

STRENGTHENING GOVERNANCE PROGRAMMING THROUGH TACKLING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

RHV¹ in Honduras



Violence against women and femicide in Honduras

Violence against women and girls (VAWG)² has long been a serious problem in Honduras. The justice system does not function effectively, crimes are committed with impunity in 97% of cases of VAW, and only 3% of cases are brought to trial. But since the coup d'état of June 2009, the level of violence has escalated - physical attacks, verbal violence, sexual violence, and violations against freedom of expression - and protection for women has decreased further.

Women in Honduras, as in some other Central American countries, suffer the most extreme, and ultimate form of violence known as femicide. Femicide is defined as *“the death of women as a result of gender-based violence, including deaths perpetrated by husbands or ex-husbands, colleagues or ex-colleagues, in a relationship including boyfriend-girlfriend relationships, and those deaths perpetrated by third parties or strangers”*³.

It occurs in different settings: the home; organised crime and commercial sex; gang violence; political violence. Research has found that *“women’s position as embodiments of family honour means that in most cases they are the victims of vengeance attacks, carried out to send a message to male family members; some are killed by police as retaliation for gang attacks on police officers”*⁴. Most deaths occur in urban areas where labour-related migration has led to areas of high

concentration of young migrant women. The most vulnerable are women between 16 and 30 years old. Cases of femicide rose by 63% between the periods 2007-8 and 2009-2010⁵. By 2011 one woman was being murdered each day⁶.

The huge increase in the availability of fire arms has exacerbated the situation, but the underlying context which enables this extreme form of violence against women are the unequal power relations between men and women. The accompanying impunity for perpetrators is a reflection of the degree to which the violent murder of women is tolerated and justified in society. Perpetrators are neither identified nor punished; the justice institutions lack the will to prevent or solve cases. Women who are sexually violated by the police rarely report this as they have little confidence that police will be tried or brought to justice. They are left with no protection and no access to justice.

The high level of violence against women is one of the factors that prevents women participating in political life and impedes their progress and capacity to act within it. In addition, the coup led to the resignation of the most progressive women within the National Congress who had the potential to call the State to account on these human rights abuses. Since the coup the situation has regressed. The Government which came to power in January 2010 fails to mention gender, women’s rights or violence against women in its plan for the country. And the promoters of religious fundamentalism, linked to Opus Dei and the most conservative sectors of the Catholic Church, have dealt a blow to

women's rights by reinstating a decree on the legislative agenda which penalises the sale, use and promotion of the morning after pill and in doing so have taken away women's right to make decisions about their own bodies.

RHV's Agenda on women's political participation

In 2008 the Raising Her Voice programme began in Honduras with the aims of promoting the active participation of poor women in decision-making processes and political life, bringing about changes in attitudes and beliefs regarding the role of women in public life, and influencing public policy and the budget process in relation to women's rights. Much was achieved, particularly in the early stages, in terms of strengthening women's organisations, particularly from poor rural isolated communities, and their policy/advocacy capacity; working with civil society organisations and local governments to influence policy processes with a women's rights approach, and lobbying for women's human rights. There has been a strong focus on linking local activism with national CSOs by developing a network of women's networks to bring local voices to district and national levels. Key issues include women's participation in the electoral process, gender budgeting, the implementation of the quota system for women's election of political office, and *the eradication of VAW*.

However, the coup of 2009 forced changes in the project's approach. Two of the RHV partners broke all ties with the *de facto* government, and began to prioritize responding to women's demands, denouncing the rupturing of the state of law and order, and demanding the setting up of discussions free from repression, with respect for the human rights of men and women opposing the coup d'état. For one of the partners, Visitación Padilla, this meant living through institutionalised political violence (offices watched, phone lines tapped, members captured and beaten) to the extent that the International Court of Human Rights has granted protection measures for its coordinator. This meant that the RHV project

had to shift away from direct advocacy with local and national Government. It focused instead on vigilance and social mobilisation to demand and defend rights, training and campaigns to promote women's rights (through public forums and leadership training schools), supporting women in elected positions of power, and strengthening the National Coalition of Honduran Women (CONAMUH). CONAMUH links together different women's organisations with the aim of building a feminist identity for women's political participation and women's political actions to end the violence. This involves women's commitment to build power at local and national levels in order to defend and promote human rights and end violence. Their aim is to build a social and political platform that will contribute to bringing about changes in patriarchal power structures and build a participative, inclusive and equitable democracy.

Why did violence against women become a key issue for RHV?

The RHV project works through three partner organisations: Asociación de Organismos no Gubernamentales (ASONOG), Movimiento de Mujeres por la Paz Visitación Padilla (VP), and Centro de Estudios de la Mujer en Honduras (CEM-H). All came to RHV with strong networks with rural indigenous women living in poverty, and were well aware that while VAW had historically been seen as more of an urban problem, it had now become a rural problem too. Visitación Padilla, in particular, came to the RHV partnership with a strong concern to work on this issue. Known for their history and commitment to national work on women's political participation and leadership, they were also recognised for their work on denouncing VAWG.

