Concertación de Mujeres de Suchitoto*), El Salvador

In her 1998 book,<sup>31</sup> Clara Murguialday related how the Alliance began to be formed in 1991 by the members of 10 women's organisations that worked in the municipality, in response to the 'promotion of women's unity by some nuns working in

local parishes'. The factors which these organisations had in common included their political relationships, their organisational work with women in relation to production projects and basic community services, and the importance they assigned to women's rights.

During the Suchitoto meeting, Jacinta Lucia Miranda recounted that the current mission of the Alliance is to bring together the organisations that work with women in the municipality so that they coordinate their work with women in the communities, in the local council and with the diverse bodies which promote women's participation as citizens. In this way, they seek to promote development with gender equity of the municipality. Their current objectives include:

- ◆ To develop mechanisms that facilitate the integration of gender equity into municipal administration and management.
- ◆ To contribute to the strengthening of women's positive participation as citizens.
- ◆ To promote and lobby local government for the establishment of laws which guarantee women's development in the municipality.

The basic strategies that the alliance uses are: organisational strengthening of women's and mixed groups; training and advice on gender equity; awareness raising with the authorities and organisations which work in the municipality; and the development of policy proposals.

The successes highlighted by Miranda include:

- ◆ The establishment of a position within the council for a representative of women's organisations.
- ◆ Successful lobbying of the council for the development of a gender equity policy.

- ◆ The creation by the council of the municipal women's centre.
- ◆ The approval of a municipal by-law requiring community associations to establish women's secretariats.

Based on her analysis of the Alliance's first six years, Murguialday presented a series of reflections, which are of wide importance, not only for Suchitoto:

- ◆ 'Election periods provide a good opportunity for publicising programmes and demands, raising the awareness of women voters... and negotiating with the parties', but they are not the best time for the movement to develop its political programme. 'It would be better to develop a platform before the beginning of an election period.'
- ◆ Although the groups in Suchitoto had gained experience, this had not meant that they were able to do so without external support. On the contrary, 'as the movement's strategies and aims become more complex, ideas, abilities and economic resources from outside become more important'. A negative effect of this is that it reinforces 'the tendency of local groups to build more "vertical" rather than "horizontal" links... (reducing) the power of the local women's movement'.
- ◆ 'An advantage of the creation of institutional mechanisms (such as the Women's Commission and other possibilities) is that the development of municipal policies which benefit women does not depend on the good will of the current mayor'. However, it is important that 'the responsibility of the municipal government in the creation, support and recognition of these mechanisms be clearly established'. At the same time, women's organisations must be clear that, while these bodies are 'responsible for translating women's demands into municipal policies', they are not some kind of 'women's movement commission responsible for supervising the local government's actions'.
- ◆ The woman councillor elected with the support of the movement had to respond to multiple loyalties, with: the local population, the electorate, her party, the women's movement, the women of the municipality, and the national feminist organisation which had contracted her. 'Given this complicated range of representation and loyalties, it was not surprising that the relations between the councillor and the women's movement were complicated'.

### 3.3 Matagalpa Women's Network (*Red de Mujeres de Matagalpa*), Nicaragua

Gutiérrez recounted that this network was created in 1992 in the context of the establishment of thematic networks at national level. Membership includes individuals, women's organisations and representatives of mixed organisations. From the outset, the network has considered itself to be part of the national women's movement but it is completely autonomous without affiliation to 'the church, parties or anything else'. This independence has given the network a certain level of recognition as it is free to publicly criticise as, and when appropriate all the political parties, the governing Liberal party, the opposition FSLN and others. Negatively, this situation has sometimes led the network to be quite isolated.

Gutiérrez characterised the network in two ways: as a space for political participation—from which feminists defend their rights as women in society—and as a space for organisation and coordination. Its objective

is to contribute to the development of a just and equal society in which all women's rights are respected, and its activities include public awareness raising, political advocacy, training, cultural and artistic events, and women's personal development.

