

RAISING HER VOICE, BREAKING THE SILENCE

RHV HONDURAS

A Case Study by Carmen Manaute



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Contents

Introduction

1. Raising Her Voice in Lempira
2. Laying the foundations: personal change
 - 2.1 Personal commitment: breaking barriers
 - 2.2 Planting the seed: training
 - 2.3 The power of the collective: the women's network
 - 2.4 Spaces for leadership
3. The fruits of the collective: from the individual to the organisation
4. Observers of change
5. The road yet to be travelled

Acronyms

ASONOG	Association of Nongovernmental Organisations
CCT	Citizen Transparency Commission
CEM-H	Centre for Women's Studies-Honduras
DFID	Department for International Development
EROC	Western Regional Platform
INAM	National Women's Institute
INE	National Statistics Institute
OMM	Municipal Office for Women
ONG	Nongovernmental Organisation
ONU-Mujeres	UN Women
Oxfam GB	Oxfam Great Britain
RHV	Raising Her Voice
Visitación Padilla	Women's Movement for Peace <i>Visitación Padilla</i>

Introduction

For too long, women have been forced to remain at the margins in terms of their political leadership, security in conflict zones, protection from violence and access to public services. Women must now take the centre stage as leaders, promoters, and agents of change (UN WOMEN).

In the struggle for gender equality, women still have to break down barriers at the personal, social and, of course, political spheres. However, the rocks in the road make it difficult for them to make progress down the path towards equality and the recognition of their rights. Programmes, such as Raising Her Voice (RHV) help them to move forward.

This case study has given us the opportunity to visualise the progress made thanks to Oxfam's work with the Association of Nongovernmental Organisations (ASONOG) in 4 municipalities located in the CAFEG Association of Municipalities (Candelaria, Gualcinse, Piraera and Erandique). Both organisations have been implementing the RHV programme since September of 2008.

The study allows us to reveal the stories of personal, social and political change told by the women ASONOG has been working with over the course of the last five years. It also gives us the opportunity to reflect on what has driven these changes, from the perspectives and voices of the women who experienced them.

The present study was carried out using a methodology designed to promote women's full participation and leadership in the information gathering process. Over the course of 5 days, thanks to support from Oxfam Honduras and ASONOG, the study consulted 49 people through interviews, workshops, and informal chats with members of the Gualcinse, Piraera, Erandique and Candelaria women's networks, in the department of Lempira. More specifically, the study consulted the people involved in supporting the process of change, and the organisations and institutions that have started to listen to women's voices. We give thanks to all those who shared their opinions and reflections with us, especially women's network members for their generosity in sharing part of their lives with us.

Photo description: A workshop with municipal-level women's networks.

1. Raising Her Voice in Lempira

The department of Lempira forms part of the western region of Honduras. It is a predominantly agricultural region. The majority of its inhabitants dedicate themselves to growing coffee, corn, rice and tobacco. Development has been slow in the region and it registers very high levels of poverty. It also has one of the lowest Human Development Indexes in Honduras.

It is in this part of the country that an RHV project is being carried out by Oxfam Great Britain, with financial support from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). The RHV programme has operated in 17 different countries over the course of the last 5 years. It aims to promote poor women's rights and capacities in order to try and ensure that decision-making processes, policies and public spending reflect and respond to their needs and interests. In Honduras, RHV has involved three local partner organisations, CEM-H, *Visitación Padilla* and ASONOG. This has allowed it to carry out actions in the departments of Lempira, La Paz, Intibucá, and the marginal urban areas of Tegucigalpa. These activities aim to promote women's active citizenship, helping them to exercise their right to participate in decision-making processes. This is

achieved by training women on their rights, by forming and strengthening women's networks and by promoting women's networks' advocacy capabilities in relation to their local governments.

This case study is centred on the work carried out in the department of Lempira by one of the project's partner organisations, ASONOG. There are two main reasons why we selected the RHV work being carried out in this region of Honduras. First, because the RHV work here is being carried out by an organisation with substantial experience in the field of citizen participation, but with less specialised experience in gender-based work than other programme partners in the country. This made it possible to explore the institutional lessons learnt by ASONOG's as it began implementing the women's participation project, and the internal changes this process entailed. Second, it was taken into account that the starting point of the region's women was very weak with regard to their levels of organisation and zero with respect to their advocacy capacities. This would allow us to observe the change taking place as a result of the RHV intervention more clearly and to analyse the process of change.

