

8. Advocacy and National Elections

Women's political participation in Honduras



Voters in Gracias, Lempira, learning about the new system for voting for members of congress

This paper discusses Oxfam's advocacy work in Honduras on women's political rights, and women's leadership and empowerment in the political sphere. Beginning with an overview of the constraints that women face if they wish to participate in politics, the paper then goes on to discuss Oxfam's advocacy and campaigning activities during and after the 2005 election period. These include lobbying and advocacy on political reform, campaigning to encourage people to consider voting for female candidates, and promoting women's leadership and political empowerment.

Overview: barriers to women's political participation

Honduras has been classified as the third poorest country in Latin America and the Caribbean after Haiti and Nicaragua. High levels of inequality have persisted and deepened, with income concentrated in a few hands. Eighty per cent of the population live in poverty, and absorb only 37 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP), while the rest goes to the rich.¹ Gender inequality makes women particularly vulnerable to poverty, limiting as it does their access to employment opportunities, assets, and public services such as health care, education, and water and sanitation. As a result, women's incomes are on average only 42 per cent of men's, lower than in other Latin American countries such as Nicaragua and Bolivia.² The poverty faced by so many women means that they have to prioritise earning income to support themselves and their children, meaning they have little time left to think about participating in political life. In addition, lack of economic resources means that few women have the money to finance an electoral campaign.

Honduras is a strongly patriarchal society, where the church retains considerable influence in social, economic, and political life. Women are expected to devote their lives to bearing and raising children, and it is only relatively recently that most girls in Honduras have started going to school. Many older women still lack education. This places constraints on their capacity to participate in politics, as does a lack of support from family, the community, and political party members. Rural women in particular face harsh conditions, often having to walk long distances to fetch water for their families, or to accompany their children to school or to visit health centres. This means that many do not have the time, energy, or support to engage in politics.

The current political system does not address the demands of the majority of the population, in particular those of women. The system is characterised by a centralised government with a vertical power structure, and presidentialism, in which the president has ultimate power over all other state institutions.³ The existence of a two-party system, where the two majority parties alternately gain control over Parliament (despite there being five active political parties), has been an obstacle to Parliament fulfilling its function of representing the population, and acting as an intermediary between the people and the state. Rather, the two dominant political parties have acted in the interests of the economic elites to which their leaders are linked, remaining unaccountable to the majority of the population and resistant to democratic reforms that could facilitate the promotion of gender equality and pro-poor policy. In particular, traditionally these elites have ignored and marginalised women as political subjects. This is evident in the fact that after 50 years of women's suffrage, in

2001 only 7.4 per cent of representatives in the national congress were women, and, apart from during a brief period in the early 1980s, the number of women who are mayors has never exceeded ten per cent.

‘Women are discriminated [against] inside our own parties, [the men] have their own separate meetings, they have their closed groups, and they don’t even invite us. Moreover, women fear participating in politics, because people start spreading lies about our behaviour, they give us nicknames, and there is ideological and sexual harassment.’ (Miriam Perez, ex candidate for mayor in the municipality of Marcala)

Civil-society support to women’s political leadership

In this context, Oxfam worked with Movimiento de Mujeres por la Paz ‘Visitación Padilla’⁴ and Centro de Estudios de la Mujer Honduras (CEM-H),⁵ two feminist organisations, on a campaign aimed at changing policies and practices to increase women’s political participation in the 2005 presidential, congressional, and local elections. The campaign consisted of two stages; lobbying for electoral reform, and then voter education and mobilisation during the election period, accompanied by attempts to encourage candidates to adopt agendas that were supportive of women’s rights, and pro-poor.

Electoral reform

The two central demands in terms of electoral reform were switching to an open preferential system for electing candidates, and the introduction of a 50 per cent quota for women candidates in both local and national elections. Political parties were also asked to develop gender-equity plans and to be more accountable to the electorate. Finally, the campaign called for a reduction in the campaign period, to make it easier for women candidates, who are likely to have less time and fewer financial resources, to stand for election.⁶ One of the key strategies of the campaign was working in alliance with a coalition of civil-society organisations that supported electoral reform, leading to the coalition including the goal of equal representation of women in its agenda.

