

Promoting gender equity in local governance – a toolkit

In Central America, over the last five years there has been growing evidence that demonstrates the increasing possibilities for successfully promoting women's rights through local governments.

These positive experiences are due largely to the work of several feminist organisations in lobbying local governments to address women's priorities since the mid-1990s, as well as to the actions of some women councillors and mayors. By the end of the decade, some municipal governments began to address gender equity, and associations of women councillors and mayors were established in El Salvador and Honduras.

These successes have inspired more women in local government, community leaders, activists and women's groups to replicate these experiences in their own municipalities.

What strategies have contributed to these achievements? When designing actions to promote gender equity at local level, what factors should be taken into account? How can

women work together to keep making progress at this level? Through the project "Building Women's Citizenship and Governance in Central America", answers to these and other questions have been identified. Some of the most important of those are shared here.



Local governments promoting gender equity

During the last five years, a range of instruments and bodies have been created by local governments in Central America to promote gender equity and to respond to women's priorities. These include:

- Gender equity policies in 10 municipalities in El Salvador.
- Gender equity commissions in 4 municipalities in Nicaragua.
- More than 40 Municipal Women's Offices in Honduras and 6 in Guatemala.

Actions taken

- Earmarking of funds for activities benefiting women.
- Municipalities showing support for promoting gender equity through billboards in public places and streets named in honour of notable women.
- Official celebrations of International Women's Day.
- Creation of women's centres.
- Holding open forums for women.
- Municipal forums on violence against women.
- Monitoring of domestic violence.
- Gender training courses for councillors and municipal officials.
- Income generation projects for women.



The gender equity commission of Matagalpa, Nicaragua

In 2002, The Matagalpa Women's Network, women councillors and other women lobbied the municipal council for the creation of this commission.

Successes of the commission include: earmarking of funds from the municipal budget for activities with women; integrating a gender perspective into the municipal strategic plan; and agreements to develop a gender equity policy and create a municipal women's secretariat.



The San Salvador municipal gender equity policy

This policy, which was approved at the end of 1999, was the first of its type in the region and had its origins in the Women's Platform for 1997–2000 promoted by the Salvadorian women's movement. To ensure its implementation, women's organisations not only conduct lobbying and other actions to exert political pressure but also participate in a consultative commission and provide support through training and fundraising. The achievements of the policy include: significant increases in the proportion of director-level posts held by women; a substantial increase in the number of municipal police women; the establishment of district-level gender roundtables with representatives of community organisations; the opening of three women's centres; and the approval of a by-law prohibiting sexual harassment in public areas.



Actions by the local government of Maraita, Honduras

Since taking part in gender training, the mayor of Maraita, Reina Lagos has promoted a style of administration which has women as its starting point and which promotes transparency and the participation of all women and men. To identify women's priorities, a women-only public forum was held with the support of the National Women's Institute and the departmental governor, who is also a woman. Informal consultations have also been conducted with women at community level. Maraita now has a municipal women's office and is introducing a gender perspective into its budget.



Let's promote gender equity in our municipalities!



Women must act

Take the initiative

Local government actions to promote gender equity have always been the result of women taking the initiative, be they councillors, mayors or women's organisations. Although some men act as allies, it is women that take the first step and keep the process moving.

Get the opinions of women from the grassroots

Local government action should reflect the aspirations and priorities of women. This requires wide-ranging and continuous consultation with women at all levels.

Support local women's organisations

Through lobbying, supporting women councillors and mayors, and working with local governments, these organisations play a decisive role in the integration of gender equity into municipal plans and action.

Promote the election of women committed to gender equity

Determined and persistent action is needed at all stages of the process: debate, approval, assignment of funds and implementation. For that reason, the presence in local government of women who are firmly committed to the promotion of women's rights is invaluable.

Keys to successful advocacy

Develop women's agendas and political pacts

The development of local women's agendas and the related signing of commitments to action by mayoral candidates can be an important first step. Nevertheless, women must be persistent in following-up on these commitments.

Gain the goodwill of local authorities

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.

Link women's demands to other municipal objectives

Support for some women's demands can be generated by demonstrating their relationship with other improvements promoted by local government. Similarly, initiatives to promote public participation can open up spaces to address gender equity issues.

Use the opportunities provided by national legislation

When demands for action are based on national legislation such as municipal codes, women's policies, equal opportunities laws, etc. they gain legitimacy with local authorities and the general public. Similarly, laws and policies on public participation can provide opportunities to promote equitable participation by women.



How can we ensure policies are implemented?

Create dedicated bodies and hire specialised personnel

Existing personnel need to accept responsibility for implementing approved policies but they also need the support of specialised staff or an office with specific responsibility for gender equity. Such staff must be given sufficient authority in the institutional hierarchy to facilitate their work with other officials.



Ensure funding

It is extremely important that resources are assigned for the implementation of approved policies with the municipality being responsible for providing them.

Win staff support

The successful implementation of gender policies depends on the support they receive from local government personnel. If high-ranking staff are involved in developing those policies this will help them to identify with and support the initiative.

Create formal spaces for participation and consultation

The creation of official spaces which include councillors and representatives of women's organisations facilitates the development of cooperative relationships. Whilst the councillors receive quality advice in an area which is new for them, the women's movement gains a direct say in the design and implementation of actions that benefit women.

Strong and skilled women councillors and mayors

Build women's solidarity

Women are in a minority in local governments and are often marginalised by their male colleagues. Given this, unity between women councillors and support from women in the community are crucial so that they can overcome criticisms and make progress in the construction of local governance which has women as its starting point.

Increase their skills

Many women councillors and mayors have never received training on gender issues. They also tend to have limited experience and preparation for the responsibilities of local government. Consequently, training that combines gender with topics such as local government administration and management can be of great assistance.

Support associations of women in local government

Associations of women in local government, involving elected officials, municipal personnel and women's organisations, have been established in several countries and at regional level. These associations are successfully uniting women of diverse parties around the struggle for women's rights, despite the rivalry and different visions of those parties.





From January 2002 to June 2005, five Central American feminist organisations worked together in the project **“Building Women’s Citizenship and Governance”**. CEM-H from Honduras, Grupo Venancia from Nicaragua, Las Dignas and Las Mélidas from El Salvador, and Tierra Viva from Guatemala implemented individual and joint activities to promote and facilitate women’s active citizenship. Activities focused on: strengthening women’s leadership in civil society and government; developing and negotiating public policies to promote gender equity; and promoting a culture that respects women’s rights.

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For more information see:

- Women and Local Democracy: Lessons from Central America
- Gender equity and local governance. A study of the San Salvador gender equity policy
- Women as Citizens: Participation for Women’s Rights in Central America

All these publications are available on the One World Action website, from the partners or by writing to devgen@rcp.net.pe

Communication with the following associations of women in local government is also recommended:

Red centroamerica

de Mujeres Municipalistas
por el Desarrollo Local
con Equidad de Género

contact through the partners

Andrysas

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