In the case of Lempira, the programme's efforts have been focussed on the municipalities of Candelaria, Erandique, Gualcinse, and Piraera. The two fundamental strategies being implemented are, on the one hand, training and raising awareness among women on their rights, their personal and collective capacities, public policies, and budgets, and, on the other, creating women's organisations and women's networks both at the community and municipal levels. Over the course of time, women's networks have begun establishing themselves as an effective voice for women and as an advocacy tool in relation to local governments.

2. Laying the foundations: personal change

A change has been brought about in women's vision of themselves as rights holders and as people with greater capacities for developing themselves within different spheres of society (Álvaro Padilla, Linkage Coordinator, Citizen Participation Programme, ASONOG).

Values, such as security, self-esteem, valuing one's self, knowledge of rights, consciousness, confidence in personal and collective capabilities, a sense of responsibility and overcoming fear are recurrent features of conversations with women's network members in the CAFEG Association of Municipalities.

In spite of the obstacles identified, many of which still remain today (such as male chauvinism, low self-esteem, remote communities, family responsibility, conformity, a lack of money, and others), nearly all of the women's network members consulted confirmed that they had experienced personal growth. This had encouraged them to participate in matters that affect them, to remain in their organisations, to speak about their rights and claim them, and, without a doubt, to raise their voices. *I feel they've been a great help to us. Women used to be asleep, now they've woken up* (Amada Martínez, Piraera women's network).

The diverse family and personal situations of women's network members means that the personal growth they experience is also diverse. Their participation in the RHV programme has led some women to start studying, to progress further in terms of their personal growth, or to make the most of their participation in women's networks by starting up joint agricultural production projects. Such projects also serve to generate income for households and, to an extent, to mitigate their husbands' feelings that they might abandon their responsibilities at home. Situations and people are diverse.

Each woman has a different and unique story of change and growth to tell, although, as Ma Jesús' and Amada's stories illustrate, all of them have something in common, overcoming fear.

Ma Jesús García is 52 years old, has been married for 30 years and has 7 children. She lives in a village in the municipality of Gualcinse and is currently vice president of the Gualcinse municipal level women's network and treasurer of her community group. At home she carried out domestic tasks. She also sells the bread and *tamales* she makes with a women's group in her community. Her husband is an agricultural producer. She is an active woman and her participation in the project has given her security, capabilities and a source of income for her family economy. *Before, I used to spend my life in the kitchen, I didn't leave. Now, I'm not embarrassed or afraid to speak in public. I work with children in my community. I monitor their weights. I am also involved in the community bank and in a cooperative. Now I'm forming a group of 20 people, men and women, to carry out an agricultural production project with support from an agricultural fund. I'm no longer afraid to accept different positions. I've even received an offer to run for 2nd local government council member at the next elections. I didn't want to run, but the candidate told me that, due to my commitment to the women's network, that I was the ideal person to defend women's rights.* Her active participation in the RHV programme has enabled her not only to earn her own income and use it to pay household expenses but also to assume responsibility for the issues that affect her community, for getting other women involved, and for bringing agricultural production projects to the group and mobilising the group.

Photograph: Ma Jesús García with her husband in their rural home.

The case of Amada Martínez is different. She is 40 years old, separated, and a mother of 3 children. Her participation in the project has helped her to value herself, following the difficult process of separating from her husband. ASONOG's facilitator in the field helped her to become part of the Piraera women's network. She finds support and therapy in the group and this helped her to overcome the situation she found herself in. *As a woman, my experience with my husband had left me with many fears. I felt I wasn't worth anything. A married woman with children, separated from her husband...I used to say I wasn't worth anything.* However, her participation in women's network meetings began to make her feel better. She learnt about other people's stories of overcoming negative experiences and this helped her to believe in her capabilities and in herself. Moreover, they motivated her to demand half of their possessions from her husband. She also decided to continue studying. Since the separation, she has been studying for a high school diploma in social leadership and she aims to continue studying afterwards. *My dream is to study law. I'm already 40. Sometimes I think my age is a barrier but when I see the unfulfilled needs in my life and in other's lives I think there's still time and that I can do it.*

The personal development of women like Amada and Ma Jesus has been made possible by a combination of two factors: the process of providing training and forming organisations, facilitated by the RHV programme, together with an essential factor: women's commitment and willingness to overcome barriers.