This campaign had some success. The Electoral and Political Organisations Law, which came into force in 2005, introduced an open preferential system. Under the new system, people can vote for candidates for president and for congress from different parties, whereas under the old system, voting for a presidential candidate from one party meant voting for congress members and local officials of the same party. An innovation of the system is that it includes pictures of the candidates, making it easier for people with limited literacy to vote. In addition, congress did agree to include a quota for

women candidates. The efforts of congresswomen from across the political spectrum to influence the debate within congress were crucial to this; however, despite their hard work, the quota was eventually set at 30 per cent, not 50 per cent, without specifying where women candidates should be placed on electoral lists. Also, the parties interpreted the quota as a maximum ceiling.

In the primary⁷ elections in 2005, only four out of 12 factions within the two main political parties complied with the quota. Those four placed women on the lower rungs of the list of candidates or as alternate members⁸ of congress.⁹ Rules should have been established guaranteeing compliance with the quota not only regarding the numbers of women candidates, but also the ranking of women candidates on electoral lists. This was a lesson learned by those active in the campaign: it is not enough to modify laws, because unless there is political will and a challenge to embedded cultural practices, these modifications will simply be ignored.¹⁰ In addition, although working in alliance with other civil-society organisations and ensuring that this alliance included the goal of women's equal representation was a significant achievement, as one of the interviewees reflected, mixed organisations that did not have a women's rights focus responded to other interests. Therefore, it might have been more effective to create a separate coalition of women's rights organisations to negotiate the reforms.

Voter mobilisation and lobbying candidates

Once electoral reform had been introduced, the campaign moved to educating the electorate about the new election procedures, and encouraging them to consider women candidates for congress as an electoral option, rather than simply dismissing them on the grounds that women do not make suitable political leaders. The main strategies were: raising awareness among the population about the new electoral reforms, and encouraging them to vote; and lobbying male and female candidates to include women's demands in their election manifestos.

Visitación Padilla worked intensely in 14 of the 18 departments of the country, educating women about the new election procedures, and encouraging them to consider voting for female candidates. This included stressing to voters that they now had the right to vote for presidential and congress candidates from different parties.

Visitación Padilla facilitated a range of activities, such as workshops in rural areas to teach women about the new electoral system, and meetings between women candidates for congress and women from poor areas to allow the latter to present their demands.

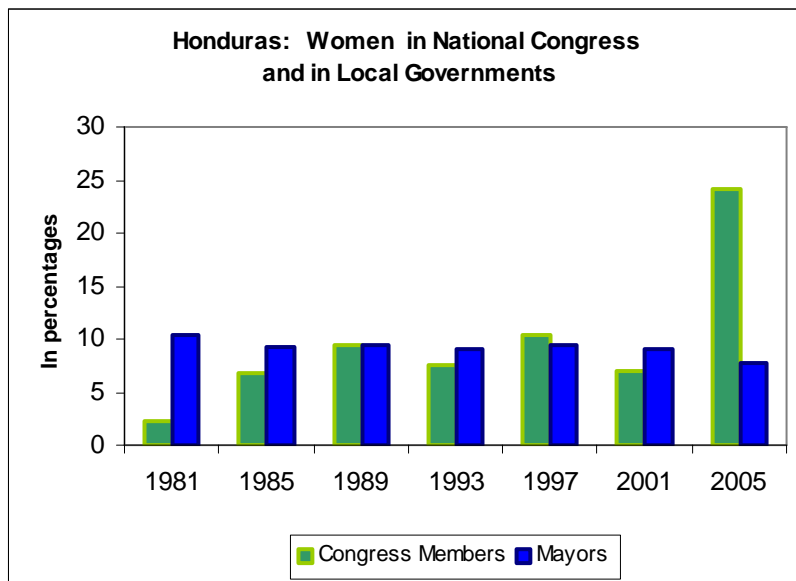
CEM-H, for its part, lobbied candidates to adopt a progressive, women's-rights agenda, and then encouraged women voters to consider supporting them. Their campaign slogan was 'mujer ya no planches', the verb 'planchar' having a double meaning in Spanish –