Political advocacy by the network is concentrated chiefly in the local area. In the context of the 2001 elections, the network led a process by civil society organisations to develop a municipal agenda in which more than 100 local groups participated, and which incorporated the proposals of women in the community and women's organisations. Subsequently, three of the four candidates for mayor signed this agenda, including the winning candidate; the network is monitoring his fulfilment of this commitment. During the administration of this mayor, the network successfully lobbied to be included in the Local Development Committee and for the creation of the Gender Equity Commission within the committee (*see point 2.2*), which seeks to ensure the fulfilment of the mayor's commitments in this area.

Two more of the network's strategies should be mentioned. First, the emphasis that it places on activities that aim to transform the dominant culture. For this reason, they have always conducted campaigns around the most significant dates on the women's movement calendar.<sup>32</sup> A wide variety of activities are carried out including the use of street banners, forums, films, videos, concerts and festivals. Public concerts with well known entertainers, including women who are successful at the Latin American level, have proven to be a particularly successful strategy as 'everybody comes because other concerts are in Managua and expensive, and we have the chance to spread our message'.

The second strategy is feminist education in order for women to advance their arguments convincingly in public. Over the last two years, the members of the network have received systematic training through feminist education sessions in which around 30 women regularly participate.

Following the Suchitoto encounter, interest in the themes explored during the event has grown in Nicaragua. In response, the network organised a national encounter of women in local government, which was held in October 2004.

### **3.4 Nacaome Women's Network (Red de Mujeres de Nacaome), Honduras**

Amelia Nassar is both a member of this network and the official in charge of the Nacaome OMM. Her personal position reflects a strategy that has been adopted by several local women's networks in Honduras, under which they seek to link their work to that of the OMMs.<sup>33</sup> Nassar recognised the value of this and other types of linkages, commenting that the work of the person responsible for an OMM is much easier when they coordinate with many community organisations.

In her opinion the Nacaome network has benefited from the capacity strengthening work of CEM-H. At the time of the Suchitoto encounter, the network was receiving funding through the local government for women's production projects. Nassar also commented that the network has received the recognition of the local media, which have approached them to speak about women's rights and the OMM.

With respect to the relationship of the women's movement with local governments, she reflected that in her

experience it is important to engage with the mayors, taking advantage of favourable contexts. She identified two key lessons:

- ◆ Agreements should always be put into writing, 'The mayor will never take into account anything which isn't written down'.
- ◆ The signing of political pacts during elections is important but the most important factor is the grassroots action and pressure exerted by women.

## 4 Conclusions

The large number of women who took part in the Suchitoto encounter and the intensity of their participation made two things very clear. Firstly, women working in or with local government have an unmet need to exchange experiences, learn from each other and work together. Secondly, they do not see gender equity as an area outside their responsibilities; rather they consider it as central to their reality and that of their municipalities. These situations provide an important opportunity for progress in the promotion of women's rights in our region. We should learn from the accumulated experience of local officials and women's organisations and apply its lessons.

### 4.1 Principal obstacles

There are still serious limitations to the full participation of Central American women in public decision-making. Some of the obstacles that should be highlighted include the following:

- ◆ The patriarchal and *machista* culture is resistant to the participation of women in political decision-making. Even where minimum quotas for women have been introduced as legal requirements or by voluntary decisions of individual parties, the numbers of women in elected positions remain very low.
- ◆ The considerable influence of the church is negative, as it tends to relegate women and is opposed to the feminist agenda.
- ◆ Mechanisms for public and/or civil society participation in political decision-making tend to have faults in their design which limit the ability of women to participate effectively.

- ◆ Women have less access to the economic resources necessary to cover the costs of election campaigns.
- ◆ Women who participate in political life are subject to all manner of criticisms and rumours, while their abilities and their opinions are questioned and ridiculed. Even when they are elected they face fierce opposition, especially from men, both other elected officials as well as municipal personnel, and both from their own parties and from the opposition. In addition, they tend to be marginalised in positions of lesser importance, both within their parties and in local or national government.

### 4.2 Progress in the promotion of gender equity at local level

Advocacy work by women's organisations with local governments is a new phenomenon. Nevertheless, there are already a number of cases in which their initiatives and their support for local councillors and other officials have had important effects. The role of these organisations has been key in almost all the cases of municipal action discussed in Suchitoto.