2.1 Personal commitment: breaking barriers

Many of the testimonies gathered have emphasised that women's participation in RHV project activities in Lempira has not always been easy. The women involved are conscious of the obstacles they have had to face and negotiate in their daily lives in order to participate fully in this project. Their commitment has helped them to overcome many difficulties.

Coming to training sessions has been a sacrifice, but I do it because of the benefits it brings.

First, the assistance provided in training sessions and meetings involves adding extra work to that which women are already carrying out. They have to make an extra effort to fit project activities around their family and work commitments. As José Ramón Ávila, director of ASONOG, states *western Honduras has been one of the slowest regions in the country to progress. RHV is working here in isolated areas, areas that aeroplanes could see before cars could. Recently, people have begun to go out. Worst of all, there is even more pressure to work on women living among people who cultivate corn because they have to make tortillas. This is an additional job for women. It must be stressed that the effort required for one of these women to participate means getting up at 3 o'clock in the morning, leaving the food ready for her children and husband, leaving the house with children on her back, getting on to an uncomfortable vehicle, and travelling for 2 hours to participate in a meeting where she'll receive training.* The women involved mention *you always have to neglect the home, but what you can do is to plan things so that you can both learn and do the housework. There's always time for everything.* In some cases they resort to paying someone else to work in their homes or at work. For example Ma Jesús García, from the Gualcinse women's network has hired someone to take her place at work at the small coffee business on several occasions. *I do it every time I go to a training session and, this way, I'm providing work for someone else too.*

Secondly, women's high level of commitment has also helped them to confront an additional obstacle to their participation in these activities, especially when they are starting out: family mistrust. As María Consuelo from the Gualcinse women's network explains, *my family would ask me about what I do and why I'm wasting my time.* According to Iris López and Concepción Aguilar from ASONOG, *the male chauvinist culture in the area was prevalent, as was women's fear to file complaints or to join organisations because their husbands would prevent them from doing so. Consequently, we created strategies to start to reduce this discomfort.*

Regarding these strategies, the work carried out to raise awareness among men and provide them with training has been very useful. *Awareness is being raised on the importance of women's participation. They understand that they are not going to anything bad,* affirms ASONOG's director. Over the course of the work sessions, the organisation has worked with men and women, inviting them to participate in training activities or events to raise awareness on certain topics, together with their husbands. The women interviewed have positively evaluated the support that men are giving to women's rights activities. They feel that this helps to facilitate women's participation in meetings and training sessions as their husbands know where they are. This helps men to overcome their initial resistance to their wives leaving their homes. They now have respect for women's participation. Moreover, as a result of raising awareness, men are beginning to learn about women's rights, to be more conscious of their capacities, and to value them more highly. Some suggest that the fact that both men and women have knowledge of women's rights leads husbands to mistreat with wives less, as they begin to fear being reported.

2.2. Planting the seed: training

Carrying out work to train and raise awareness among women has planted a seed. This is of fundamental importance the process of bringing about change in both women and men. RHV funds have contributed to mitigating the structural and practical factors that serve to limit participation: poverty among participants and the distance between communities. The project has tried to *offer the minimum conditions needed to facilitate participation. It has provided transport, food and*

materials and made it possible for participants to bring their children (Alvaro Padilla, ASONOG). Vehicles are provided for travel from communities, and the food costs of participants are covered.

Women's network members have been the main beneficiaries of training sessions but, on occasions, members' husbands, Municipal Office for Women coordinators, and Mayor's Office employees have also participated.