'to iron' or 'to make a terrible mistake'. Hence, this slogan conveyed the message to women that they should stop doing both. This campaign challenged cultural and social stereotypes about the role of women, but also invited women to vote for those congress candidates that had proposals on the issues of reproductive health, violence against women, and access to resources such as land. Linked to this, intense lobbying work was carried out among male and female candidates, to convince them to include women's demands on their agendas. This involved CEM-H visiting individual candidates from all the different political parties to raise their awareness of women's rights and poverty issues, and organising public forums at the local level, where women articulated their concerns, and presented their demands. These demands routinely related to the provision of adequate housing and public services, and access to land. To ensure that poorer women were able to participate actively at these forums, CEM-H identified women to attend the events in advance, and provided training to boost their self-esteem and prepare them to speak in front of an audience. In addition, transport to the forums was provided.

An important feature of this work was encouraging congressional candidates and candidates for local-government positions to sign 'pacts' at local forums, declaring their commitment to women's rights and to addressing the demands identified by the women in their constituencies, particularly with regards to poverty, access to land, housing and public services, and violence against women. This was an important method of engaging male leaders in particular, who recognised that including priorities identified by poorer women in their election manifestos would translate into increased votes from women in their constituencies.

Among the campaign's achievements was prompting public discussion about women's human rights for the first time in Honduras. Also, formerly 'taboo' issues such as abortion and sexual and reproductive rights were included on the agendas of some male and female candidates. Women's increased knowledge about the political system and legislative reform are also important outcomes of this work, as was the fact that people increasingly came to recognise women candidates as an election alternative.

In November 2005, the election process closed. The most visible outcome was a significant increase in women's participation as election candidates. A total of 170 women stood for election to the national congress, of whom 31 were elected as full members and 27 as alternate members. This was a significant achievement, as it meant that women went from comprising just seven per cent (2001) of congress members, to comprising 24.2 per cent.



Source: Centro de Derechos de Mujeres (CDM) (2004) 'Mujeres en Cifras', Honduras; UNDP (2006) 'Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano Honduras 2006: Hacia la expansión de la ciudadanía'.

There was less success at the local level, where only 23 women were elected as mayors (out of 298 municipalities; or just 7.7 per cent¹¹); four fewer than the number elected in 2001. It is clear that more effort should have gone into encouraging people to vote for female candidates to local government, as well as those standing for congress.

More women in congress: progress, threats, and challenges

The general elections in 2005 represented important progress for women involved in politics in Honduras. Nevertheless, this result was overshadowed by the arrival to power of women from the economic elite and conservative religious groups, who in general have no gender awareness, and are primarily concerned with the interests of their political parties. 'They were the ones who made most of the changes in the legislation, given that they had the economic resources for campaigning and also had [access to] the political networks with the two majority parties', said Suyapa Martínez of CEM-H, feminist and former candidate to congress. In contrast, many of the progressive women candidates with whom CEM-H and Visitación Padilla worked did not have sufficient financial backing to pay for campaigning, as they did not come from wealthy backgrounds, and also did not have the full backing of the political parties to which they were allied. In many cases, women candidates found themselves at the bottom of electoral lists, or not selected at all, as parties failed to implement the 30 per cent quota. Both these factors point to the need to continue to press for electoral

reform, to reduce the costs of standing for election in Honduras, as well as to ensure that the 30 per cent quota is respected by all the political parties, and that momentum to increase the quota to 50 per cent is maintained. In a promising recent sign, an alliance of women in congress, women active in political parties, and women's organisations, was able to convince one of the most conservative parties to propose a reform to the Electoral Law that would raise the quota to 50 per cent.

