

New government, old problems

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Since 1980, amidst relative institutional calm and questionable forms of peoples' participation, a series of structural adjustments were implemented. Among these were privatisation of some basic goods and services and the reduction of subsidies for the most vulnerable groups. Successive governments have claimed that these adjustments achieved acceptable macro-economic results, but the quality of life of the Honduran people has deteriorated considerably.

The country has experienced an accelerated process of impoverishment. The World Bank stated: "in spite of the fact that the economy has improved, the level of poverty continues to be high. Depending on the source of reference and on definitions, between 50% and 60% of Honduran families are poor".¹ According to the Human Development Report (HDR), poverty in Honduras fell from 67.4% in 1991 to 62.1% in 1999. In urban areas, the decrease was from 62.5% in 1991 to 49.1% in 1999. This drop does not mean greater equity, however. In rural areas, poverty rose from 70.6% in 1991 to 72.6% in 1999. The weighted percentage of poor women and poor men was similar in 1991; in 1999, 14 departments had a higher percentage of poor women than poor men.

The government had forecast a five per cent growth in GDP, but this reached only 3.5%. In 1999, the *per capita* GDP was USD 62.77.² Inflation was around 10% and the percentage of the current account deficit relative to GDP was 5.6%.³

In 1999, 48% of Honduran homes had unsatisfied basic needs, *ie*, they lacked access to drinking water, sanitation and lived in deplorable housing conditions with over three people per room.⁴ This average was 58% in rural areas and 37% in urban areas.

The situation of women

There has been an increase in cases of AIDS among the female population, particularly affecting women aged 20 to 39. The maternal mortality rate remains high (155 per 100,000). Women-headed households represent one-third of total households and 50% of urban households. Women make up 39.1% of the employed population. The female employed active population (EAP) is increasing but in jobs requiring low qualifications, and this is promoting the feminisation of poverty.

The "maquilas"

The *maquila* sector (the bonded assembly industry) employs most of the female workforce. According to Honduran Association of Maquiladores data, 80% of the work in the sector is carried out by women, mostly single mothers who

have not completed primary or secondary education. These women receive salaries of USD 62 to USD 182 per month. Many women also work in the agro-export sector. Approximately 60% of the workforce is female and mainly carries out tasks of transplanting, fertilisation and harvesting.

Women are excluded from decision-making processes

Honduras has a Law for Equal Opportunities for Women establishing that a minimum of 30% of elected posts be held by women. Nevertheless, following elections on 25 November 2001, the number of women deputies in the National Congress dropped from 9% to 5%. Women's representation in municipal corporations remained at 9%. The percentage of women mayors dropped two percent, from 30 to 27 women mayors. Female representation in the Executive remained at 20%. The percentage of women in alternate and non-relevant posts increased.

For the first time in history, and with the efforts of civil society, an opportunity has arisen for women: The National Congress issued a decree establishing an Appointments Board for the election of men and women magistrates to the Supreme Court of Justice, with the aim of making the judiciary more democratic. Parliamentarians from the traditional parties tried to invalidate this selection process. As a result, of the 45 magistrates submitted by the Appointments Board, 15 were elected of which nine are women. For the first time in history, the President of the Supreme Court of Justice is a woman: the lawyer, Vilma Cecilia Morales Montalbán.

During the electoral process, women's organisations organised municipal fora for candidates for mayor and the municipal corporations. They endeavoured to have their demands and proposals incorporated into municipal agendas. Women also sought to institutionalise the Women's Office with a budget and political power, so that this institution would have a true interlocutory function and make women's networks visible to municipal corporations.

At national level, actions were taken by women to influence the government to incorporate the commitments made at international summits and conferences into national laws, such as the Law Against Domestic Violence and the Law for Equal Opportunities for Women.

Another major achievement of the women's movement in the last four years, with the support of international co-operation, is the implementation of various public policy proposals for gender equity. This constitutes a major step forward in guaranteeing the implementation of policies, programmes and actions to correct social gender unbalances. Women's Public Prosecution Offices were established in the country's 18 departments.

