



**Promoting Gender  
Equity in the  
Democratic Process:  
Women's Paths to  
Political Participation  
and Decisionmaking**

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## Preface

In 1995, the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and The Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA) began working in partnership to manage the “Promoting Women in Development” (PROWID) grants program, funded by the Office of Women in Development at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). PROWID was a four-year grants program that sought to improve the lives of women in developing countries and economies in transition by promoting development based on practical insights gained from field-tested interventions. PROWID grants supported 45 different activities implemented by partner organizations in over 30 countries, including action-oriented policy research, pilot interventions, and advocacy that contributed to economic and social development with women’s full participation.

PROWID projects were grouped into three broad crosscutting themes including economic growth and development; governance, civil society, and women’s leadership; and domestic violence against women. Additionally, a small number of projects were focused specifically on female genital cutting (FGC) and on the challenges and transformations for women in post-conflict transitions.

This paper is one of several analytical documents synthesizing the findings across PROWID projects and their implications within the various theme areas. Recognizing that such themes overlap in their contributions to development, PROWID project staff worked in consultation with the partner teams in the field to identify key lessons derived from their project experiences and formulate recommendations for improving the design and practice of development. An overarching “best practices” synthesis paper concludes the set of documents, placing PROWID findings within a framework of development envisioned as the progressive realization of human rights and structuring the full range of recommendations as a final programmatic contribution to the theory and practice of women in development.

All of the PROWID synthesis papers are available upon request from ICRW and CEDPA, and can also be found on-line at the web site of either organization. To visit the ICRW web site, go to <http://www.icrw.org>, click on “PROWID,” scroll down to “Publications,” and look for the *PROWID Synthesis Papers* section. To visit the CEDPA web site, go to <http://www.cedpa.org> and follow the PROWID Publications link. *Reports-in-Brief* providing summaries of each project supported by PROWID are also available from ICRW and CEDPA by request and on-line.



## Acknowledgments

The authors wish to recognize all those who contributed to this document. Very special thanks and recognition are extended to all the PROWID partner organizations that conducted projects pertaining to women's leadership, advocacy and political participation as they relate to good governance and the strengthening of civil societies in their respective countries. Their concrete experiences formed the basis and inspiration for this synthesis paper and give credence to the theories contained herein. Without those experiences and the thoughtful analysis of results provided by our partners, this paper would not have been written.

In addition, very little could have been accomplished without the energy, insights and experience provided by several others. Heartfelt thanks are given to Meredith Miller Vostrejs and Sharon Heller who conducted valuable research and assisted in the writing and editing of countless draft documents. Deep appreciation is equally extended to Valerie Miller who contributed her expertise in the design of an initial framework for the document and provided analysis, feedback and encouragement throughout the writing process. The insights and comments on the various draft documents provided by Marcia Greenberg, the WIDTECH Project's Democracy and Governance Specialist (with Development Alternatives, Inc.), Lisa VeneKlasen of the Global Women in Politics Program at the Asia Foundation, and Sally Yudelman, Senior Fellow at the International Center for Research on Women, were invaluable to the content of this paper. Finally, without the participation, encouragement and support of colleagues at CEDPA and ICRW, this synthesis document and the experiences it represents could not have been produced.

# Executive Summary



**I**n countries around the world, movements to establish democratic forms of government increasingly influence international affairs and development strategies. Organizations and community groups are continuously finding ways to promote “good governance” that support and respect the voices and interests of a range of citizens. As detailed in this synthesis paper, the full involvement of women in political and economic arenas is also gaining ground as a legitimate goal, as well as a litmus test of the degree to which democracy has been attained.

By highlighting issues surrounding governance and civil society, the PROWID projects pointed to various ways in which women can be integrated into the democratization process. The first section of this report establishes a framework in which this can be achieved, including discussions of several elements organized under three central topics: political culture, civil society, and government institutions. The structure and outcomes of 14 PROWID projects in the field are summarized to elucidate these aspects.

A democratic political culture functions and is critical to the advancement of women, primarily because it encourages political consciousness and action. Consequently, as political alliances are formed and information is shared, power relations within society and the political arena shift, allowing previously marginalized groups (such as women) to identify and fight for their goals. When this point is reached, the social capital (i.e., the relationships, institutions, and norms that facilitate cooperation among various groups) of a country is enhanced, and democracy can then gain a stronger foothold.

A vibrant civil society is a prerequisite of democracy. By building constituencies around particular political concerns, civil society ensures that a range of citizens and interests can gain access to political systems. Civil society actors, in particular politically conscious organizations and individuals, also contribute to the development of political skills on the part of constituents, a necessary component if citizen participation is to be firmly established and remain a consistent factor in political life.

The nature of political culture and the role of civil society in a given context is determined in part by government institutions, such as legislatures, ministries, judicial entities, and local agencies. Such institutions make up a realm in which civil society actors can work to fulfill their political goals and in which policymakers and political leaders can demonstrate their commitment to the democratization process. Importantly, institutions provide a basis for judging government accountability with regard to responsibilities to citizens and the creation of conditions that catalyze and reinforce both political activity and empowerment by groups of citizens.

The PROWID projects considered in this paper underscore the many channels that are available to women pursuing political involvement. As a democratic political culture expands worldwide, it is increasingly important to examine how women—and often the institutions to which they belong—take on new roles and identities, develop new skills, claim individual and collective rights, participate in public decisionmaking processes, and establish an equal footing with their male counterparts. The PROWID project

generated a deeper understanding of the reasons for women's exclusion from civic life and about how best to foster their participation in democratic process, in particular regarding the tools and strategies that can be applied to promote participatory values, practices, and institutions.

The lasting impact of women's increased mobilization and political participation will ultimately be seen at the level of the individual as women everywhere gain a heightened political consciousness and come to believe in the possibility of transformation. At the national level, the political discourse will be altered to the point at which gender issues will be a shared concern of a broad spectrum of political groups. In the long run, the broader the participation in the democratic discourse, the more likely it will be that a society's development choices will reflect the needs and concerns of all its citizens.

The following recommendations for program planning and implementation are subdivided into three broad categories:

***Tools and Strategies to Foster and Strengthen Women's Participation:***

- Support policy analysis activities.
- Promote human rights education.
- Continue skill building and support for women in public office.

- Use advocacy training as a means to understand and challenge inequitable societal structures.

***Power of the Collective Voice and Experience:***

- Facilitate the development of diverse networks for women's groups.
- Support institutional capacity building.
- Create forums for women to exchange ideas and reflect on their experiences.
- Develop a written record for other organizations.

***Credibility as a Vital Asset:***

- Create and widely disseminate a credible body of information.
- Collect gender-disaggregated information as a powerful tool for monitoring and assessing women's progress.

The following are lessons that come from collective project experiences:

- Sustainable development requires *women's* active participation in public decisionmaking.
- Political consciousness results from critical thinking.
- Small steps provide the foundation for enduring social change.



# A Framework for Enhancing Women's Political Participation and Decisionmaking

## Introduction



Democratic transitions in many countries have ushered in new ideas about the citizen's role in political life. The meaning of democracy and the responsibilities it entails are continuously being negotiated in new contexts of ideological exploration and citizen aspiration. In recent years, as the process of democratization has become more widespread, the complex relationship between governance and women's empowerment has come under increasing scrutiny by academics, development practitioners, and grassroots constituencies.

One of the key issues at hand is whether the establishment of democracy can foster an environment in which groups that have traditionally been excluded from full involvement in economic and political arenas—such as women—can gain greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives. It has also become critical to determine whether new systems of “good governance” allow women to gain political skills, claim individual and collective rights, participate in public decisionmaking processes, and establish a more equal footing with their male counterparts.

Approaches to the overall empowerment of women have begun to integrate tools and strategies designed to promote democratic values, practices, and institutions. This trend has stimulated fresh insights on and innovative field programs in the area of integrating gender concerns with development interventions. As illustrated herein, the PROWID project has generated new understanding of the relationship between governance and women, as well as new strategies for strengthening the inclusion of women in the democratization process.

This synthesis paper establishes a framework for examining the relationship between good governance and women's empowerment, and reports on the ways that a sample of 14 PROWID projects have influenced this connection in specific countries and contexts. All the projects described here can be viewed against the backdrop of three core elements, which provide reference points for understanding what happened in the field. These are defined as follows:

- **Political culture.** A democratic political culture offers opportunities for the expression and reconciliation of different views, demands governmental transparency, encourages citizen participation, and supports a strong civil society.
- **Civil society.** Characterized by effective citizen representation and participation in political life, civil society is a constantly evolving network of politically active, aware organizations and individuals that represent diverse interests, shape public dialogue, and influence political outcomes.
- **Government institutions.** The creation of democratic bodies determines the degree to which government is transparent and accessible and whether policies reflect an equitable balance of society's interests. If successful, organizations and individuals will be able to themselves freely advocate for changes in policies, programs, laws, regulations, and institutions.

The establishment of a framework containing these three elements does not suggest that the involvement of women in democratization is a mechanistic or universally applicable process. On the contrary, this paper seeks to reconcile an understanding of key aspects of governance with

the widely varied experiences and activities of the women, civil society organizations (CSOs), and institutions involved in PROWID. Each of the three aspects is therefore broken down into distinct components, which are then discussed and illustrated with descriptions of specific PROWID projects carried out by partners in country.

In the final section of this paper, recommendations are presented for practitioners, communities, and policymakers regarding how they can better create the conditions necessary for women everywhere to secure equality, fundamental freedoms, and human rights. Lessons learned from PROWID work in the area of democracy and governance are also identified and discussed.

## Political Culture

Establishing a participatory democracy is a challenging process that first requires recognition and understanding of the powerlessness experienced by individuals under the prevailing political systems. The next step is to work with citizens in such a way as to encourage political consciousness, organization, and advocacy. This approach in turn requires the development of new networks that can strive for common goals and foster a political culture defined by proactive norms and values (Gaventa 1995). Such a culture creates an environment in which effective political involvement is not only possible, but can be carried out without fear of violence or repression.

Changing a political culture requires both individual and collective actions, for example educating on political structures and how political power is exercised, improving public access to information, and increasing respect by policymakers for citizens' opinions, voices, and right to influence decisionmaking. Certain key issues must be examined when assessing the state of political culture and what is needed to move toward democracy, as discussed and illustrated below.

## Political Consciousness

The character of political culture hinges in part on the consciousness of citizens and the value

that they attach to political behavior and norms, both of which vary depending on social, cultural, economic, and political circumstances. In contexts where individuals are not free (for any number of reasons) to gain and express knowledge, political consciousness may not exist and open political activity may not be an option. In contexts where individuals are free to shape and understand the political influences on their lives, it is likely that political engagement is a shared value and is routinely practiced as a means of reconciling competing interests.