A wide range of actions, entities and instruments has been developed at local government level to promote gender equity and/or respond to women's priorities. These include gender equity policies, affirmative action plans, municipal women's offices, gender equity commissions and others. Their creation is an important achievement in itself and is due, without exception to women—be they councillors, women's organisations or both. In many

cases their results are only beginning to be seen but even so a number of significant examples of progress can be mentioned, for example:

- ◆ Increased numbers of women in positions normally reserved for men.
- ◆ Municipal personnel, both women and men, have received training on gender or with a gender perspective.
- ◆ The establishment of women's centres.
- ◆ Creation of community level consultation mechanisms.
- ◆ The assignation of funds for actions in favour of women.
- ◆ The implementation, as official activities, of celebrations of 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.
- ◆ Monitoring of domestic violence.
- ◆ Production projects.

When women's rights begin to be promoted, doors can open to more ambitious initiatives. For example, the implementation of the Mejicanos affirmative action plan in El Salvador and the creation of the Gender Equity Commission in Matagalpa, Nicaragua have been followed by initiatives to develop municipal gender equity policies. Similarly, the implementation of these types of initiatives in some municipalities has had a multiplier effect as women from other municipalities seek information on how to implement such initiatives in their own areas.

Associations and networks of women working in and/or on local government have been established in three of the four countries represented in Suchitoto and at regional level. The majority of these groups are new; nevertheless 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.

### 4.3 Lessons learnt

#### **Advocacy strategies of the women's movement**

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 parties, tendencies or other sectors. One result is that during elections they have been able to continue prioritising women's rights at a time when parties might tend to de-emphasise the issue.

On the other hand, alliances with other sectors of civil society and with municipal officials 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 practical and strategic needs.

Other lessons that can be highlighted include:

- ◆ The importance of developing capacity for debate, leadership and consensus building. This implies that training of the

movement's members should have a central role.

- ◆ Women's organisations would be well advised to develop their political agendas before election periods.
- ◆ The development of local platforms is only one of many strategies but it has been shown to be an effective means of lobbying local governments.
- ◆ 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, so as to be able to gain their confidence.
- ◆ Initiatives must be framed in the reality of the local government, seeking to adjust them to the true possibilities of progress and taking advantage of other municipal objectives and strategies.
- ◆ 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 the capacity of the municipality, given that most 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.

It should be noted that effective citizen's participation by women at the local level frequently leads to action on issues which are not central themes of the feminist agenda. This happens because women in the community tend to prioritise their practical needs, such as access to public

transport or drinking water. This is in part because most of them have not yet questioned their gender identity and so involve themselves in demands related to the role assigned to them by society. Nevertheless, the ways in which they prioritise and approach these issues tend to be significantly different from those of men. In this way, their participation contributes to a different, more equitable and integrated style of local development. Likewise, when their demands are presented within a framework of gender equity promotion, then the relationship between these issues and those of the feminist agenda become clear.

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

In the face of opposition to women in elected office, the women mayors and councillors advise that women should reaffirm their value and capacity as women and develop new approaches to politics and public administration: with transparency, respect and 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 demonstrates that solidarity and gender awareness are possible even within local councils and between representatives of rival parties. In this way, women mayors and councillors are able 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 its starting point women, and which works with them and works 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, both at the beginning of particular processes and more permanently.

- ◆ 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. This last point is of great importance given that without funding these bodies, as in the case of other initiatives, would have great difficulty in progressing beyond the formal announcement of their creation.

### **Organisations of women and local government**

The diverse membership of these associations contributes to their success. The participation of ex-mayors and councillors is an important way of avoiding their experiences being lost. In fact, given the difficulty for women to be re-elected, their participation greatly helps in the follow-up of on-going processes. The participation of local women's organisations can strengthen their capacity to engage with local governments and favours the development of positive relationships between them.

In this context, the Central American Network could be of great importance, as it will give its members access to a wider range of ideas and experiences, including the sharing of experiences between the national associations. The similarities between the experiences of women from different countries that were emphasised by many participants in Suchitoto further reinforce the usefulness of this network.