1 World Bank. Country Assistance Strategy (CAS) for Honduras, Report # 20072, 27 January 2000, p. 3.

2 Progress Report for the Follow-up Meeting submitted by the Government of Honduras, March 2001 Annex A3.

3 "Hablemos Claro Financiera", Honduras, January 2002, p. 72.

4 Strategy for Poverty Reduction by the Government of Honduras, August 2001 p. 10.

Despite establishment of these institutions and fora to denounce the violation of women's rights, and despite the efforts of many independent and organised women, discrimination against women persists. As mentioned above, despite the Law for Equal Opportunities for Women, women's share of important elected posts is actually falling.

The "zero tolerance" campaign

Civil society has advocated for de-militarisation of security bodies. Nevertheless, the Executive recently appointed a man with a military history, Juan Angel Arias, as Minister of Security. There has also been disregard for the law in the appointment of police directors without consideration of lists submitted by the National Security Council (CONASIN), a council for the control of military abuse that involves civil society and government.

Civil society institutions, in particular the women's movement, are concerned about the present President of the Republic's "zero tolerance" campaign. This repressive campaign against delinquency, which centres on youth and poor people, is based on the government's limited vision of social issues. A more comprehensive vision of citizen security is required, as nothing is solved by sending military forces into the streets if they cannot be prevented from abusing power against the civilian population, particularly against young people. Citizen security seen in a wider context is related to food security, health, education and particularly to security for women in the streets and at home. The present government has taken no steps to reduce the number of women who die as a result of domestic violence.

Foreign debt and the HIPC Initiative

In December 1998 the debt was USD 3,823.6 million and by December 2000 it had reached USD 5,558.4 million. In the framework of the Enhanced Initiative for the Heavily-Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC2), debt relief of USD 960 million is expected over the next seven years,⁵ an amount that is considered to be far below what is needed to develop the country.

In the framework of HIPC2, the government is implementing a Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) and an anti-corruption strategy. It is expected that a new agreement will be reached with the IMF in February 2002. Implementation of HIPC2 is scheduled to start in October 2002, and at that time, the government will have to submit a report showing achievement of conditions to start receiving the benefits of debt relief.

The various civil society organisations have stated their concern over the feasibility and operationality of the PRS, because it lacks congruence with the macro-economic adjustments demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The debts are related to the fact that the PRS implies privatising the scant state companies (telecommunications and electricity) and some basic services.

The achievements of social and women's movements

The people's movement of Honduras has achieved some victories: separate ballots for election of president, deputies and mayors; elimination of obligatory military service; separation of the police force from the military force; the approval of reforms that dignify the judiciary; the existence of a Commission for Human Rights; the Law Against Domestic Violence; the Law for Equal Opportunities for Women; the creation of the Special Women's Public Prosecutor's Office, the National Women's Institution; Family Councils, *etc.*

In the last four years, the women's movement has placed women's rights on the public agenda, particularly sexual and reproductive rights and violence against women as a human rights issue. It has also increased experience in the construction of public policies for gender equity, among which the National Women's Policy, the Policy for Gender Equity in Honduran Agriculture, the Policy for Gender Equity in Natural Resources and the Environment and the Policy for Gender Equity in the Ministry of Finance.

Similarly, important steps have been taken to achieve gender equity through participation in the PRS. Another challenge has been the construction of an alternative and cultural audience to re-value the social image of women in the patriarchal and exclusionary society.

Some challenges for women's movements

- To establish a relationship of co-ordination, orchestration and lobbying with women who are in positions of power, to make allies of them for the advocacy of women's agendas in decision-making fora.
- To create a clear strategy for the fulfilment, monitoring and follow-up of commitments made to the women's movement by elected candidates.
- To create a forum respectful of movement diversity to enable the setting of priorities in negotiations with the elected government.
- To make the Electoral Law more democratic by promoting independent candidates.
- To reform the Law for Equal Opportunities for Women, to include a clearer mechanism for enabling women's access to elected posts such as the "braid" (alternating the names of women and men on the ballot) and for monitoring achievement of the 30% target.
- To continue progress in constructing an inclusive social and political culture and to advance suitable leadership. ■

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5 "Hablemos Claro Financiera", Honduras, January 2002, p. 71.