The election of women from conservative and religious backgrounds is a threat to women's rights, given that the groups to which they are allied are promoting public policies that go against civic freedoms, and reproduce stereotypes that maintain gender inequality.¹² For instance, the Family Congress Commission, a religious bloc within congress led by a woman from the conservative Catholic organisation Opus Dei, has been responsible for introducing two laws which would prohibit the introduction of sex education with a gender perspective into public schools, and stop teachers from using sex-education guides prepared by the Ministry of Education. This shows how important it is to recognise that higher numbers of women elected to political positions will not automatically lead to progressive policies that will benefit other women, or other marginalised groups. It also indicates the ongoing need to try and raise awareness of gender inequality and its impact among all electoral candidates and elected officials consistently across all the political parties, rather than just working with those who already have progressive women's rights and pro-poor agendas.

Another key challenge identified is that encouraging poorer women to participate in politics as candidates for election is difficult in a social context where most women have little experience of political processes, no access to resources, little education, and are illiterate. Activities such as lobbying parties to include poorer women on electoral lists, and providing training in public speaking and campaigning to women candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds did form part of Visitación Padilla and CEM-H's programmes, but had a limited impact. In the longer term, one change that CEM-H and others are calling for is the implementation of a preferential open electoral system at local level, similar to that which is now in place for presidential and congress elections. Suyapa Martínez argues that this would make it easier for poorer women to stand for election, as so many women are already active and well-known in their communities at the village level, and so would be more likely to be selected by political parties keen to field candidates with a high chance of winning. But even with reforms such as this, it is likely to remain difficult for poorer women to hold positions of political leadership. This is mainly due to their lack of economic and strategic resources to stand for election, both of which need to be addressed, but also because women continue to suffer discrimination and marginalisation, as well as facing rigid perceptions about their role,

which seek to confine them to the reproductive sphere. It will take many years of careful and systematic effort to bring about changes in attitudes, so that poor women standing for election have the support of their families, communities, and political parties.

'The road is long and difficult, we have to walk a long way to overcome [current attitudes to] women's role in society, their low academic level, their three-shift day, the daily struggle to survive, the church's [influence], and low self-esteem. All these are obstacles, but they can be overcome as women gain awareness and become committed and [recognise their own political value].' (Gladys Lanza, Coordinadora del Movimiento por la Paz Visitación Padilla)

Supporting progressive leadership

In the context of these challenges, Oxfam in Honduras is continuing to work with Visitación Padilla, CEM-H, and another partner organisation, Centro de Derechos de Mujeres (CDM)¹³ on supporting women leaders to advocate on women's rights. One aspect of this work is to facilitate links between congresswomen who have been identified as progressive, and women's rights organisations, for the exchange of ideas and information. In this regard, Oxfam partners provided support to women's rights organisations in terms of building their capacity to influence these congresswomen. These organisations have then gone on to provide training and information to congresswomen on women's rights issues, meaning that they are then in a better position to debate on bills related to women's rights within congress. As one of the interviewees commented, 'The result of this alliance with female congress members has been that no other congress in Latin America has debated so much the issue of sexual and reproductive health as in Honduras'. Although the process is far from over, precedents have been set in terms of improving the capacity of women's organisations to undertake advocacy work and in-depth analysis of the issues on which they work.

'The strategy of training women that have been elected and female public officials in important sectors...has been fundamental, since in a relatively short time, these women have identified with the feminist fight'. (Maritza Gallardo, Oxfam Project Co-ordinator during the campaign)

Oxfam and its partners have also worked with women who are active in political parties across the political spectrum, providing training in leadership, organisation, and gender awareness. This has had a positive impact in terms of enabling these party activists to play a greater role in decision-making within their parties, and encouraging them to design and press for gender-equity plans. It has also meant that women active within political parties have supported electoral

reform proposals submitted by women's organisations, encouraging their parties to adopt them.

Another strategy that is being implemented is supporting women's networks and organisations to be more effective in terms of influencing the public agenda and budget design at the local level. Some of the main activities involved are workshops for female local-government officials on women's rights and advocacy strategies, meetings with women's networks to set plans for monitoring the local pacts signed by candidates during the election, and meetings between women's networks, civil-society organisations, and members of local government. Workshops have also been held for female leaders and local officials in budget planning and social auditing¹⁴ with a gender perspective. One positive outcome of this work has been that policies to increase women's participation have been implemented in six municipalities where Oxfam is working. As a result, female local officials have been able to participate in budget design, leading to the allocation of public resources for projects directly benefiting women at the local level.