In order to gauge the level of political consciousness in a particular situation, it is important to look at the extent to which citizens recognize their ability to change circumstances and avail themselves of opportunities for political education and awareness building. Any combination of economic hardship, political oppression, cultural orthodoxy, and gender discrimination may lead people to conclude that an alternative vision for their lives is not possible, and subsequently inhibit them from claiming the things to which they have a right—such as fundamental freedoms, security, political participation, and autonomy. Many people are not in a strong enough position to recognize that what appears to be a “private problem” may in fact be part of broader trends that affect thousands of others like them. This way of thinking can undercut the development of a political consciousness by obscuring opportunities to learn how to overcome constraints and exercise rights.

In developing political consciousness, individuals and groups analyze situations, abandon their sense of isolation from politics, and acquire the confidence to strive for political change (VeneKlasen 1996). This process requires strategies for building awareness, promoting education, alleviating internalized oppression, and supporting indigenous knowledge, all of which enable people to challenge existing values and norms. As noted above, the constraints blocking such transformations can be significant, particularly for women. For example, women often possess the skills and language necessary to articulate political ideas, but do so only in culturally acceptable, private ways, such as through stories, humor, music, and discussions

with family and friends. This type of political consciousness can be redirected if public spaces (e.g., community organizations, popular education centers, and literacy classes) become available for discussion and analysis, and for linking daily forms of resistance and aspiration to the public sphere (Gaventa 1995).

### **El Centro para la Participación Democrática y el Desarrollo (“The Center for Democratic Participation and Development”)**

**(Cenzontle).** A project in Nicaragua provides the first illustration. In the last 20 years, war, natural disasters, and unfavorable national and international economic policies have undermined living conditions in Nicaragua. These factors have combined with a male-dominated society to spur a sense of exclusion, fatalism, and low self-esteem among women, which has in turn limited their political participation and decisionmaking power. Many women are impoverished and feel that they are unable to influence the circumstances that guide their lives.

In 1998, Cenzontle initiated a project in three Nicaraguan communities to improve the socioeconomic conditions among poor women by providing them with microenterprise development opportunities and information and skills for political empowerment (Cenzontle 1999). Founded in 1989, the Nicaraguan nongovernmental organization (NGO) supports advocacy related to women’s social, economic, and political participation, and has come to recognize that women will be unable to become active in political and decisionmaking processes unless they understand the value of their own knowledge and abilities. Using popular education and consciousness-raising methodologies, Cenzontle involved 150 poor women from both rural and urban areas in interviews and workshops to explore issues of power and self-esteem, gender equity, women’s rights, and leadership.

As a result of these efforts, women began to identify new, active roles for themselves in society. Training modules on advocacy, community, social participation, and citizenship helped

to strengthen their self-confidence, skills, and organizational abilities. In one indication of the change that resulted, the women who participated in the Cenzontle project were at the forefront of community recovery efforts following Hurricane Mitch in October 1998.



*Cenzontle’s ongoing work in the areas of credit, technical support, and training helped generate jobs for unemployed Nicaraguan women*

**Partners for Change.** Another example of citizen action is in Romania. Recent economic, social, and political transitions there have changed the lives of many people: one of the hardest hit groups has been women, who are increasingly faced with unemployment, violence, and reductions in social services. Confronted by downsizing of state-owned industries, women are often the first to lose their jobs and the last to be considered for new or “restructured” positions, despite holding qualifications that are

“Before being organized, it was like I didn’t exist, like I lived in another world, as if I didn’t have rights, as if I weren’t human. That was before because I just made due with what I had to do at home. We didn’t have the right to credit or anything else, but we already knew that we could organize ourselves. When Cenzontle came, it was different because there was more open participation. We learned there was a rotating fund for women, especially for women that didn’t have access to credit through other means. Then we were meeting, and for me it was something important, a new experience, not just about credit but about values and knowledge that I didn’t have. It is important to participate and I learned that in the training on citizen participation. I entered politics because I said maybe this is an opportunity to help other peasant women like me.”

—*Filomena Gradis, a 45 year-old Cenzontle project participant*





*Participants in a regional consultative meeting in Drobeta Turnu-Severin, Romania*

at least comparable to those of male colleagues. Those fortunate enough to hold jobs often cope with unfavorable work conditions such as

health and safety hazards and inflexible work hours that increase women's existing burdens of childcare and household management. Gender discrimination and little or no experience of political participation have only exacerbated women's sense of powerlessness and inability to see change as possible, let alone as within their control.

Partners for Change, a Romanian NGO, uses advocacy, training and education programs, strategic partnerships, and written materials to increase society's awareness of human rights and gender equity and to bring about positive and equitable change in Romanian society. In 1998-99, Partners collaborated with the women's branch of the Energetica Trade Union Federation ("Energetica") on a project to address women's feelings of powerlessness and futility in relation to employment and the workplace (Partners for Change 1999).

Needs assessment tools and activities were used to determine project participants' levels of understanding of gender roles and responsibilities in the home and the workplace (in particular within the energy industry), as well as the current political and economic situation in Romania. For example, a questionnaire was distributed to participants to elicit discussion among women on how they spend their days (e.g., caring for children, housework, or paid employment) and what aspects they felt were needed to improve their situations (e.g., childcare or flexible work hours). Participants then analyzed and defined challenges and

patterns from a gender perspective and were introduced to internationally accepted human rights norms. In addition, two training-of-trainers workshops involved a total of 40 women (effectively resulting in a network of trainers on gender awareness), and more than 60 women and men from Energetica affiliates attended three regional consultative meetings.

Project participants came to understand the linkages between the lack of leadership and decisionmaking positions for women in both the workplace and trade unions, as well as the fact that women were often subjected to unfair hiring and firing practices. They began to realize that the situations in which they found themselves were not necessarily permanent, and that women have the ability to advocate for equitable treatment. They also recognized that women can and should take on more leadership and decisionmaking roles within the home, the workplace, and the community. Many participants requested and received additional training in advocacy, working with the media, and building constituencies for women-focused agendas within Energetica.

### **Power**

Political culture is partly defined by the understanding and exercise of power in a given context. Experiences of power shape advocacy strategies and influence the degree of success that citizens are able to achieve. If citizens, either out of ignorance, discrimination, or oppression, view power as fixed, their ability to transform power relations will be limited. If, on the other hand, they understand the exercise of power to be an outcome of constantly shifting interactions, they will be in a stronger position to push for change. According to this view, knowledge can always be attained and alliances established for the purposes of transforming political conditions.

In general, women have often understood power in terms of who has "power over" them, rather than as the power that is exercised on their behalf or for a larger common good. Since many women have been denied power in the public sphere, they have exercised power

primarily in the private sphere.<sup>1</sup> Many have little experience working with both other women and men in the pursuit of social goals. As a result, women engaging in public political activity for the first time are often pressured to conform to the norms and values of the existing political culture, and lack alternative models of power to follow (Batliwala 1997).

At the same time, however, the private sphere enables women (as well as other oppressed groups) to challenge power differences and seek alternatives to the status quo in less visible ways. As noted earlier, many women appear to accept their subordination, but resist it in discreet, socially acceptable ways that lessen the chance of retribution. This awareness and skill can inspire the formation of social movements located within communities and lead to organized political action (Miller 1994).

A versatile understanding of power may provide openings to transform power relations. Although citizen groups, women, and others often lack power that is generated by money, control, and authority, they have access to alternative sources of power. These include alliances of large numbers of like-minded people, knowledge and information, perseverance, resilience, intuition, creativity, good planning and organizing, moral authority, honest relationships, and the ability to nurture life (VeneKlasen 1996). When power is conceptualized in these ways, political culture is enriched and the possibility of change increases.

**Via Campesina Women's Working Group.** The Via Campesina project provides a good illustration of how experiences of power influence advocacy. Established in 1993, it is a global movement of organizations representing peasants, small and medium-sized farmers, farm workers, rural women, and indigenous agrarian communities. As part of PROWID, Via Campesina launched the "Peasant Women on the Frontiers of Food Security" project to strengthen the potential of farm and peasant women throughout the Western Hemisphere to

influence and respond to global economic changes, specifically the impact of the neoliberal model of economic globalization on small-scale farmers and food resources and availability (Via Campesina 1999). As the traditional monitors of food security on the household level, women have been adversely affected by economic restructuring which has displaced workers, disrupted markets, undermined environmental integrity, and altered regulatory frameworks.

The project was organized by the Via Campesina Women's Working Group in collaboration with three regionally-based organizations.<sup>2</sup> The Working Group brought together 200 small farmer and peasant women from 37 countries to engage in workshops in which they identified and analyzed trends that hinder women's leadership in decisionmaking. Participants gained knowledge about the international economic and political forces affecting their rural communities, became aware of existing gender-related barriers, and gained the ability to articulate needs and goals.

The workshops and follow-up exchanges resulted in advocacy initiatives, including proposals to modify laws related to women farmers and land reform. Groups met with government officials in their countries on a range of issues, including access to credit and



*Bolivian women of the Via Campesina movement gather at a Latin American assembly in Brazil*

<sup>1</sup> The private sphere designates activities related to the household and family (e.g., cooking and child care), for which women everywhere have historically held primary responsibility.

<sup>2</sup> These were: Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones Campesinas ("Latin American Coordination of Peasant Organizations," or CLOC) in South America; the Asociación de Organizaciones Campesinas Centroamericanas para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo ("Central American Peasant Association for Cooperation and Development," or ASOCODE) in Central America; and the Windward Islands Farmers Association (WINFA) in the Eastern Caribbean.

technical assistance, biodiversity, food security, and trade rights. In addition, workshop reports and education materials underscoring the work of farm and peasant women and the gender aspects of food security and agricultural sustainability were widely disseminated among rural constituencies.

The workshops demonstrated that peasant women understand the significant role they can play within the larger community. Many of these women learned that they, their families, and communities need to advocate for alternative models of rural agricultural development that would allow women to determine sustainable and equitable farming policies and systems. The common ground recognized through the project ended a pervasive sense of isolation and powerlessness among participants and encouraged increased participation in decisionmaking and advocacy in new arenas of power.