In the majority of cases, training takes place somewhere independent in each municipality with joint activities for the women's networks of the 4 municipalities involved. In order to facilitate the learning process for women, particularly poor and disadvantaged women, ASONOG has designed practical methodologies and accessible learning processes in order to ensure that participants will be able to replicate them. This is a key factor to the sustainability of the process. The use of practical examples and real situations helps to create an environment that encourages learning and the exchange of ideas between the women participating. This has also contributed to their motivation and self-esteem. *They have given us training not only on the theory but also through messages that really reach you, sometimes on problems that you are going through and that you can identify with. We've also held exchanges and other people come from different areas who may have suffered more than you and when they speak and tell everyone about what they've been through it motivates you to move forward, it's really nice (Amada Martínez, Piraera women's network).*

The training sessions have imparted knowledge on the subjects of women's rights, violence against women, public policies, budgets and project design. Furthermore, the project has helped women to increase their self-esteem, their leadership capabilities and, as we will see further on, their monitoring and advocacy work.

RHV training actions have been reinforced by the linkage of the women's network agenda on violence to national level advocacy platforms, such as the National Campaign against Femicide, with participation from women leaders (and some men) from the CAFEG Association of Municipalities. This process has promoted their participation in the different actions being carried out to raise awareness on violence at the regional and national level meetings in which these issues are addressed. These actions have strengthened women's consciousness of themselves as subject to rights and have promoted the reporting of cases of violence. *There are now women who are able to address the public. They have overcome their fear. I've noticed a change. [Women] are able to defend themselves on their own. They know the law that protects us with respect to matters of violence. Men are afraid to mistreat them because they know they'll be reported.* They take cases of violence to the Municipal Office for Women or to the Magistrate's Court, if it is a more serious case (Mirna de Jesús Coello, President of the Piraera women's network).

2.3. The power of the collective: the women's network

We see how women in organisations are breaking down barriers, are interested in participating in their communities, and how more women are getting involved. (Yolany Figueroa, Oxfam Honduras).

A third fundamental factor to the change experienced by women is the forming of women's organisations. The feeling that they are part of a group has created feelings of solidarity, capability, confidence and mutual support among the women involved. *Belonging to the group has helped all*

women, especially single mothers (workshop with women's network). The group is a refuge, a means of support, and a thrust to make personal and collective decisions. The women involved feel understood. They receive advice and support from other women and feel capable of claiming their rights.

The RHV project has facilitated the forming and strengthening of informal women's organisations and their integration into municipal level women's networks. This, in turn, has helped to promote the participation of community level organisations, together with groups located in the centres of municipalities. *Before, there were very few groups and they were mixed, with men and women. Since the arrival of ASONOG, the municipal women's network was formed. More community groups have also been formed* (workshop with women's network).

The process of training community groups and women's networks involved a lot of hard work and was highly participative. The work has required ASONOG to provide systematic personalised assistance and to implement methods that promote empowerment. The forming of community groups began with the identification of women leaders in different communities. These women were given training first. Home visits were then made together with these leaders in order to inform other women in the community about the group and to motivate them to participate. *This methodology requires more time and resources. Organising a group is not the same thing as providing training to women to enable them to organise the group. However, this is a project innovation that helps to build their capacities, allowing them to help to ensure the continuity of their organisation* (Álvaro Padilla, ASONOG).

When ASONOG arrived I went with Dilcia, the facilitator in the field, from door to door motivating the women to participate (Ma Jesús García, Red de Mujeres de Gualcinse).

Community assemblies were organised with the women interested in participating from each community. They were given detailed information on what women's networks are, what they are useful for, how to become a member etc. Each assembly then elected between 1 and 3 delegates (depending on the size of the group) to represent the community group in the municipal level women's network. Once set up, the community groups are integrated into the municipal network, together with the women trained in the municipality. This municipal network organises periodic assemblies. The community group delegates attend these assemblies, together with all the other women who want to participate.