## **4.4 Final word**

Violeta Hernández of Las Mélicas finished her presentation in Suchitoto with the following thought: 'Working at the local level we can generate women's active participation and leadership to transform our municipalities and our societies, so that they are characterised by gender equity, without social exclusion and with true development. This continues to be a challenge but while we work we must keep this dream before us.'

## *Panel members, speakers and facilitators at the regional encounter*

**Janeth Castillo:** Councillor, Matagalpa, Nicaragua.

**Jeronima Cotzójay Mugus:** Councillor, San Juan Sacatepequez, Guatemala.

**Vivianne Dardón:** Tierra Viva, Guatemala

**Nery Arely Díaz:** Councillor, Nueva San Salvador

**Rosa Delia Dimas:** Councillor, Mejicanos, El Salvador.

**Carmen Flores:** Councillor, El Paisnal, El Salvador; leader in the Dimas Rodríguez community.

**Margarita Gutiérrez:** Grupo Venancia, Matagalpa, Nicaragua.

**Violeta Hernández:** Las Mélicas, El Salvador.

**Morena Herrera:** Las Dignas, El Salvador; ex-councillor for San Salvador; currently substitute deputy in the National Assembly.

**Reina Lagos:** Mayor of Maraita, Honduras; President of the National Alliance of Honduran Women in Local Government, ANAMMH.

**Ana Landa:** Las Dignas, El Salvador.

**Angie Largaespada:** Matagalpa Women's Network, Nicaragua.

**Alma López:** Councillor, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala.

**Alba Márques:** Councillor, Soyapango, El Salvador.

**Suyapa Martínez:** CEM-H, Honduras

**Alejandra Massolo:** Independent consultant.

**Silvia Matus:** Las Mélicas, El Salvador.

**María del Socorro Mendoza:** Vice mayor, Tuma La Dalia, Nicaragua.

**Ana María Menjivar:** Ex-councillor, Suchitoto, El Salvador.

**Rosa María Menjivar:** Las Dignas, El Salvador.

**Jacinta Lucia Miranda:** Suchitoto Women's Alliance, El Salvador.

**Amelia Nassar:** Nacaome Women's Network, Honduras; Official in charge of the OMM.

**Blanca Rosa Olmedo:** ANDRYSAS, El Salvador.

**Celeste Magaly Ramírez de Peña:** Councillor, Jocotán, Guatemala.

**Marta Elena Rodríguez:** Ex-mayor, Soyapango, El Salvador; currently substitute deputy in the National Assembly.

## Central American organisations of women and local government

*Note: if any of the email addresses appear to be out of date, contact one of the NGOs indicated among the contacts for the regional network (Las Dignas, Las Mélidas, Tierra Viva, CEM-H and Grupo Venancia).*

### El Salvador

**National Association of Women Councillors and Mayors of El Salvador** (ANDRYSAS, Asociación Nacional de Regidoras, Síndicas y Alcaldesas Salvadoreñas)

Virginia Magaña, Secretary General –  
virmag@navegante.com.sv

Sonia Baires (Las Dignas) –  
politica@lasdignas.org.sv

### Guatemala

**Association of Women Weaving Development** (AMUTED, Asociación de Mujeres Tejedoras de Desarrollo)

Julia Sum de Quemé – amuted@itelgua.com

**Political Association of Mayan Women, MOLOJ** (Asociación Política de Mujeres Mayas “Moloj”)

Norma Sactic – molojixoq@intelnett.com

### Honduras

**National Alliance of Honduran Women in Local Government** (ANAMMH, Alianza Nacional de Mujeres Municipalistas de Honduras)

Reina Lagos, President – rlagos@yahoo.com

Dunia Flores, Technical Secretary –  
duniaflores@hotmail.com;  
duniaf@amhon.hn

### Nicaragua

**Nicaraguan Municipalities Women's Association** (AMUJERMUNIC, Asociación de Mujeres de Municipios de Nicaragua)

At the time of publication no direct contact details were available. Contact may be possible through *Margarita Gutiérrez* of Grupo Venancia – venancia@ibw.com.ni

### Regional

**Central American Network of Women for Local Development with Gender Equity** (Red Centroamericana de Mujeres para el Desarrollo Local con Equidad de Género)