The Via Campesina project also pioneered women's leadership development by working interregionally and drawing connections between local and global concerns. The international exchanges enabled rural women from throughout Latin America and the Caribbean to recognize mutual concerns and the value of controlling sources of economic security. They also learned to take responsibility for crafting an advocacy platform to highlight the impact of globalization on agricultural communities and gained understanding of the international and political forces that undercut the viability of rural communities. Importantly, the collaborating partners were able to apply their new confidence, knowledge, and leadership skills in creating greater gender awareness and equity within their own organizations.

### Social Capital

As a democratic political culture develops, individuals and groups begin to take on new roles and identities, gain self-respect, develop new skills, and adopt values of cooperation. With some energy and effort, spaces in the political culture can be transformed to provide settings in which private lives and public

institutions can converge, and where ordinary citizens can claim their rights as citizens with dignity, independence, and vision (Evans and Boyte 1992).

An evolving political culture depends on these spaces for the creation of social capital, which is often defined as the web of relationships, institutions, and norms that help people cooperate and coordinate with one another for the common good. In other words, the level of social capital in a given context reflects the degree of social cohesion that exists, and is the "glue" that holds institutions together and ensures that they function effectively (World Bank 2000).<sup>3</sup>

By enhancing levels of reciprocity, cooperation, and coordination, a web of social capital and the proactive political culture it promotes are instrumental in the development of sound governance, economic prosperity, and healthy societies (Miller 1994). It determines the extent to which people are engaged in collaboration and information exchange, share experiences, and feel connected to a broad desire for change. People become confident in expressing themselves publicly, draw strength from one another, and recognize that each has unique skills and perspectives to offer. Social capital is therefore the concrete manifestation of a dynamic political culture.

**The NIS-US Women's Consortium.** PROWID projects in the Newly Independent States (NIS) provide many examples of a burgeoning civil society though at an early stage of development. Mechanisms to include NGOs in formal policymaking dialogue are virtually absent, while the capacity of NGOs to channel citizen participation to influence public policy remains extremely limited. Founded in 1992, the NIS-US Consortium is a coalition of 200 women-led NGOs that seek to increase women's participation and influence in the economic, political, and community life of the NIS. In a 1998-99 PROWID project administered by Winrock International, the Russia office of the Consortium—which represents 98 organizations from

<sup>3</sup> The World Bank has defined several key sources of social capital in the context of social and economic development: families, communities, businesses, civil society, the public sector, ethnic relations, and gender-based networks.

35 regions—launched advocacy campaigns on issues related to the advancement of women’s legal, economic, and social status (NIS-US Women’s Consortium 1999). A variety of methods were used, including meeting with federal and regional policymakers; collaborating with government bodies focusing on women’s issues; gaining access to government documents; holding strategy sessions with member organizations; and participating in issues forums with a variety of NGOs in order to expand coalitions.

The Consortium’s capacity to promote citizenship and extend technical assistance to the NGO community has encouraged activism among women and other citizens, allowing a norm for such activity to gain a foothold in Russia. In this way, the Consortium project helped build social capital and establish the necessary structures for women to pursue public advocacy. As a result, individual participants gained a stronger sense of citizen responsibility and women-led NGOs became more visible and were recognized as contributors to public policymaking. More women within the Consortium attained new knowledge and became well-versed on the gender aspects of a range of economic, social, and political issues. A stronger group identity was subsequently forged.

In addition, reciprocal relationships were established with government officials. For example, at a forum in Moscow, several women’s groups developed and articulated a clear position statement on then-President Yeltsin’s proposed electoral law changes in order to increase the chances that women would win elected offices. Consortium member groups also produced original, alternative policy statements on sex trafficking, gender bias in the political arena, and microcredit opportunities for women, and fed them directly into deliberations at international seminars. Finally, groups became more assertive in crafting gender-sensitive language for legislative proposals and other sources of public information, and the Consortium produced numerous materials for use by its members. These actions indicate that Consortium members gained a profound awareness of their interests, direction, and complementary

roles in influencing public opinion and the policymaking process.

**The Federation for Women and Family Planning.** To build similar opportunities for dialogue in Poland, the Federation was established in 1992 as a coalition of NGOs to promote the reproductive health and rights of Polish women. It launched a project under PROWID to involve women in lobbying and advocacy on these issues (Federation for Women and Family Planning 1999). The Federation’s core belief—that a woman’s right to choose and decide freely if and when to have children is a basic human right, without which women are denied full and equal participation in development—served as the basis for its organizing and advocacy activities.

One of the main goals of the project was to equip women with skills and knowledge needed to create change through democratic processes. This was accomplished primarily through the production and dissemination of written materi-



*Public education pamphlets on women’s sexual and reproductive health prepared by the Federation*

als (i.e., press releases, manuals, fact sheets, bulletins, and advocacy guides), as well through meetings, workshops, seminars, and conferences. As part of a promotional campaign, a user-friendly set of fact sheets on reproductive health, sex education, male responsibility, sterilization, and contraception was produced and widely disseminated to members of Parliament, local authorities, policymakers working on education and health care issues, the media, and the general public.

The establishment of an Advisory Council made up of scientists, politicians, and health policymakers helped the Federation tailor its messages, select appropriate advocacy tools, and build professional relationships. In addition, the Federation formed a national network of 220 advocates who created local support groups focusing on family planning and sex education.

In short, the Federation introduced new and important perspectives on sexuality, gender relations, and human rights into public discussions on reproductive health in Poland, thereby charting a path for ordinary citizens to advance their concerns democratically. By bringing together usually disparate groups of people, the Federation supported the view that citizens can initiate change by working together and being more proactive. This is the essence of social capital, and a strong indicator that a more pluralistic political culture may be emerging.

## Civil Society

As mentioned above, one of the central components of social capital is civil society, a concept that highlights the accomplishments of organizations that occupy the space between formal government institutions and grassroots constituencies. It is one of the building blocks of a democratic nation state (Holloway 2000). While the term is occasionally used in ways suggesting that civil society is a static entity, it is more accurate to view civil society as a constantly evolving network of politically conscious and active organizations and individuals with a range of interests, all of which help to shape public dialogue and influence political outcomes.<sup>4</sup> It is

useful to view the evolution of civil society as an inquiry into *why* and *how* people become engaged in public affairs.

The formation and strengthening of civil society is an ongoing process that determines how and why people become engaged in public affairs, and varies according to culture and context. Local capacity to participate in civil society can be built within the political arena through several channels. One avenue for action is raising political awareness to encourage people to organize around common grievances, seek out allies, and contribute to the policymaking process. Other possible strategies include opening access to and communicating with formal governmental and policymaking institutions; imparting skills and knowledge that enable citizens and organizations to be effective advocates; and influencing the form and function of government institutions over time to protect and promote civil society.

Strengthening citizens' capacity, leadership, organization, and power gives them greater voice and serves to counterbalance the exercise of excessive authority by governments and members of the political or economic elite. A vibrant civil society can also support justice through the work of organizations that hold governments accountable for promoting the human rights of their citizens. The extent to which civil society is capable of becoming a viable arena of political activity and expression is determined by constituency building, access to political systems, political skills development, and institutional development. These aspects are discussed in detail below.

## Constituency Building

Political consciousness, as noted earlier, is an important precursor to individuals and groups choosing to exercise power. In order to advance reform on specific issues, people must first be able to analyze their situation and identify constraints to and opportunities and prospects for action. When a critical mass of citizens begins to coalesce around common grievances, a constituency—the linchpin of proactive civil

<sup>4</sup>As the concept of civil society takes root, the term "civil society organization" (CSO) is increasingly used. However, it only makes sense to use the term CSO if it has a different meaning than NGO, such as a community association, social service center, or savings club (Holloway 2000).



society—emerges and can position itself to inform public opinion. Constituency building is a natural extension of political consciousness because it results when people examine their own lives and the lives of others around them.

As constituencies begin to articulate their purpose and forge a public identity, they are better able to see themselves in relation to other groups, the state, and the citizenry at large. Constituencies can both build bridges among like-minded civil society actors and become antagonists when views, aspirations, and political demands diverge. In practical terms, both processes require constituencies to mobilize political and financial resources, attract supporters, and coordinate strategies; such tactics in turn enable previously acquiescent and disparate groups to become more active (Gaventa 1995).

An important aspect of constituency building is ensuring clarity and unity of purpose. Many constituencies often fail to look closely at the causes of the problems they hope to alleviate or the consequences of the initiatives they plan. If constituency building is intended to expand citizen participation, then the focus of any advocacy initiative should reflect the actual views of a broad group of people. Engaging the potential beneficiaries of an initiative in defining and analyzing a problem and determining the policy solution is therefore a critical step for organizations (VeneKlasen 1996).

When decisionmakers do not represent the majority of a given constituency, members may find it more difficult to contribute their own expertise and may feel disengaged from a campaign (Miller 1994). In addition, within a broad-based constituency, the leadership may see the grassroots as lacking the knowledge or sophistication necessary for effective policy advocacy. Consequently, policy-related compromises may be made during an advocacy process without consulting the communities most immediately affected by the outcome (Gaventa 1995). In the long run, this can weaken the power of a constituency.

In the context of PROWID activities, constituency building has emerged around the rights of women and the need for a human rights-based approach to development. Expanding education initiatives have helped women learn more about their rights under international covenants and agreements.<sup>5</sup> As a result, women participating in PROWID projects have come to regard each other as political allies, understand the obligations placed on their governments under international agreements, and organize groups into constituencies driven by human rights concerns. Further, in learning about rights and responsibilities, many women have discovered tangible opportunities for political participation.

The increasing success of women-focused NGOs in transforming public dialogue on women's rights and pressuring governments to enact measures which safeguard these rights is testimony to the importance of building constituencies for political action. This has been particularly evident as women's organizations and their members have come to understand the gender implications of current policies and legislation, assessed their impact on women, and advocated for change so that policies and laws are responsive to the conditions, needs, and rights of women. When this is the case, and advocacy options are open to women, a political culture can emerge in which government institutions are, at least to some extent, open to reform. Even if structural obstacles remain to overcoming inequitable policies, the fact that women have the freedom to craft appropriate advocacy strategies marks an important step forward.

#### **Women, Law and Development International.**

An example of successful constituency building is from the Central Asian Republics (CAR), where governmental and nongovernmental organizations are relatively new, legal systems often fail to function, and cultural attitudes frequently lead to discrimination against women and prevent individuals from challenging authority. In light of these factors, the transition from Communism has left many in Central Asia

<sup>5</sup> These include the 1949 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1966 International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).



*Project participants meet at an advanced human rights training for NGO leaders in Kiev, Ukraine*

vulnerable to human rights violations and in possession of few skills or opportunities for redress. Growing unemployment and wage cutbacks, as well as the dismantling of social services such as day care, have hit women the hardest because of their unequal and often insecure place in the labor market. Other worrisome trends include a rise in domestic violence and a loss of trust in law enforcement agencies, with a consequent decline in the reporting of rape and other violent crimes.