The political empowerment of poor women

The political empowerment of poor women is also an area that has been prioritised, in recognition that earlier activities had not fully succeeded in ensuring that their needs and priorities were reflected in the agendas of the women who were actually elected to congress, and to local government. Oxfam has worked on this with two other partner organisations: the Coordinator of Rural Women of La Paz (COMUCAP)¹⁵ and the Institute of Social Investigation and Advocacy (IISI).¹⁶

One important activity is work with female indigenous farmers, one of the most marginalised groups in Honduran society. In 2006, 21 indigenous women farmers active in COMUCAP took part in training at an 'Advocacy School'. These schools have been run since 2003 by IISI with support from Oxfam, and provide training to civil society and community leaders. Training is tailored to the needs of each organisation, and consists of a mixture of theory and practical work. For this Advocacy School, IISI developed a training programme with activists from COMUCAP, which had a specific gender focus. Training covered:

- different kinds of leadership
- policies, laws, and institutional frameworks to promote gender equality
- processes related to the formation of public policies (setting the agenda, formulation and monitoring), with a focus on the implementation of the poverty reduction strategy paper and policies relating to access to land

- citizenship and the state
- strategies for advocacy: popular mobilisation, organisation, education, and working with the media

Measures were also taken to make it easier for women to participate, such as providing child-care during the course.

During the evaluation meeting, the women who had participated stated that they felt stronger, and better able to communicate their needs and interests to authorities and community organisations. They now recognised the importance of trying to influence decision-making processes that affect their lives, and had a better sense of their rights and responsibilities as citizens, and of the important contribution that they make to the economy. Increased understanding of how local- and national-level policies are formulated and implemented meant that the women now felt they were in a much better position to influence these processes.

As a result of their training, these women have designed an advocacy plan to press for more public funding for projects benefiting women, as well as contributing to the design of community-level development projects. As the mayor of Chinacla said to one leader of COMUCAP, 'you have transformed the women of Chinacla; before they didn't attend meetings and now they are the ones who speak more and advocate for women's projects'. In addition, in other districts, two women who participated in the Advocacy School are intending to run as candidates for mayor themselves.

Conclusions and recommendations

Despite advances in Honduras in developing a legal framework to promote women's participation in elected government, the gap between women's formal rights to political participation, and most women's experiences, is significant. Measures to increase the numbers of women elected have succeeded, but so far it is mainly women linked to political, economic, and religious elites who have benefited from this, leading to legislation that threatens to deny women's rights, rather than supporting them. In light of this, Oxfam and its partners have come to recognise that in addition to lobbying to increase the numbers of women elected, and lobbying for more accountable democratic systems, strategies are also required to ensure that women and men reaching power are aware of gender issues, particularly those affecting poorer women, and are prepared to work to uphold women's rights. For this purpose, it is important to continue and intensify work with women who are active in political parties or who are community or civil-society leaders, who may in the future become elected representatives and leaders, to modify their ideas and beliefs related to women's human rights, and stereotypes about gender roles.

In addition, greater attention needs to be paid to enabling poor and indigenous women to hold public positions, to ensure that policy decisions reflect the needs and interests of this group. This should include training in leadership skills and on how the political system works, to boost poorer women's confidence and knowledge, both of which are barriers to their active participation in the political sphere. It is also necessary to advocate at the government level for the implementation of public policies for gender equity, particularly those related to greater access to and control over resources. While women continue being the poorest, and the ones with the least amount of time, capacity, and experience, they will continue to be marginalised from the country's political life.

This paper is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consist of interviews carried out with women involved in this programme, including co-ordinators of women's organisations, project managers, and women candidates who participated in the elections in 2005.

Notes

¹ Institute of Social Studies (2006) 'Evaluación de la Estrategia de Reducción de la Pobreza en América Latina, Informe de País: Honduras, 2006'.