---

El Salvador

---

Isabel Fabián (Las Mélidas) –  
melidasoccidente@navegante.com.sv,

Nery Arely Díaz (Councillor, Nueva San Salvador) – neryare@yahoo.com

Blanca Rosa Olmedo (ANDRYSAS) –  
telephone 613-0122

Dilcia Marroquín (Las Dignas) –  
politica@lasdignas.org.sv

---

## Guatemala

---

*Ixmucané Solórzano* (Tierra Viva)–  
tierraviva@guate.net.gt;  
procorganizativostv@tierra-viva.org

*Jerónima Cotzójay* (ex-councillor, San Juan  
Sacatepequez)–telephone 6630-3305.

*Juana Olga Jocón González* (Women's  
Sector)–mujerpaz@inteln.net.gt

*Francisca Marroquín* (CALDH)–  
mujeres@caldh.org

---

## Nicaragua

---

*Margarita Gutiérrez* (Grupo Venancia)–  
venancia@ibw.com.ni

*Angie Largaespada* (Matagalpa Women's  
Network)–adic@ibw.com.ni

*Socorro Mendoza* (vice mayor, Tuma La  
Dalia)–Wasaka85@hotmail.com

---

## Honduras

---

*Suyapa Martínez* (CEM-H)–  
cemh@cablecolor.hn; suyapa9@yahoo.es

*Reina Lagos* (ANAMMH)–  
rlagos@yahoo.com

- 1 SEPREM (2002) “Recopilación de Leyes. Ley General de Descentralización, Ley de los Consejos de Desarrollo Urbano y Rural, Código Municipal”.
- 2 For example, Guatemala’s General Decentralisation Law and Honduras’s National Decentralisation and Local Development Programme.
- 3 4% in Nicaragua, 5% in Honduras, 8% in El Salvador and 10% in Guatemala.
- 4 Kennedy, Mirta. Personal communication.
- 5 In Kennedy’s opinion, decentralisation as promoted by the World Bank is a mechanism designed to facilitate the privatisation of public services and the plundering of local resources by reducing central control. Kennedy, *op. cit.*
- 6 Las Dignas and ANDRYSAS (2002). ‘Mujeres que gobiernan municipios: Memoria del Encuentro Internacional de Mujeres Electas en Cargos Públicos en Entidades Locales’.
- 7 SEPREM, *op. cit.*
- 8 *Op. cit.*
- 9 Laws in Central America require a set of operating regulations, which are approved separately by the national legislature, to permit their full implementation.
- 10 Marroquín, Dilcia. Personal communication.
- 11 Fabian, Isabel. Personal communication.
- 12 The percentages of women elected as deputies were: 1990–17%; 1996–11%; 2001–23%.
- 13 Local councils are not multi-party; all councillors come from the party winning the elections.
- 14 Presentation during the 4th Meeting of the Central American Network of Women for Local Development with Gender Equity, Matagalpa, Nicaragua, February 2004.
- 15 This experience of women’s public forums has been replicated by many of the municipalities with municipal women’s offices, including Nacaome, Santa Rosa and Ojojona with support from CEM-H, and with others supported by INAM.
- 16 By the end of 2003, a total of six Salvadorian municipalities had approved gender equity policies: the four presented during the encounter, plus those of Cojutepeque and San Rafael Cedros.