Understanding the structure and practice of the international human rights system and building advocacy capacity is an important first step toward upholding women's rights at the national level. In 1998-99, Women, Law and Development International (WLDI) undertook, in cooperation with the Network Women's Program of the Open Society Institute (NWP/OSI), a program to provide training and technical assistance to strengthen NGOs in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (WLDI 1999). WLDI works to build capacity and consensus on the gender dimensions of rights, clarify the role of law and its potential to increase women's empowerment, strengthen women's rights networks, and hold governments accountable to human rights commitments.

The WLDI project in CAR sought to improve advocacy on women's human rights by educating individuals and organizations on human rights concepts, laws, and systems at the national, regional, and international levels, as

well as on how to access and use human rights mechanisms. WLDI then assisted groups in the design and implementation of practical advocacy strategies to promote and protect women's human rights. A primary objective of the project was to build a constituency of women, men, institutions, and governments that supports human rights as a means to achieve social justice, and that is active in meeting this goal. Through its training workshops, WLDI enhanced the human rights knowledge and advocacy skills of women activists and NGO leaders, deepening participants' knowledge of gender and power and the role of law and civic participation in improving the status of women.

In Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, WLDI worked to transform apathy and lack of self-confidence, which in many cases prevented women from becoming politically active. To this end, training sessions on human rights issues and organizational strategies, as well as public education campaigns, were conducted using context-specific curricula and training materials. Many officials and local citizens were reluctant to participate in the trainings because they believed that advocating for women's rights meant opposing the government. In reality, the workshops were a catalyst to changing the attitudes of local authorities through increased cooperation between them and project participants, as well as facilitating a broader understanding of women's human rights at the local level.

In Kazakhstan, WLDI worked with local NGOs and research institutes to study the issue of women's deteriorating economic status. The team coordinated with national NGOs to educate women on their economic, political and social rights, further attracting public attention to the problem and providing information that can help women become more active in politics, and in turn to fight for their economic rights. Project participants also generated new research on women's poverty and used it to fuel advocacy campaigns, including, for example, an effort by the country's Feminist League to monitor the government's compliance with the Platform for Action adopted in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Participants from Turkmenistan focused their



*Women's rights activists from the Central Asian Republics participate in a WLDI training session*

efforts on domestic violence as a human rights violation, conducting a series of workshops at schools and factories and with local NGOs to create a base of advocates in favor of amending relevant laws. Many project participants found that constituency building through awareness-raising and educational initiatives not only built sustainable citizen participation, but was also viewed by governments as nonthreatening.

**Be Active, Be Emancipated (B.a.B.e.).** In another relatively new transition from Communist rule to democracy—in the Yugoslav successor states—heated ethnic conflict, war, and a deterioration of social and economic structures resulted. Women have been greatly affected by this change, suffering declining status and opportunities and the erosion of formerly established rights. They have also been the first group in the war-torn region to begin rebuilding contacts and to work against a continually reinforced environment of prejudice and hate. In the nascent context of civil society, women's groups have begun to form, born of the pressing need for humanitarian and psycho-social assistance for women victims of war.

Be Active, Be Emancipated (*Budi aktivna, Budi emancipirana*, or B.a.B.e.) was established in Croatia in 1994 as an advocacy and lobbying organization committed to systemic approaches to social change based on women's rights and full participation in society. It has conducted human rights education and training in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Ukraine, and pro-

duced reports and guidelines on women's human and reproductive rights and political participation for use by governments. In 1996, B.a.B.e. launched the Women's Human Rights Network for Education and Action (WHRNEA), an education and advocacy project aiming to foster communication and collaboration among women activists and professionals (B.a.B.e. 1998).

Similar to the WLDI project, B.a.B.e. found that building a constituency for women's human rights was critical to making women's voices heard and their concerns represented in national policies and legislation. B.a.B.e. aimed to form a loose regional network of women's human rights advocates through training and the development of strategies. Five workshops and two regional seminars brought together 165 women representing 69 women's groups from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia, as well as panelists from Austria and Italy. Workshops introduced women to basic human rights theory and existing national and international mechanisms to promote and protect women's human rights. More advanced training was provided to help women adapt this knowledge to local needs and contexts. Participants devised advocacy strategies in their communities to address issues such as violence against women, reproductive rights, and the rights of refugees and displaced persons.

In the context of upcoming elections, project participants from Bosnia-Herzegovina formed the first women's joint coalition and conducted a voter education campaign in that region, reaching more than 60,000 women. In Macedonia, the first interethnic group was formed to provide primarily rural women with human rights and advocacy education and training. In addition, women from Eastern Slavonia, Croatia, formed a caucus within an existing human rights organization.

### **Access to Political Systems**

When civil society is strong and responsive, citizens have the capacity not only to influence decisionmaking, but to enter the political arena (Gaventa 1995). This process requires citizens to understand the nature and functions of political

institutions (such as local assemblies and national legislatures and agencies), as well as how to navigate the prevailing political culture and structure. In short, access to the political system must be engineered. For women, barriers to such access have always existed in the form of functional illiteracy, gender discrimination, and entrenched political norms. The greatest challenges are to gain access to the political system, and then to transform the dominant political culture so that it is more inclusive of previously marginalized groups, such as women.

Many countries where PROWID activities have been undertaken are not shaped by longstanding traditions of citizen participation and advocacy, or cannot mobilize the resources necessary to build citizen participation. Civil society actors frequently blaze the trail to political access by educating citizens, gaining institutional visibility, and enhancing the values of citizen participation. In bringing citizens together to gain access to the political arena, community organizers have learned a great deal about the importance of developing the skills of citizen leaders in coalition building, media, canvassing, fundraising, tactical research, organization building, and how to run meetings (Gaventa 1995).

Perhaps most important, access to a political system is gained through credibility. An organization or constituency of actors that is able to consistently and authoritatively demonstrate its expertise on a public policy issue, or successfully mobilize a broad-based advocacy campaign, enhances its credibility and legitimacy as a contributor to policymaking. In this way, credibility facilitates access and can change the quality of dialogue between civil society actors and state institutions.

**The NIS-US Women's Consortium.** In situations where NGOs and other citizen groups have previously been dismissed, the ability to articulate an agenda and inform public dialogue can earn them respect and appreciation. In the Newly Independent States (NIS), nascent women's coalitions hold great promise as advocates and agents of change. As described

previously in this paper (*see section on social capital*), the NIS-US Women's Consortium aims to increase women's participation and influence in economic, political, civic, and community life throughout the NIS. The Consortium's Russian office serves members through information dissemination, networking, and technical assistance. As part of the PROWID project administered by Winrock International, the Consortium focused on increasing the ability of Russian women's NGOs to launch advocacy campaigns on issues identified as crucial to advancing women's legal, economic, and social status (NIS-US Women's Consortium 1999). By helping women activists become more savvy about advocacy and learn the mechanics of the legislative process, the project effectively created opportunities for political access.

By holding strategy sessions and conducting advocacy activities, NGO participants learned how to navigate Russian political institutions, gain visibility for their organizations and women's issues, communicate with member organizations and government officials, collaborate with each other, and increase their input in the legislative process. To these ends, the Consortium convened strategy sessions prior to meetings of key government committees, such as the Interagency Commission to Improve the Status of Women; the Presidential Commission on Women, the Family, and Demography; and the Parliamentary Committee on Women, the Family, and Youth. This effort resulted in direct meetings with legislators, a better understanding of how bills become laws, an appreciation of the interplay between the executive and legislative branches in Russia, and the establishment of gender expertise committees within the Consortium to review all draft legislation on social issues. Further, through information-sharing and advocacy alerts, the Consortium bolstered the ability of local NGOs to monitor the implementation of federal programs.

Because Consortium members took the time to access and review key government documents (e.g., budget, draft legislation, and reports), they demonstrated an ability to engage in policy dialogue on an equal footing with officials and to grasp the workings of government institu-

tions. The deliberate approach taken by the Consortium paid off in the form of credibility and respect from high-level federal officials and regional policymakers. Member organizations are now often consulted by Duma (parliament) members and government agencies on issues important to women.

**Be Active, Be Emancipated (B.a.B.e.).** Similarly in Croatia, as discussed previously (*see section on constituency building*), the advocacy and lobbying organization B.a.B.e. has focused overt approaches to increasing access to political life. The signature feature of B.a.B.e.'s work is a high degree of community-level participatory education and training for women on human rights advocacy, supplemented by orientation on how the legal system, legislative process, and media operate and can be used to safeguard women's rights (B.a.B.e. 1998).

The organization was successful in gaining legitimacy for citizen mobilization as a means of transforming dialogue on public policy. By conveying empowering human rights messages to large numbers of women, B.a.B.e. drew public attention to the larger issue of women's political participation and leveraged access to decisionmaking entities. Specifically, human rights education was fashioned into targeted actions and alternative strategies and proposals. In Croatia, B.a.B.e. formed a coalition of 18 organizations, the Women's Ad Hoc Coalition to Monitor and Influence the Elections of '97, which ran a "51% Campaign" to promote women's participation in policymaking and political offices.<sup>6</sup> Members who had participated in the campaign workshops and seminars drafted a statement to the Governmental Commission on Equality denouncing the increase in violence against women throughout the region.

In collaboration with its Croatian NGO network, B.a.B.e. prepared the *NGO Report on the Status of Women in the Republic of Croatia*, which it presented at the January 1998 session of the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (the CEDAW



*B.a.B.e. and Ad Hoc Coalition members spread their election campaign messages throughout Zagreb, Croatia*

monitoring body). In each case, B.a.B.e. made a valuable contribution to framing the public discussion on women's issues, while at the same time accessing the political system and institutions with a distinctly grassroots style.

### Political Skills Development

Once representatives of civil society gain access to a seat at the decisionmaking table, it is critical that they have a set of skills to engage state institutions and to develop technical and organizational expertise. Only then will citizen engagement in political affairs be institutionalized. Even when basic advocacy and participation skills are fairly well established, many women may seek to expand and hone their abilities. However, becoming skilled participants in corrupt and unaccountable political structures and institutions is not empowering for women if the nature of politics and the way political power is exercised ignores the need for new directions in gender-related issues. As NGOs experiment with collective and rotating leadership, public accountability, and collective planning, action, and analysis, many women are attempting to build a new culture of power based on a different value system (Batiwala 1997). The basis for this shift derives from the relationship between women in political life and a broader, politically conscious women's movement in civil society.