Before the coup they worked with urban women from political parties and found violence to be a daily struggle in political life. In the early stages of the RHV project, the problem of VAW arose in every single training event and in every meeting on developing local government agendas. It was clearly impacting on every aspect of women's lives and was getting worse. The RHV partners realised that this was an issue they could

campaign on together, and decided that they had to address VAWG in order to achieve RHV's aims on political participation. This was reinforced by the escalation in political violence that followed the coup in 2009.

RHV approaches to addressing VAWG

The following outlines the activities, achievements and impact of those aspects of the RHV project which relate to work on VAWG. There are three main approaches:

(i) Strengthening the capacity of rural women to act as a network for advocacy and awareness-raising.

RHV has helped to reactivate and reorganise ten women's networks covering more than 1000 rural and urban women in 11 areas of the country. This has been a key achievement of the project. This network of networks has the following aims. Firstly, it *strengthens women's capacity to act together* to influence the state and society on public policy and budgeting, and to prioritise women's interests. They have developed an agenda for women which identifies problems and proposals with regard to health, education, the economy, political participation and *violence*.

Secondly, it raises *public awareness on women's rights* including *freedom from violence* through radio spots, radio programmes, and public forums and events.

And thirdly, it provides *community level training on building women's leadership* and citizenship in the social sphere, gender auditing of public policy and budgeting, political advocacy aimed at local decision-makers, and the '*de-masking of gender violence*'. This has raised women's awareness of power relations, both in party politics and civil society structures, and helped them identify the mechanisms of control that discriminate against and subordinate women in political parties and define their roles as practical and mundane (data collection, meeting organisation, minute taking, food preparation) rather than in strategic decision-making roles. Male local government leaders

are invited to attend these trainings to raise their awareness of the violence women experience, and the need for a fairer gender distribution of reproductive workload so that women can play a greater role in the public sphere.

RHV also supports the National Coalition of Honduran Women (CONAMUH) in their efforts to link together women's organisations and build a feminist identity for women's political participation and women's political action to end VAWG.

(ii) Influencing local governments to be more transparent, accountable and adopt public policies and budgets with a focus on gender.

The RHV network advocates for the opening of Women's Municipal Offices with adequate budgets to run them. It offers support to these offices to develop local political agendas and distribution of municipal budgets in ways which promote gender equality. Assessments have been carried out in 7 municipalities to evaluate local government practice on gender budgeting, and training modules delivered on the same. The network promotes a women's political agenda – women's empowerment, awareness-raising and *countering the high incidence of violence* in the municipality – including a call for an allocation of *2% of local government budgets* to implement this agenda. Verbal commitments to this target were made by local government in 2011. The network also advocates for more local government meetings to be open to the public to increase transparency and accountability.

(iii) Influencing the State and society on the implementation of the quota for women's political participation and the eradication of violence against women

a) *Women's political participation*. At national level Visitación Padilla has been strengthening the network of alliances and working across political parties to advocate for electoral reform to increase the quota for women's political participation in elected positions from 30% to 50% under the slogan "*half of the power is for women*". One of the network's aspirations is that the agenda of a new generation of progressive women leaders will

include measures to protect women from the escalating levels of violence and bring perpetrators to account. They succeeded in getting a 50% quota included in the Electoral Law reforms to be submitted to the National Congress in 2011 but with the current absence of a strong and responsible government following the coup, and the accompanying militarization, drug trafficking and centralisation of power, there has been no discussion of the new Electoral Law nor the proposal of the 50% quota. They continue to wait for the proposal to be debated in Congress.

However, successes have been achieved. Legal statutes have been created for the new National Resistance Front party which include a 50% quota for women's political participation, and this reflects the stronger role that women are playing in the post-coup resistance movement despite all the setbacks on the women's political agenda wrought by the coup. The recent process of drafting and discussing the Electoral Law has led women in the political parties to assume more of a protagonist role for women's rights rather than relying on civil society to set the agenda, *"Before, it was us women from civil society organisations that had to create this change, but today it is women in the political parties, accompanied by us"*, RHV coordinator. This new capacity for leadership is in part due to the training and awareness-raising provided by the women's network before the coup.

b) Violence Against Women and Girls

The RHV project works to raise women's voices against the impunity of VAWG at both national and local levels.

Nationally:

- Cases of gender-based violence have been denounced and law suits filed in national and international civil human rights tribunals.
- RHV partners have advocated for judicial frameworks protecting women's rights to be fulfilled, for example, the CEDAW protocol observations and recommendations on the safety of women.



Gladys Lanza, Women's Tribunal Against Femicide

- Mobilisations have been organised with constant press releases to visibilise women's rights problems including violence against women.
- Visitación Padilla and ASONOG support the National Campaign against Femicide – see below.