² UNDP (2006) 'Informe Sobre Desarrollo Humano Honduras 2006: Hacia la expansión de la ciudadanía'; Institute of Social Studies *op.cit.*

³ Civic Movement for Democracy (2003).

⁴ Movimiento de Mujeres por la Paz 'Visitación Padilla', or Women's Peace Movement, was created in January 1983 with the aim of raising consciousness among Hondurans regarding the US military presence in the country and the dangers of a regional war. Visitación Padilla's main aim is now to contribute to transforming the patriarchal structures that hinder women's full and equal participation in all areas of development. The organisation particularly works on providing support to women who have experienced violence, and promoting women's participation as active citizens. Visitación Padilla is made up of grassroots groups of women active all over the country.

⁵ Centro de Estudios de la Mujer Honduras (CEM-H) was founded in 1986 as a civil not-for-profit organisation without political or religious ties. The organisation's mission is to contribute to the elimination of different forms of discrimination and violence against women; promote and contribute to the transformation of the economic, social, and cultural structure of the country in order to build a more inclusive society, without poverty, but with social justice and gender equality; and to enable full citizenship and the human rights of women.

⁶ M. Kennedy (2006) 'Situación de la Equidad de Género en Honduras', www.cemh.org.hn (last accessed November 2007).

⁷ In Honduras, prior to general elections, the two main political parties hold 'primary' elections to decide who will then go on to stand as candidates for president, vice president, congress, and local government in the general elections. Internal candidates represent the different political factions within the main parties; in 2005, eight factions fielded candidates in the primary elections for the Liberal Party, and four factions fielded candidates for the National Party. All registered voters are eligible to take part. The three other parties have alternative processes to select candidates, that are not open to voters from outside the parties.

⁸ When a full member of congress is absent, an alternate takes his or her place. When this happens, the alternate has the same rights and responsibilities as the full member.

⁹ Centro de Investigación y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos (2005) 'Una mirada al proceso electoral primario 2005'.

¹⁰ M. A. Martínez (2004) 'Ponencia en el Foro Mujeres en Espacios de Toma de Decisiones'.

¹¹ UNDP (2006) *op.cit.*

¹² Centro de Derechos de Mujeres (2007) 'Memoria Foro Mujeres en Espacios de Toma de Decisiones', Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 21–23 July 2004, pp. 72–9.

¹³ Created in 1992, Centro de Derechos de Mujeres (CDM) is a feminist organisation that promotes and defends women's rights. CDM's mission is to contribute to transforming values, attitudes, and practices that discriminate against women, in order to build a more just and equal society. CDM's principal areas of work are domestic and sexual violence, labour rights, sexual and reproductive rights, non-sexist education, and citizen participation.

¹⁴ The process of social auditing allows an organisation or institution to monitor the social, economic, and environmental impact of its activities. For more information see www.socialauditnetwork.org.uk/what%202.htm (last accessed November 2007).

¹⁵ The Coordinator of Rural Women of La Paz (COMUCAP) was started in 1993 by six women who were concerned about their own living conditions, and those of other Lenca indigenous women. It now has over 250 members, and 16 local groups in four municipalities in La Paz, one of the five poorest departments (or provinces) in Honduras. COMUCAP's mission is to promote and defend the rights of its members and their families, and also to support the production and processing of organic products (principally coffee and aloe vera) for sale on the international market. COMUCAP also works on challenging violence against women.

¹⁶ The Institute of Social Investigation and Advocacy (IISI) has been active since the late 1990s. Its goal is to strengthen the advocacy skills of civil-society organisations and help them to establish a more influential relationship with the state. To this end IISI runs Advocacy Schools for community leaders and activists. 'Our emphasis is on the process of advocacy and multiplying learning. That's the key', said Salvador Segovia, IISI Facilitator. Advocacy training equips community leaders with strategies, skills, and ways of working, meaning that they are able to improve their lobby activities, their relationship with the media, their capacity to influence public opinion, and their alliances with other organisations.

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