<sup>6</sup>The Coalition advocated for 51 percent representation of women in government in order to reflect the proportion of women in the population at large.

It is important to note that the process of building skills fosters a greater sense of ownership of political processes by individuals, which can in turn generate strong, sustainable organizations. By sharing responsibility for activities and their outcomes, many women involved in PROWID activities have gained self-esteem and a greater sense of identity and accomplishment, as well as increased their commitment to and investment in what they are doing. For example, involving women in participatory action research has helped entire communities diagnose the cause of local environmental health problems, or to recognize that their oral traditions and “folk” knowledge—which are often maintained by women—can be a valid basis for action. In accepting responsibility, women see value in what they know, can learn, and have to offer, gain a fresh appreciation of themselves and their potential within the community, and develop an understanding of their rights.

Finally, it is important that the skill development of civil society actors be geared toward the long-term. Civil society programs do not always draw on a systemic or political analysis of the problems they wish to address, and thus are often confined to providing short-term services to alleviate the immediate symptoms of structural inequality (VeneKlasen 1996). Groups and leaders who develop strategies and skills that combine a vision of long-term change with the achievement of short-term goals are well-positioned to strengthen organizational capacity



*Women develop strategic campaign messages as part of the electoral training supported by CLD*

for the purpose of gaining leverage in creating and changing public policy.

**The Center for Legislative Development.** In the Philippines, the need for legislative advocacy is particularly critical in regions where sectors of the population (including women and minorities) are alienated from governmental structures. Since the early 1990s, the Center for Legislative Development has focused its initiatives and resources on involving women throughout the Philippines in public advocacy. The organization also seeks to achieve gains for women in development by publishing popular materials and conducting training sessions in partnership with local women’s organizations. As part of its Women in Politics Program, CLD initiated a project under PROWID called “Legislative Advocacy for Women’s Rights” in the Cotabato Province on the Philippine island of Mindanao (CLD 1998). The project aimed to facilitate women’s full, informed participation in political life by increasing their presence in local elections and government

The advocacy project had three central objectives: consciousness raising, political participation, and alliance building. CLD trained women from 21 communities in a variety of skills necessary for running election campaigns and provided support to help them become effective and responsive legislators. Through the project, participants came to understand the structure of public policymaking and gained awareness of political channels, structures, and power relations. Armed with this technical grasp of the broader context, women became directly engaged in the political process, lobbying government on issues such as clean water, health care, and literacy.

CLD carried out its advocacy project in two phases: training and planning. Training involved a series of seminars on topics such as political awareness, gender analysis, legislative advocacy, developing legislative proposals, the electoral process, and campaign organizing. Soon after training took place, project organizers recognized the need for an entity that could serve as a focal point for collaboration. This led to the establishment of a 200-member, province-wide

alliance of women advocates and elected officials dedicated to studying and promoting issues that affect women in local communities. The Women in Advocacy for Rural and Urban Opportunities in Mindanao (KABARO) provided a venue for mobilizing support for election campaign activities.

Project participants and KABARO members organized a parade and symposium with the theme “Women’s Month, Women’s Vote, and Women’s Political Power” that was attended by more than 600 women. Impressively, of the women who received advocacy training under the CLD project and ran in local and municipal elections, 47 percent won their seats. Participation in the project also spurred the participation of women in legislative council activities and local governmental committee hearings. KABARO alliance members also met with local leaders and introduced 20 legislative proposals directly benefiting women in their respective local councils. The alliance has gained expertise and visibility, further spreading awareness and expanding avenues of collaboration with women’s advocates and both governmental and nongovernmental agencies. Law enforcement officials and lawyers have turned to KABARO for information and guidance on gender-related concerns, while civic organizations have benefited from its input on community issues and problems.

**El Centro para la Participación Democrática y el Desarrollo (“The Center for Democratic Participation and Development”)** (**Cenzontle**). In Nicaragua, the NGO Cenzontle also supports advocacy related to women’s social, economic, and political participation as discussed previously (*see section on political consciousness*). The organization has made popular education an integral part of its approach to facilitating the involvement of women in the public sphere. As part of PROWID, Cenzontle produced 15 training modules designed to improve technical skills in business development and citizen participation, as well as to counteract patterns of subordination and negative self-esteem (Cenzontle 1999). The modules focused on gender equity, organizational development, self-esteem, leadership,

women’s rights as human rights, policy advocacy, community and social participation, citizenship, conflict resolution, negotiation, business administration, basic accounting, marketing, enterprise feasibility, and credit administration.

Cenzontle activities were based on a collaborative learning process that began with discussions of participants’ perspectives and experiences, followed by input and guidance from Cenzontle program directors and facilitators (*promotoras integrales*). These 150 female facilitators were selected through interviews, dialogue sessions, and workshops. Women were selected based on their communal leadership experience, credit record (either with Cenzontle or other nonprofit financial institutions), enterprise initiative, status as heads of households, literacy levels, and desire and willingness to develop leadership abilities.

Cenzontle also helped present several policy proposals to the Nicaraguan government, including one on national reconstruction following Hurricane Mitch in October 1998 that focused on the issue of women’s access to and control over economic and material resources. Project participants were also active in discussions that led to the formulation of proposals in other areas, including access to credit, employment practices, health, labor laws, and violence against women. In addition, Cenzontle co-sponsored a regional workshop to train facilitators throughout Central America and Mexico on the theory and practice of political advocacy on gender-related issues.

Through the workshops and advocacy activities, project participants gained knowledge and skills, and in turn they began to think in terms of what they could accomplish. Women gained a new appreciation of themselves, a fresh perspective on their rights, an understanding of political and social conditions in Nicaragua, and a resolve to address challenges in their lives. Consequently, the civic groups to which project participants were associated became stronger, with members better able to define and defend their rights, articulate their needs, and participate in public decisionmaking in their country.

**The Center for Russian, Central, and East European Studies at Rutgers University, the Kharkiv Center for Women's Studies (KCWS), Ukraine, and the National Information Center on Women's Organizations and Initiatives (OSKA), Poland.** Working in a very different political climate, women's access to political power has not increased in the democratic transition sweeping through Eastern Europe and Eurasia. In Poland and Ukraine, both the current political climate and a lack of political skills on the part of citizens prevent many potentially active women from influencing policies that affect their daily lives, including areas such as childcare, reproductive health and rights, domestic violence, education, unemployment, and workplace discrimination and harassment. Consequently, governmental structures are less accountable to and representative of women than is desirable.

For this reason, from 1996-98, the Center for Russian, Central and East European Studies at Rutgers University initiated and developed a collaborative project with OSKA and KCWS. OSKA is a collaborative effort of leading Polish women's NGOs aiming to provide access to information, initiate joint projects, and develop strategies to educate the public and policy-makers on the vital role of women in a democratic society. KCWS is an association of lawyers, journalists, sociologists, and historians committed to implementing integrated programs to foster women's social, economic, and political development.

Together, the three organizations trained women activists and leaders of women's NGOs in order to heighten awareness of the role of gender in decisionmaking and to increase political participation by and for women in local communities (Rutgers et al. 1999). Underlying this approach was the belief that women's political participation would compel the government to be more accountable and representative of women. Using an advocacy and training model developed at Rutgers, the project identified the skills necessary for women to work together successfully at different levels of political development, which were then discussed in advocacy and

leadership training workshops. More than 40 women participated in and contributed to each of the nine workshops, representing 19 NGOs and 13 communities. Sessions included problem identification and prioritization, strategic planning, fundraising, public relations, leadership, working with government officials, and the gender aspects of public policies.

As a result of the project, several advocacy initiatives were launched on the local level. In Poland, NGOs conducted an initiative in local schools to increase knowledge about women's rights, and the Women's International Foundation formulated platforms for women running in local elections that focused on reproductive rights and women's employment and social security. In Ukraine, Journalists for Women's Rights produced a newsletter featuring women candidates and campaigned on their behalf in local elections, while the Union of Women of Poltava conducted workshops on women and political leadership and campaigned for eight women candidates in the 1998 city council election (two of whom won). In both countries, women attended local public policy deliberations and visited with town administrators, mayors, and local officials. Some groups also lobbied government officials on the *oblast* (regional) and national level for the inclusion of women's issues on policy agendas, including reproductive rights and funding for health services and education.

### **Institutional Development**

Another aspect of a strong civil society is the development of non-state institutions, the effectiveness of which can be judged by their level of success in winning policy and legislative victories, increasing the political arenas in which they operate, and strengthening their organizational capacities (Miller 1994). If such conditions are achieved, civil society is likely to consolidate and expand the scope, functioning, accountability, and effectiveness of organizations representing marginalized constituencies.

Building strong and viable women's organizations remains one of the principal challenges to shaping a more democratic and influential civil



society. Women's involvement in the democratization process has enhanced the number, prominence, and visibility of actors that represent the concerns of citizens in relation to formal institutions of governance. As a sign of their growing influence, women's groups are more frequently called upon to serve as issue experts and provide policy input, providing evidence that the process of institutional development among civil society actors (such as NGOs and community-based organizations) is gaining momentum. In turn, such institutional development is an indication of the increasing activity and clout of civil society and the importance of citizen participation.

While a single advocacy campaign may be successful in facilitating the change or adoption of policies, any forward-looking strategy should incorporate steps to consolidate the dimensions discussed above (i.e., constituency building, access to political systems, and political skills development). In the long-term, the operational strength of civil society actors will lie in their ability to produce the social capital necessary to achieve policy reform in a pluralistic society. Without an emphasis on their own organizational development and maintenance, civil society actors will find it difficult to sustain their efforts, be influential participants in the political process, and hold governments accountable (Miller 1994).

**Grupo de Educación Popular con Mujeres, A. C. ("The Popular Education Group for Women") (GEM).** Despite considerable strides in Mexico's economic and social development, millions of people in the country continue to endure conditions of extreme poverty, with women ranking among the poorest of the poor. Issues related to class and ethnicity have compounded an unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity, in turn spurring the marginalization of Mexican women. These circumstances prompted GEM to strengthen the ability of regional organizations to generate innovative development projects that benefit poor indigenous, peasant, and urban women. Founded in 1986, GEM is a Mexican NGO active in six states with the mission of assisting women's groups to transform unequal and discriminatory relation-

ships between the sexes and to improve women's living and working conditions. To this end, GEM operates regional training centers, provides training and education programs to promote women's economic and social opportunities, and conducts social and economic analysis.