Although women's community groups and municipal women's networks do not have an explicit legal framework set out in legislation, or their own legal personage, they do have a defined organisational structure and boards of directors, which are elected once every 2 years. Women's network members both produce and vote on the regulations in place to guide the internal functioning of their organisations. These sets of regulations contain warnings and fines for delegates who do not attend meetings. The aim of the warnings is to ensure that the women involved take on their responsibilities. *Now that we have internal regulations, we shall see if the group will become more disordered or if, upon applying them, it will become more organised. A community group that fails to attend municipal network meetings is fined 50 lempira (2.50 USD). The elected delegate who fails to attend is fined 10 lempira (0.50 USD). We have approved these fines and we will apply them* (Ma Jesús García, Red de Mujeres de Gualcinse).

Moreover, each municipal level women's network has a work plan, which is the result of a process of training and reflection. These agendas are set out in accordance with the 8 areas of the Honduran government's Second Plan for Gender Equality and Equity, adapted to the local context. *The agenda*

constitutes a 5 to 10 year plan and is set out in accordance with the 8 areas (Ingrid García, Erandique local government council member and vice president of her municipality's women's network. As Ma Jesús García, from the Gualcinse women's network, explains *the network's agenda includes various different activities: requesting help in practical activities such as driving cars and motorbikes, training in baking, in sewing, as well as strategic activities aimed at improving health, education, the environment, economic development, defending women's rights, and women's political participation, among others. It's organised into different chapters that benefit women.* As such, the agendas bring together women's demands and constitute a guide for the advocacy work they carry out their respective Mayor's Offices.

Women's organisations have served as a useful instrument in that they have facilitated training, reflection, and debates with women, the organisation of actions to raise awareness on certain issues, and the appearance and development of leaders, providing an essential space to develop women's advocacy capacities. Furthermore, this experience has created the opportunity to make the most of the organisational structures created in order to promote new projects and interventions with different financing institutions. At present, many of them are carrying out agricultural production projects using seed capital provided by their Mayor's Offices or local financiers, such as PRAF¹.

2.4. Spaces for leadership

Besides the personal changes mentioned, the training activities and the work carried out to strengthen women's organisations have been useful in helping to identify and guide women leaders, following the sowing of the seed of participation. The leaders identified stand out in their respective communities and RHV has provided them with opportunities and resources for training and capacity building. *The women involved now have confidence in me. If I invite them to a meeting, they come. They recognise that I'm an honest, transparent, and responsible person. 5 years ago I didn't have all this. I would have liked to have been mayor and now I think I have the capabilities* (Brasilia Alfaro, Candelaria women's network).

The work carried out to develop and strengthen leadership skills within women's groups has helped some of their members to launch themselves into politics. Through their participation in women's networks, some members have started to stand out in their respective communities. They have begun to make themselves heard and to actively defend their collective interests. Their capacity to mobilise and organise others has prompted certain political parties to make them offers to run as candidates in local government elections. Their participation also affords them the opportunity to participate in other organisations such as citizen transparency commissions or the Western Regional Platform (EROC)².

¹ The Family Allowance Programme (PRAF, initials in Spanish) was initiated in 1990 as one of the Honduran government's social assistance programmes with the aim of satisfying the priority needs of socially marginalised groups in both rural and urban areas of the country.

² The Western Regional Platform (EROC) is a space for coordination and forming linkages between civil society (groups organised at the municipal level, such CCTs, women's networks, youth networks...) and local governments from the municipalities belonging to the Associations of Municipalities in the departments of Lempira, Ocotepeque and Copán, in western Honduras.

According to those interviewed for this study, the profile of a women leader is that of a 35 year-old married woman, who, in accordance with the context, could expect to live to the age of 73³. In fact, a reoccurring concern in the conversations was the lack of young women leaders. *There are not many young people, and this worries me. What will happen when we're no longer here?* (Lucia Bonilla, Candelaria women's network). The reflections expressed on this lack of participation are numerous and varied. *I don't know. Maybe it's a lack of willingness to move forward or maybe it's because they haven't lived through experiences like I have. They haven't got to where I am and haven't had to take the initiatives I took. Maybe that's it.* (Amada Martínez, Piraera women's network). *The youth are active and enterprising but they lack young women leaders. Leaders tend to be older, maybe because of the experiences they've lived through.* (Ingrid García, Erandique local government council member and vice president of the women's network). Irrespective of the motives, all of the women agreed on the need to get young people involved to enable them to take the baton and contribute to the continuity of women's networks. This could possibly be achieved, they suggest, through a specific programme aimed at motivating young women.