Locally:

- Advocacy with local authorities has led to women in the municipality of Gualcine having access to complaints mechanisms on domestic violence for the first time. 87 complaints were subsequently filed.
- ASONOG have organised public meetings where women leaders have been able to question judges publicly to ensure proper management of violence cases. In one such meeting women said they now understood that violence is not normal or natural, much less acceptable, and that it must be denounced.
- The Piraera Women's Network lobbies local government to regulate alcohol consumption which exacerbates violence in the community, and will hold local authorities to account on punishing those who break the law.

Alliance with the National Campaign against Femicide:

- The huge escalation of violence following the coup in 2009 led to two of the project partners, VP and ASONOG, joining the National Front of Popular Resistance, which itself forms part of a wider coalition of women's and feminist organisations promoting

a National Campaign Against Femicide. CEM-H, although not part of the Femicide Campaign, also promotes and accompanies the women's networks at local level and assists them in putting forward questions in assemblies and forums held with justice and other authorities.

- Research on the causes of femicide and the accompanying impunity was carried out by Oxfam International and the Women's Tribunal Against Femicide in Honduras as part of the National Campaign against Femicide⁷. This showed evidence of the responsibility of the State and justice institutions in maintaining impunity for the perpetrators of femicide, and how the credibility of these public institutions has plummeted since the coup. It also calls for an urgent investigation into the situation of those who defend and support the lodging of complaints and calls for justice in femicide cases since attacks against these women are rising all the time across Central America. The findings have been used by the Oxfam-supported Women's Tribunal Against Femicide, an alliance which lobbies for the judicial protection of Honduran women by working with institutions such as the Inter-American Court on Human Rights (IACHR) and CEDAW, through media work and political lobbying through various social movements. They presented the report to the IACHR in Washington who subsequently made recommendations to the State of Honduras.
- The National Campaign highlights violations of women's rights, creates awareness about women's right to live free from violence, files complaints and law suits against perpetrators and puts forward questions in assemblies and forums with the justice authorities. It has strengthened the capacity of women's organisations to build strategic alliances, lobby, and use international justice systems to protect women

against rights violations. And alliances have been formed with Human Rights Platform, through which the request for an audience with IACHR was jointly coordinated, and also with UN Women Honduras for whom two training sessions have been held on the international protection system and human rights.

- For the RHV partners, the campaign represents a form of tackling the huge problem of VAWG at another level and with broader alliances. It falls within the remit of the RHV project as it embodies the aspiration of women uniting to develop a strong clear demand for an agenda to tackle women's rights. It also strengthens RHV's aspirations because participating in this work has the powerful effect of uniting women across the networks since VAWG cuts across every socio-economic and political group and is recognised so widely as a barrier to women's human rights and progress on every level.

Conclusion

The RHV programme in Honduras illustrates the importance of addressing women's experience of violence as a fundamental precursor to effective work on women's political participation as it is such a constant and pervasive barrier for women at all levels. This is particularly true in fragile political contexts such as post-coup Honduras where political violence has become institutionalised. The fact that VAWG/GBV has been addressed throughout the programme at all levels, from local to national, and across the range of its strategies - from awareness-raising to alliance building and political lobbying - has led to two sets of outcomes. Firstly, the issue of VAWG/GBV has gained visibility, its social acceptance is being challenged from the grassroots up to state level, policy changes on VAW are being sought, and government institutions are being held to account on their obligations to prevent and protect women from violence. Progress on all of the above is inevitably constrained by the political situation, but impressive efforts are underway on all these fronts. Secondly, the broader

work of RHV has been strengthened by the work on VAWG which has united women across religious, social, economic and political boundaries and further strengthened its broad-based coalition. In the words of the RHV coordinator *“no political project can achieve results unless it is rooted in the organization, education and mobilisation of people at the grassroots”*. Perhaps this best articulates the value of the work that RHV is contributing to the struggle to end violence against women and girls in Honduras.

Written by Fiona Gell with thanks to Maritza Gallardo, RHV coordinator in Honduras, for her insightful contributions.

ENDNOTES

¹ The Raising Her Voice (RHV) programme is a 5 year programme which started in 2008, is working across 17 countries and is funded by the UK Government's Department for International Development

² This paper focuses on the violence faced by women and girls on account of their sex rather than other parts of their gender identity. It's important to acknowledge here both the limits of the paper and the importance of other work around violence and other vulnerable groups, including the gay, bi- and trans-sexual community and boys and men. Gender based violence (GBV) encompasses all physical, sexual and psychological violence that is rooted in individuals' gender roles and identities. The most common and pervasive form is Violence against Women and Girls. Since the use of these terms is context dependent, VAWG/GBV will be used throughout.

³ The Inter-Institutional Commission against Femicide in Honduras

⁴ In Gallardo, M. Quoted in [The Observer](#), 29 May 2011

⁵ 'Informe Final de Femicidios en Honduras 2011: Impunidad: un grito sin respuesta'. Campana Nacional Contra los Femicidios.

⁶ Observatory of violence against women database.

⁷ Informe Final de Femicidios en Honduras 2011. 'Impunidad: un grito sin respuesta'.