As part of a project to promote women's involvement in independent enterprises that was initiated in 1997-98 under PROWID, GEM underwent an institutional strengthening process known regionally as *sistematización* ("systematization") (GEM 1999). This is a form of "stock-taking" which involves members in reflecting on project experiences and results, ultimately giving organizations the opportunity to evaluate the quality of its work and document lessons learned.

Systematic analysis was undertaken collaboratively by participants and project staff. This served to both strengthen the learning and organizational capacity of GEM and its seven regional centers and to generate new employment opportunities for women. For example, the systematization process provided GEM with feedback that regional centers should acknowledge the lack of opportunities for women in areas characterized by extreme poverty, prompting the integration of advocacy efforts into its job placement program in order to promote policies that benefit the poor.

During the PROWID project, more than 100 training sessions and workshops were held to strengthen the organizational and technical skills of the women who make up GEM and the regional centers. Strategic plans to promote

Cristina, a 35-year old Nahuatl from Xiloxochico and a member of an indigenous artisan women's cooperative, participated in capacity-building activities run by the regional center in Puebla. "In Maseualsiuame we formed teams of artisans who would go to other cities to sell goods," explains Cristina. "At first it was difficult to convince our families and husbands to allow us to go, but the training we received and the support from our organization gave us the strength we needed to realize our potential and carry out our responsibilities. I am no longer fearful of speaking in public, talking to local officials, or being away from home...I am now a leader, valued and respected in my community and in the region."

economic development and business skills were explored. In addition, 18 workshops were held with directors and staff from the regional centers, as well as 100 women with whom the centers worked. Issue areas included approaches to development; organizational skills; development planning; policy advocacy; self-esteem; strategic planning; and the process of systematizing project experiences.

In addition, research and publication initiatives enabled GEM to share its work with NGOs and citizen groups—both throughout Mexico and in other countries—that seek alternative ways to combat poverty and inequality. The publication, *Construyendo un Nuevo Poder: Centros Regionales de Capacitación a la Mujer* (“Constructing a New Power: Regional Women’s Training Centers”), is a detailed final report on the experiences of establishing and strengthening regional centers. Designed as a case study, it describes the background, process, activities, and impact of, as well as lessons learned from, the entire project, thus serving as a model for replication by other civic groups seeking to improve organizational capacity.

Seven issues of the quarterly newsletter *Mujeres Empresarias* (“Women Entrepreneurs”) were also published, and 3,600 copies were distributed to women participating in programs at regional centers, community members, local and regional

NGOs, and other civic and governmental institutions. A reference manual and a journal were developed for each activity, meeting, and workshop conducted during the project and distributed to directors and staff at each center.

In order to expand its institutionalization efforts, GEM conducted ten “Gender and Business Development” workshops for representatives of NGOs in other Mexican states that hoped to improve the entrepreneurial skills and capacities of both their organizations and the women with whom they worked. GEM also channeled resources through projects and specific agreements with the centers for training programs, business investment projects, community development, and financing activities. For the first time, opportunities were created for the regional centers to meet and exchange ideas with NGOs in order to foster joint planning and to maximize advocacy efforts at the local, regional, and national levels.

As a result, women from the regional centers have served as mediators and issue experts and drafted legislation on economic and social policies that affect women. In Chihuahua, for example, the Centro de Atención de la Mujer Trabajadora (“Center for Attention to Working Women”) advocated for and achieved the establishment of a state government *estancia* (“office” or “division”) for women’s issues. The Centro is working with the state Congress to develop a two-year plan to address such concerns as women’s legal rights, family violence, child care, and health conditions in the workplace. GEM also pioneered an important public/private partnership by conducting training programs on administering microenterprise and income generation activities for social service agencies in the government.

GEM’s project activities raised the visibility of women’s work and the value of their contributions to the Mexican economy and society. This was possible because GEM acknowledged the importance of exploring its own strengths and weaknesses, a process that “professionalized” its performance, elevated its image, and made its work better suit the needs of its constituencies.



PROWID project partners participate in a regional workshop on advocacy and the promotion of rural women’s rights in Latin America hosted by GEM

**Tambuyog Development Center.** In a different rural setting—in the Philippines—a lack of regulation in the fishing industry has led to the unlimited extraction of natural resources, environmental degradation, and increasingly strained economic conditions within the sector. To address these growing problems, many NGOs and government agencies in coastal areas throughout the Philippines have adopted Community-Based Coastal Resource Management (CBCRM) programs. This strategy aims to transfer access and control of the fishing industry's resources to local communities, with the long-term goal of establishing community property rights.

Since 1989, the Tambuyog Development Center has operated a range of programs throughout the Philippines to strengthen fishing communities and support the emergence of organized, self-reliant groups that control and sustainably manage their own resources. In 1997-99, Tambuyog launched a pilot CDCRM project under PROWID throughout the Philippine island of Palawan to actively involve women in local resource management organizations and community decisionmaking processes, thereby enhancing their economic status and sustainable resource consumption (Tambuyog 1999).

Historically, the participation of Filipino women in resource management has not been formally acknowledged, principally because of a misconception that they were not actively involved in the fishing industry and therefore had no stake in coastal resource management. Tambuyog's strategy for empowering local women began with community organizing and leadership formation. An initial gender awareness workshop and training session on feminist research was conducted with 12 women identified as local researchers and organizers. Subsequently, a total of eight training sessions were conducted with an average of 25-40 participants each.

As part of the project, two new women's groups were formed, which Tambuyog assisted with skills training in strategic planning, organizational development, advocacy, and public speaking. As a result, the organizations gained prestige and

assumed decisionmaking roles and responsibilities by selecting their own governing bodies, electing board members, and establishing issue-related committees (e.g., on credit and savings, typhoon relief, and environmental protection). Members of the pilot groups gained representation on local fisheries and aquatic resources management councils and began to coordinate community outreach, for example through initiatives such as coastal cleanups and children's education programs on waste management. Together with local governments, the groups also coordinated International Women's Day activities, including public lectures and discussions on women and development. Some of these initiatives were supported through savings and credit programs established by the members of newly-formed organizations. Thus, in addition to strengthening institutional capacity, these programs enhanced women's income-earning potential.

Throughout the project, Tambuyog staff developed and tested new indicators for monitoring and evaluating the integration of gender into sustainable development programs. These indicators are slated to become standard program tools. Sample indicators include increased access to financial resources and higher numbers of women-held leadership positions in Resource Management Cooperatives (RMCs). In large part due to Tambuyog, the local RMCs have opened their membership and leadership to women, primarily through the establishment of women's committees. As this PROWID project demonstrated, combining institutional awareness with local strategies designed to enhance women's positions and participatory skills is an important way to mitigate problems that confront entire communities.

**Women and International Law Program at American University.** The third example of an institutional development project from PROWID is in the legal sector. Throughout Latin America, social norms and legal systems are often characterized by a lack of attention to gender equity, resulting in laws or practices that do not take into account the experiences and needs of

women. Furthermore, men with traditional views tend to dominate the legal field throughout the region, holding most of the key administrative and teaching positions in law schools, as well as the majority of leadership and decisionmaking positions in the legislature and judiciary. In order to address significant problems of violence against women and gender bias in legal systems throughout the region, the Women and International Law Program at American University's (AU) Washington College of Law launched the "Transforming Women's Legal Status in Latin America" project in 1997 (AU 1999). The AU program, established in 1984, aims to incorporate the experiences of women in all aspects of legal education, contribute to research and advocacy on women and the law, and promote awareness of the ways that laws affect women's lives.

The project included four integrated activities. First, a Pan-American Conference was held to examine Latin American legal systems from a gender perspective and discuss the challenges of integrating women's human rights into law school curricula and legal doctrine. Second, fellowships in teaching, research, and advocacy were awarded to notable Latin American women's rights advocates interested in law. Third, Regional Fellowships were awarded to enable advocates and legal scholars writing and teaching from a gender perspective to join the faculties of law schools and institutes. And fourth, a textbook entitled *Genero y Derecho* ("Gender and the Law"), the first of its kind in Latin America, was published and distributed to law professors, practitioners, and fellows to introduce new ideas and approaches into the legal system and to affirm the legitimacy of gender perspectives.

These initiatives facilitated a professional relationship between academic institutions and women's rights groups, generating new intellectual frameworks and approaches to integrating gender into legal curricula. The systematic exchange of teaching experiences and methodologies between North and South America, for example, provided women's rights activists with opportunities to broaden the scope of their legal

education. In the short term, the AU project increased the number of both law professors in Latin America teaching from a gender perspective and law courses addressing women's rights and issues. In the long term, these achievements will prepare a new cadre of legal practitioners, judges, and policymakers who are capable of making gender-equitable decisions and interpreting and applying the law in a non-biased manner.

## Government Institutions

To some extent, the character of the political culture and the roles of civil society will be determined by government institutions such as legislatures, ministries, judicial entities, and local agencies. It is in this realm that civil society actors (e.g., NGOs, private sector associations, community groups, and religious organizations) can demonstrate their utility to policymakers and where the capacity of leaders to craft policies that reflect an equitable balance of society's interests and composition is tested. It is also at this level that the degree of transparency, accessibility, and accountability of government is determined.

National and international institutions form the most common and visible arena for citizens to advocate for changes in policies, programs, laws, and regulations. Accordingly, when assessing how responsive such institutions are to changes in political culture, it is important to note whether and in what way national institutions contribute to an environment conducive to political activity and show any signs of transformation. In addition, the viability of advocacy activities and the roles of civil society actors should be assessed.

## Institutional Reform

Transforming government institutions so that they are more responsive to all constituencies and interests, including those of women, is a slow process. Although such institutions are critical in shaping the direction of change, the "official" political culture is often characterized by gender inequality and does not take into account the experiences and needs of women. The will to reform must therefore exist within institutions if change is to occur, and it is this

will that is often bolstered by the actions and advocacy initiatives of civil society actors. The realization that institutional reform requires deeper changes among interest structures and power relationships in the political culture is a necessary insight underscoring how slow and difficult change will be (Carothers 1999).

In seeking to reform institutions of governance, women aim to enhance their access to and control over social, economic, political and intellectual resources. The transformation of traditional gender relations both in the private and public spheres is the principal means to reach this end. These shifts can be manifested as changes in the gender-based division of labor, women's equal access to resources (e.g., food, health care, employment, education, and credit), changes in legislation and public policies, and women's increased participation in public decisionmaking (Batliwala 1997).