3. The fruits of the collective: from the individual to the organisation

Changes have taken place. As women, we have more opportunities. We're taken into account more. We're no longer invisible (Basilia Alfaro, Candelaria women's network).

The work carried out in the personal sphere (through building capacities, expanding knowledge and personal empowerment) and the social sphere (through strengthening organisations, building advocacy capacities and working in networks) has helped to create a network of consciousness and commitment among women with respect to public affairs, advocacy capacities, and follow-up on the issues that affect them at the municipal level.

An important part of the training process has revolved around familiarising women with the formal organisations and spaces for participation at the municipal level recognised in the Law of Municipalities of 1993 and the Citizen Participation Law of 2006: the creation of Municipal Offices for Women, the allocation of the 2% of the local government budget for women's projects, and women's participation in town hall meetings. This knowledge has helped women's networks to strategically adjust their agendas in order to strengthen their advocacy work on the forming and effective functioning of these legally recognised organisations and spaces.

The women involved in the project have the capacity to produce proposals for advocacy work aimed towards their local governments and other institutions. They have a strategic agenda that responds to women's needs and have overcome their fear of speaking in public and being taken into account in spaces for participation (ASONOG workshop).

The Municipal Offices for Women (OMMs) are located inside local government offices. Their main objectives are to promote the training of women in order to maximise their capacities, to raise awareness on gender equality and women rights, and to support and participate in the forming of women's networks, with the aim of promoting the active participation of women in their communities. There are currently 3 OMMs in the RHV area of intervention, one in Erandique, since 2008, and offices in Piraera and Gualcinse, since 2009. Each OMM is run by a coordinator, whose

³ Data from Honduran National Statistics Institute (INI), 2011.

<http://archivo.elheraldo.hn/Ediciones/2011/10/10/Noticias/Los-hombres-viven-menos-anos-que-las-mujeres>

salary, in some cases, such as that of Piraera, comes from the 2% of central-to-local government funds transfers earmarked for women. Depending on the municipality, women's networks have played a fundamental role in intervening in the process of selecting OMM coordinators. This is the case in Gualcinse.

The OMMs have received some equipment and training sessions from the National Women's Institute (INAM). However, according to those interviewed, this does not work out to be sufficient. *In the INAM training sessions they installed a computer system for us. They gave us a case with manuals on the law and on training sessions. However, we are yet to receive a call from them. We're on our own.* In spite of the progress made in getting local governments and INAM involved, the OMMs are lacking certain things that municipal women's networks are helping to provide. The women's networks involved in the project are providing them with support and assistance in many of their activities. The OMMs are also benefiting from the RHV programme as their coordinators participate in many of the training sessions and actions carried out within the framework of the programme.

The municipal level women's networks and the OMMs are working together. In fact, as Cupertino Morales, vice mayor of Gualcinse states, *his contact with the women's network is through the OMM. All of the activities are carried out through them.* The OMM action plan is being written up on a yearly basis. *In January, I went to talk to the directive. We took the action plan with the agenda so that they could approve it, together with a statement in which they made a commitment to provide follow-up on the plan* states Daysi, coordinator of Piraera OMM. *The action plan is written up together with the women's networks. Its main subjects are domestic violence, women's rights, and teaching women to work in groups and to work with the seed capital provided to them using the 2% of the municipal budget earmarked for women.*

The opening of OMMs has aided the process of channelling cases of gender-based violence. Such cases would have previously passed through the Magistrates' Court only and were mainly processed by men. *Some women have never spoken out through fear. Now, women file complaints when their rights are violated. They go to the OMM, where they are provided with advice. From there, they go to the magistrate and the complaints are resolved between the magistrate and the OMM. They order them to pay child support...this is a great help for women* (Amada Martínez, Piraera women's network).