- 17 Clulow, Michael (2003) "Gender Equity and Local Governance. A study of the San Salvador municipal gender equity policy". One World Action, United Kingdom.
- 18 Part of the information about this policy has been taken from the 2003 publications by the municipality of Nueva San Salvador and Las Méridas: "Política de Género del Municipio de Nueva San Salvador. Inclusión y Equidad Desde lo Local" and "Presentación del Proceso de la Política de Género" (CD-ROM).
- 19 Joint meetings of community management committees.
- 20 Clulow, op.cit.
- 21 CIDEP, Dignas, Méridas, ADMZ, ISDEMU, PNC Sección Familia, Centros Educativos, ISD, Juzgado de Familia (2003) "Política Municipal para la Equidad de Género, Municipio de Zacatecoluca, Departamento de La Paz".
- 22 Kennedy, op. cit.
- 23 Clulow, op.cit.
- 24 Op.cit.
- 25 CEMUJER (2003) "Política sobre Salud Sexual y Reproductiva en Soyapango" in "Construyendo la Democracia. Experiencias de Incidencia Política desde la Sociedad Civil de El Salvador". CREA Internacional de El Salvador, USAID.
- 26 Op.cit.
- 27 Pamphlet: "Fortaleciendo Nuestra Vocación de Construcción".
- 28 Las Dignas and ANDRYSAS, op.cit.
- 29 Inforpress for August 20th 2004 reported on the Second Encounter of Women in Local Government "Gender Perspectives in Local Government" organised by the Association of Mayors and Indigenous Authorities (AGAAI) which was held at the end of July. '... the women agreed on the importance of two factors: the limited interest of the sector in participating in public office and, second, lack of awareness of the laws which promote their participation... Teresa Zapeta of the Indigenous Women's Defence Office proposed the need for public information campaigns about these laws and to take advantage of the willingness of mayors to provide more opportunities for women's participation.... Nationally, there are only 6 OMM, all of which have been established with the support of Women's Association "Vamos Adelante" (AMVA).' At present, AMVA promotes women's participation in a number of municipalities of Alta and Baja Verapaz.
- 30 Information on IULA and FEMUM/ALC is available on the web site [www.iula.net](http://www.iula.net).
- 31 "Las Mujeres y el Poder Político: Sistematización de la participación política del Movimiento de Mujeres de Suchitoto (El Salvador)".

- 32** March 8 (International Women's Day), May 28 (Women's Health), June 28 (Lesbian and Gay Pride), September 28 (Decriminalisation of Abortion), November 25 (Violence against Women).
- 33** The networks that have adopted this strategy are members of a national network linked to the Women's World March.

## ***Building Women's Citizenship and Governance, Central America***

This document forms part of a series of 10 presenting the experience and opinions of five Central American feminist organisations. These organisations are working together in a regional project which seeks to promote the exercise of women's citizenship. Documents in the series include: 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 the role of public policy in the defence of sexual and reproductive rights. All the documents are available on the web site <http://www.oneworldaction.org>

# COMMUNITY FUND

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## **Asociación Civil Grupo Venancia**

Apdo Postal 102, Matagalpa  
Iglesia Guadalupe 1½ cuadra al sur  
Matagalpa  
Nicaragua

venancia@ibw.com.ni  
Tel: (505) 772-3562  
Fax: (505) 772-4971

## **Las Dignas (Asociación de Mujeres Por la Dignidad y la Vida)**

Apdo Postal 05-140, Sucursal Metrocentro  
Colonia Ciudad Satélite, Polígono S,  
No. 16 Av. Bernal,  
San Salvador  
El Salvador

dignas.politica@integra.com.sv  
Tel: (503) 284-9950  
Fax: (503) 284-9551

## **Las Mélicas (Asociación Movimiento de Mujeres Mélica Anaya Montes M.A.M.)**

23 Calle Poniente,  
Av. y Calle Las Victorias, casa 123,  
Urbanización Palomo  
San Salvador  
El Salvador

melidas@integra.com.sv  
Tel: (503) 225-2511/226-5465  
Fax: (503) 225-6865

## **CEM-H (Centro de Estudios de la Mujer-Honduras)**

Apdo Postal 3543, Tegucigalpa  
Colonia Palmira, 1era calle no. 642,  
frente a Plazoleta Jose Antonio Velazquez  
Tegucigalpa  
Honduras

cemh@cablecolor.hn  
Tel/fax: (504) 238-0101/230-0157

## **Tierra Viva-Centro de Apoyo a la Mujer**

3a. Avenida 10-18  
Zona 1  
Ciudad de Guatemala  
Guatemala

tierraviva@guate.net  
Tel/fax: (502) 2253-7244/  
2251-7372/2251-3761/2251-3537

## **One World Action**

Bradley's Close  
White Lion Street  
London  
N1 9PF  
United Kingdom

www.oneworldaction.org  
Tel: (44-20) 7833-4075  
Fax: (44-20) 7833-4102