In many contexts, women's participation in political life has begun to change the traditional rules of engagement in public decisionmaking and resulted in new opportunities and political discourse. As a result, individuals and organizations increasingly recognize the linkages between civil society and government institutions, and are more able to feed their concerns into the policymaking process. As leaders and organizations gain a sense of their own power, they are better able to envision alternative political scenarios and position themselves to take on more responsibility, in turn resulting in transformed institutions of governance.

### State Accountability

A major dimension of political life is the ebb and flow of negotiating the proper role of the state, particularly with regard to its responsiveness to the many competing interests that exist in a free society. For those seeking gender equity, a commonly held view is that the role of the state is to create conditions that catalyze, reinforce, or enable women's grassroots efforts to secure their empowerment. In addition, the state is seen to be required to live up to its obligations to its citizens, as espoused in international human rights treaties such as CEDAW. Accordingly, a

state and its many agencies or branches must work to promote and legitimize women's entry into the political arena (Batliwala 1997).

There are many ways for the state to carry out these responsibilities. For example, it can mandate women's representation in political bodies or recognize the efforts of women leaders from civil society. Action by the state can often break through the traditional boundaries that restrict women's access to participation and decisionmaking in the public sphere, and subsequently allow them to attain formal political power. Actions can sanction women's presence in local self-government and send out a broader social message that advocates a shift in a particular area of gender power relations (Batliwala 1997). In short, the state can help establish an environment in which women are enabled to be politically active.

While national institutions are ultimately responsible for ensuring gender equity, various elements of civil society can assume the role of watchdog by promoting gender-responsive legislative action. NGOs, state agencies such as women's commissions, and United Nations agencies are some entities that often scrutinize government operations in order to safeguard the rights of citizens. Further, civil society's inherent connection with grassroots activities puts it in a strong position to determine whether or not women are able to realize gender equality, and to thereby balance the statutory power of the government to ensure compliance with legislation aimed at improving the status of women.

Citizen participation in legislative outcomes can help institutionalize gender awareness, consolidate democratic practices, and build constituencies in support of women.<sup>7</sup> Effective advocacy may also influence governmental decisionmaking by educating leaders, policymakers and those who implement policies about women's economic and social conditions and rights; reforming policies, laws, and budgets; developing new programs; and supporting measures to enhance the transparency, democracy, and accountability of legislative processes (VeneKlasen 1996).

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the existence of competing interests in a democratic society means that civil society actors representing disparate constituencies and holding opposing views may struggle not only against the state, but each other as well.

**The Moscow Center for Gender Studies.** In Russia, the transition from a centralized to a market economy has had an enormous impact on state funding for social services, including maternal and infant health, income support, and child welfare programs. However, the gender-related effects of these changes have not been assessed. Thus, while it appears that newly implemented laws, policies, and administrative decisions, including budgetary allocations, may have created a new pattern of discrimination against women, no empirical data have been generated to describe the actual effects.

To address this informational gap, in 1997-98, the Moscow Center for Gender Studies (MCGS) undertook a gender analysis of current and pending Russian laws and state programs in the areas of employment, reproductive health, mass media, and migration (MCGS 1998). Through the project, MCGS underscored the role of civil society organizations in raising gender awareness and holding governments accountable for promoting gender equity. MCGS is an NGO founded in 1990 to conduct research on gender discrimination in Russian society and to explore methods for incorporating gender concerns into the country's rapidly expanding civil society.

As part of its goal to incorporate gender awareness into the Russian legislative process, MCGS published its findings and analysis in four booklets and three policy papers. The data and reports were then used to make recommenda-

tions for modifications to current laws, policies, and programs, or to suggest new ones in areas where none existed. In addition, the information was used to raise the awareness of public officials, members of the press, academics, NGOs, and community groups on gender-inequitable legislation and procedures.

For instance, after reviewing documents in the area of women's employment policy, MCGS found that the declining labor market position of women is largely the result of legislation and social norms that are biased against women. As an example, there is little control over hiring and firing policies that are discriminatory towards women. Public advertisements of job openings often state the desired sex or age for applicants. Further, the lack of gender-sensitive legislation permits the perpetuation of unstated and unofficial attitudes that would strengthen traditional family values and raise the birthrate—each having clear implications for women who prefer to or must work.

In the area of reproductive health, a variety of laws that regulate pregnancy, birth, and abortion were examined. MCGS concluded that the inordinately high abortion rate in Russia and the large number of unplanned and unwanted pregnancies result from a lack of information on family planning options, insufficient access to contraceptive devices, and poor gynecological care. The analysis also underscored inconsistency between policies and funding decisions; for example, although abortion is available from the state, health clinic funding has decreased dramatically.

Through its research and extensive, often groundbreaking documentation, MCGS promoted public awareness about gender-related issues and trends. Roundtables and workshops on each of the four theme areas were organized, and both print and broadcast media were used for wide dissemination. This included journal, magazine, and newspaper articles, and appearances of the research team on news programs and talk shows. MCGS also used the Internet to disseminate findings and participate in conferences. In addition, the MCGS project directly and indirectly contributed to the drafting and



*Members of MCGS review findings from their gender analysis of Russian legislation*

passage of several bills and amendments related to women. In coordination with the Russian Women's Consortium, MCGS prepared a list of gender analysis experts for a Deputy Prime Minister, who agreed to finance analysis into other topic areas. A proposed initiative to establish two positions for gender specialists in the Council of the Federation (the upper chamber of the Russian Parliament) is being considered. MCGS also forged linkages with officials on both regional and local women's policy committees, and an MCGS director was invited to create a university course on "Gender Studies and Public Policy" at the Moscow School for Social and Economic Studies. MCGS will also provide a gender analysis program for fellows from Russian universities and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries.

Internationally, the project team contributed to the development of gender analysis training organized by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) for five Central Asian countries. In short, the MCGS project underscored the important role that civil society actors on a variety of levels play in holding governments accountable to their citizens.

**The Centre for Rural Legal Studies.** Another compelling example of civic organizations holding the government accountable is in South Africa. Following the first post-apartheid, democratic elections in 1994, unprecedented support was given to gender equality, which is guaranteed in the Bill of Rights contained in the country's new constitution. The government ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1996 and accepted the Platform of Action adopted at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. It also established a "Gender Management System" comprising an Office on the Status of Women, contact persons and departments on gender issues within provincial legislatures, and an independent, statutory Commission on Gender Equality (CGE). Despite these formal commitments to gender equality, however, rural farmworkers in South Africa face serious ob-

stacles to equity in development resources and opportunities.

In 1998, the Centre for Rural Legal Studies ("the Centre") undertook a study of rural women farmworkers in the Western Cape Province to determine their socioeconomic status and to assess the South African government's compliance with commitments made under CEDAW, in particular Article 14 on the obligation to promote the equal participation of rural women in development. The Centre, a South African NGO established in 1991, conducts research, training, and advocacy to promote and protect the rights of farmworkers, and has successfully influenced policies on democratization and land reform, as well as agricultural labor laws (the Centre 1999).

The Centre project provides a case in point of how NGOs are holding governments responsible, while at the same time helping governments to honor their commitments to gender equity and social justice. Advocacy efforts included lobbying government officials and conducting workshops with trade unions, legal advice offices, and NGOs. In the area of research, a survey of employers and women farmworkers contributed to a report that was launched on South Africa's National Women's Day in 1999. It received extensive media coverage and was distributed to NGOs, farming organizations, and provincial government departments. In addition, two discussion documents (on CEDAW and the lives of women farmworkers) were produced for use by government representatives, among others. Finally, an educational pamphlet titled *Women Farmworkers: Know Your Rights* provided rural South African women with information on CEDAW, South African labor and tenure law, and legal service organizations.

"There were times when I felt very despondent and thought of just giving up, but the lawyers told me I had rights and that I must not be intimidated...I have always thought it was the man who had the rights to a property, not a woman. [Now] I feel great."

—Mary, a 31 year-old farmworker from De Soorns, South Africa



*Materials produced by the Centre for Rural Legal Studies to promote equal rights for women on farms in South Africa*

Throughout the project, the Centre collaborated closely with the CGE. As a result, the Centre was invited to host workshops for the Western Cape CGE and the Departments of Agriculture, Labor and Land Affairs, to raise awareness of CEDAW and to work with public servants to develop gender-sensitive indicators of achievement. The CGE has now pledged to conduct research on pay equity in agriculture, used the research to evaluate South Africa's compliance with CEDAW, and collaborated in developing a set of indicators to track achievement in formulating gender-sensitive policy with regard to the status of rural women. These indicators include incorporating a focus on rural women in program and budget preparation; prioritizing research on women living or working on farms; complying with anti-discrimination provisions under CEDAW; and making available education, training, and services in support of women's rights.

Because of the Centre project, the CGE has deepened its commitment to implementation of CEDAW and plans to replicate the educational processes used in the Western Cape in other provinces of South Africa. Moreover, the CGE has pledged to use the Centre's research findings on women farmworkers as part of South Africa's Year 2000 report to the Parliament on progress made toward CEDAW compliance, as well as in future reports to United Nations bodies such as the CEDAW Committee and the Commission on

the Status of Women. The collaboration between the CGE, a statutory body with a mandate for achieving gender equity, and the Centre proved to be a powerful model for government and civil society partnerships for the achievement of shared goals.

## Conclusions

It is common for citizens (particularly women) in transitional societies or emerging democracies to be resigned to the idea that they cannot change things or improve their circumstances. Even in instances of entrenched attitudes of powerlessness formed over decades of authoritarian rule, however, tools and knowledge are available for individuals and communities to transform their thinking. Encouraging women's engagement in a vibrant civil society is an essential component of democratic development: This process assists women in gaining greater control over the circumstances that affect their lives and their communities—and consequently affords them greater decisionmaking power. Such methods as advocacy training, consciousness raising, network building, and political and gender analysis are ways for women to combat the fear and apathy that underpin powerlessness and to generate faith in the possibility of transformation. PROWID field experiences in the area of governance and civil society demonstrate that the selection and sequencing of methods to promote women's democratic participation vary widely, reflecting the nuances of different cultural, economic, geographic, political, and social contexts. Thus, although objectives and outcomes were often similar, each project made distinct contributions.

As a democratic political culture expands worldwide, it is increasingly important to examine how women—and often the institutions to which they belong—take on new roles and identities, develop new skills, claim individual and collective rights, participate in public decisionmaking processes, and establish an equal footing with their male counterparts. The PROWID project generated a deeper understanding of the reasons for women's exclusion from civic life and about how best to foster their participation in democratic process, in particular



regarding the tools and strategies that can be applied to promote participatory values, practices, and institutions.

Questions remain, however. Will women's involvement in social movements and political activism lead to changes in the behavior of political elites toward them, and a shift in the contours of political life to include women? The lasting impact of women's increased mobilization and political participation will ultimately be

seen at the level of the individual as women everywhere gain a heightened political consciousness and come to believe in the possibility of transformation. At the national level, the political discourse will be altered to the point at which gender issues will be a shared concern of a broad spectrum of political groups. In the long run, the broader the participation in the democratic discourse, the more likely it will be that a society's development choices will reflect the needs and concerns of all its citizens.



*Rosa Isela Serrano Castro, member of the coordinating commission of the AMMOR, or Asociación Mexicana de Mujeres Organizadas en Red A.C. ("Mexican Association of Women Organized in Networks"), and member of the Via Campesina Women's Working Group Leadership Commission, speaking at the Association of Women in Development conference in Washington, D.C. in November 1999*

# Recommendations and Lessons Learned

## Recommendations



The following recommendations for program planning and implementation are subdivided into three broad categories.

### Tools and Strategies to Foster and Strengthen Women's Participation:

- **Support policy analysis activities.**

Becoming familiar with public policy and policymakers, and learning how to organize in order to access key audiences, encouraged women in the PROWID projects to become more engaged in political processes. Education and training about legal systems, electoral processes, and legislation can help women become better informed and able to demystify public policy and become better advocates for their needs. Issue forums, lobbying of policymakers, and monitoring of governments' actions enable women to hold officials accountable, often for the first time. Relations with government officials, other civic groups, and the media should be encouraged to foster greater opportunities for disseminating information and strengthening policy advocacy efforts.

- **Promote human rights education.**

Human rights education should be integrated into programs, where appropriate, as it can play a catalytic role in enabling individuals, particularly women in the case of PROWID, to become agents of positive change. By introducing a value system that promotes self-respect and recasts individuals' relationships to their communities and governments, women become aware that they have rights and are capable of participating in decisionmaking processes. This new knowledge results in an enabling environment where individuals accept responsibility, hold

governments accountable, and create their own options and choices.

- **Continue skill building and support for women in public office.**

Women's political participation is a critical element in the development of a democratic society, and offers practical experience and lessons for strengthening civil society generally. As such it is an integral element of women's enhanced status involving issues of power and powerlessness, equal access and control of resources, and the strategies that can create change agents and transform institutions and structures in society. PROWID projects successfully increased women's participation in electoral and legislative processes by training women to build constituencies, become candidates, and run campaigns in local and district elections; to develop electoral campaign messages that promoted issues identified by women as being critical to their well-being; and to organize and create support for those who would take political and legislative action on these issues. By participating in training sessions and developing and implementing advocacy strategies, women realized the need to work vigorously to promote gender equitable policies. However, women in local, regional, and national political positions must continue to develop skills in building coalitions with the broad spectrum of CSOs and elected officials in order to govern effectively.

- **Use advocacy training as a means to understand and challenge inequitable societal structures.**

Projects utilized participatory processes that enabled women to critically analyze their situations and create action plans focused on

advocacy and policy change. To be effective, program organizers should make sure activities that respond to women's immediate concerns (such as employment or land use) are complemented by strategies that address underlying structural constraints, and advocacy efforts are integrated into their programmatic strategy development processes. For example, an income generation project was most successful when it integrated advocacy efforts (in addition to credit and training programs) at the local and national policymaking levels, as a means for participants to play a role in decisionmaking processes that govern economic opportunities.

### Power of the Collective Voice and Experience:

- **Facilitate the development of diverse networks for women's groups.**

Several of the PROWID activities were spearheaded by advocacy coalitions, composed of a diverse range of CSOs, which were crucial in creating and sustaining activism and improving advocacy efforts. Networks can provide strong support systems for women advocates and promote dialogue for collaborative analysis and action—for instance, encouraging women to vote, lobbying government officials, or running for elected office. Organizations should be brought together as partners to foster a sense of strength in numbers, and capability and power, decreasing activists' feelings of marginalization and isolation. Local community organizations serving women should create linkages to exchange information with other peers and leaders at the regional and international levels, enhancing their capacity to inform and influence citizens and policymakers at home.

- **Support institutional capacity building.**

PROWID partners recognized that activism and the use of participatory learning processes requires time, flexibility, and resources. Despite the fact that it may be challenging and time consuming, grassroots-level organizations need ongoing support to strengthen their abilities to design processes and build mechanisms that ensure sustainability. Many women's groups are relatively young, lacking both essential organizational skills and concrete experience. For instance, groups need further training in pro-

posal writing, strategic planning, organizational management, and in collaborating with the media (e.g., in producing informational brochures and organizing seminars and press conferences). Further, efficient communication modes (e.g., e-mail and Internet access) are vital for developing organizations to be able to respond to community and policymakers' needs and requests.

- **Create forums for women to exchange ideas and reflect on their experiences.**

Grappling with concepts like citizenship, freedom, and pluralism requires individuals to question virtually everything they know to be true about their roles in society, as well as to challenge longstanding power relations and patterns of inequality in cultural, political, and socioeconomic structures. This process can be both exhilarating and disquieting. Women can make unique, valuable contributions and should be encouraged to engage in this type of questioning; thus, programs should be designed to provide women with the space and time to confront, discuss, and take action on these ideas.

- **Develop a written record for other organizations.**

Much of the work by women's organizations throughout the world is pioneering, often being done for the first time in some communities. By documenting project processes, *one* organization can serve as a resource for *many* women's groups and civic institutions seeking alternative means to address such issues as poverty, transforming unequal power relations, or increasing women's access to and ability to compete in the labor market. Similarly, current activists can provide a legacy to the next generation of activists with concrete, real-life examples of strategies from their projects. Materials (such as organizational training manuals) are most effective when they contain popular concepts and stories tailored to match the target audience.

### Credibility as a Vital Asset:

- **Create and widely disseminate a credible body of information.**

Civil society organizations, especially nascent women's groups, must establish credibility to

send their message to policymakers and other important actors (e.g., the media and other CSOs) with whom collaboration is essential. In several cases, the lack of accurate information and other resources, including reliable statistics, was an impediment to the PROWID partners' efforts to promote desirable legislative responses to such advocacy objectives as improved women's reproductive health or more equitable employment practices. Thus, well researched, objective fact sheets and other reports and documentation should be created to provide a credible body of information for legislators or the media.

- **Collect gender-disaggregated information as a powerful tool for monitoring and assessing women's progress.**

Access to information, and the ability to analyze and disseminate it, is essential to promote accountable and efficient structural reform. Information was used in PROWID projects to raise awareness about women's human rights; develop mechanisms for including women, men, and youth in promoting gender equity; enhance gender sensitivity in the legislative process; and hold governments accountable to women's concerns. However, a dearth of gender-disaggregated data was a significant impediment in project planning and overall promotion of women's rights, as well as in making accurate policy recommendations. Whenever possible, gender-disaggregated statistics should be gathered, and surveys and databases developed, to strengthen data collection on the status of women and enhance practitioners' efforts to inform policymakers.

## Lessons Learned

The following are lessons that come from collective project experiences:

- **Sustainable development requires women's active participation in public decisionmaking.**

Women's involvement in public discourse brings some of the key people who may be most knowledgeable about and committed to

issues—such as community development, land rights, health and education, violence in the community, and the environment—into formal decisionmaking bodies. Development priorities and policies should be articulated in close collaboration with these leaders and their organizations in order to increase gender equity and accurately address stakeholder concerns. If there is a true commitment to participation, these groups must be given the freedom to experiment with strategies and programs and adapt them to their circumstances. While this may mean less predictable avenues to development, it is likely to result in more responsive and sustainable outcomes.

- **Political consciousness results from critical thinking.**

Women and other marginalized groups often inherently possess the skills and language necessary to articulate political ideas. But when they are exposed to new information and modes of expression, and are able to evaluate and internalize them, the possibilities for change increase. There is no substitute for "owning" knowledge. Beyond simple access to information, it is the power of analysis, critical thinking, and application that has enabled women in PROWID projects to recognize their ability to change circumstances, assert their rights, and take advantage of opportunities to transform their lives.

- **Small steps provide the foundation for enduring social change.**

Efforts by PROWID partner organizations to promote women's human rights, encourage political participation, or build constituencies contributed to subtle changes in the political climate. Advocacy is a time-consuming process that is highly sensitive to political and economic crises and does not always offer quick or direct results. Any efforts, though, that produce even the slightest change in the willingness of people to become politically active or express themselves without fear marks an important step in the creation of an improved climate for advocacy and women's empowerment.



# Appendix

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For more information on the projects discussed in this paper, the following Reports-in-Brief can be ordered from ICRW or CEDPA, or can be accessed on-line at either organization ([www.icrw.org](http://www.icrw.org) or [www.cedpa.org](http://www.cedpa.org)):

- ▶ "Advocacy for Women's Reproductive Health and Rights: Developing a Grassroots Strategy in Poland." 1999. A PROWID Report-in-Brief.
- ▶ "Food Sovereignty in Latin America and the Caribbean: Strengthening the Role of Peasant Women." 1999. A PROWID Report-in-Brief.
- ▶ "Fostering Gender Fairness in Coastal Resource Management: A Community-Based Project in the Philippines." 1999. A PROWID Report-in-Brief.
- ▶ "Gender Analysis of Russian Legal Reform." 1999. A PROWID Report-in-Brief.
- ▶ "Human Rights, Advocacy, and the Empowerment of Women: An Education and Action Project in the Yugoslav Successor States." 1999. A PROWID Report-in-Brief.
- ▶ "Legislative Advocacy for Women's Rights: Training Candidates for Local Elections in Cotabato, Philippines." 1999. A PROWID Report-in-Brief.
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- ▶ "Promoting and Defending Human Rights: Building Capacity among Women in Central Asia." 1999. A PROWID Report-in-Brief.
- ▶ "Promoting Equitable Development for Women Farmworkers: Research and Advocacy in South Africa." 1999. A PROWID Report-in-Brief.
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 Founded in 1975, the Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA) is a gender-focused, international nonprofit organization active in over 40 countries with offices in Egypt, Ghana, India, Mali, Nepal, Nigeria, Romania, Russia, and South Africa. CEDPA's mission is to empower women at all levels of society to be equal partners in development. CEDPA collaborates with over 130 indigenous organizations on initiatives that seek to improve the lives of women, men, youth, and children. CEDPA builds the capacity of its partners to provide quality, sustainable programs. Youth development, reproductive health, human rights, and strengthened democracies and civil societies are achieved through strategies such as training, service delivery, social mobilization, and advocacy.



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