Municipal level women's networks have also worked on the topic of the local government budget. The law sets out that Mayor's Offices are required to allocate 2% of central-to-local government funds transfers to projects that benefit women. This commitment was not being fulfilled by many mayors and there is a consensus among the testimonies gathered by this study that the political pressure put on governments by women's networks has been fundamental in changing this. However, the allocation of this money differs greatly from one municipality to the next: in some cases it is allocated to cover the OMM coordinator's salary. In others, it is allocated to form a seed capital for agricultural production projects for women's community groups. As Ingrid García, an Erandique local government council member, states *community groups are concerned about the seed capital because in the villages they focus on economic factors. They do not see it as a need to get training. They want to start small business with the seed capital, but the 2% is very little money for a seed capital.* In any case, the funds are managed through the OMMs and women representing women's networks. They decide how they will be allocated.

Town hall meetings represent a third advocacy space for women's networks. These are spaces for citizen participation on local government decisions. *In town hall meetings, all those registered can*

*vote and take part in decisions. The issues brought to light in the town hall meetings are decided upon in local government council sessions, which are held in public. Proposals are made and voted on. Some of the issues are proposed by the local government council and others are suggested by the members of the public present at the session (Cupertino Morales, vice mayor of Gualcinse). Although not all municipalities hold town hall meetings specifically for women, the mayor of Piraera states that currently most of the town hall meeting participants are women and, as such, the decisions made are based on their votes. Women’s network members have noted that the inexistence of town hall meetings specifically for women is more due to the fact that they have not yet been requested than to a lack of political will among mayors. The opportunity to propose the topics for discussion at town hall meetings already exists and the fact that women are attending *en masse* helps to ensure that their voices are heard and taken into account in public affairs.*

In spite of the advances made in women’s political participation in social organisations, there is a series of socio-cultural barriers that impede their full political participation. Men have negative attitudes towards women’s participation. We are trying to change these attitudes through diverse actions and spaces such as town hall meetings, speeches, and presentations given at local government council meetings. However, the problem is that if women are able to understand all this, it is necessary that training is also given to men, so that they are able to understand, as well as women, what it’s all about. If we don’t keep an open mind, it’s possible that we may misunderstand the fact that any change will evoke some uneasiness within certain sectors of society. This is normal. However, in general, things are not going badly. The project is widely accepted. In this sense, the terrain is fertile for further work (Cupertino Morales, vice mayor of Gualcinse).

Some of the project’s achievements are indisputable. However, all those interviewed recognised that there are still many challenges to face in the future. *The women involved have strengthened their voices in relation to society and their local governments. They have achieved the creation of OMMs. They have gained access to 2% of the budget and to spaces for participation (town hall meetings). However, the task remains to achieve the prioritisation of their demands in local development plans, programmes and projects. At the present time, their demands are included but not prioritised (Oxfam Honduras team).*

Without doubt, another challenge will be to ensure that women’s participation in “informal” political spaces is translated, little by little, into women’s full political participation at both national and local levels. At the national level, in spite of the progress made during the 2006-2009 term, in which women’s representation in the national congress reached around 25%, during the current term (2010-2013) this percentage has fallen to around 20%. This regression can also be seen at the municipal level. The percentage of women mayors went from 8% to 5.7% in the elections of November, 2009⁴. Although in the municipalities involved in this case study there are no women mayors, women’s participation in decision-making positions has increased over the course of the programme⁵.

Women’s Participation, 2008	Women’s Participation, 2012
Almotilia Enamorado, local government council member María de Jesús García, municipal transparency commissioner Rosa Elvira Cruz, local government council member Basilía Alfaro, vice mayor	Consuelo Gámez , AINCE healthcare volunteer María de Jesús García, AINCE healthcare volunteer and president of the Gualcinse women’s network Teodora Sánchez, FHONDIL department level project coordinator and municipal health council, women’s network advisor

⁴ Millennium Development Objectives, Honduras, 2010

⁵ Source: Mayors’ Offices of Erandique, Gualcinse, Candelaria and Piraera.

	<p>Fanny Suyapa Bejarano, HONDUCOR postal agent and president of the Erandique women’s network Francisca Rivera, local government council member Mary Eneida Amaya, CCT president Fátima Vásquez, CCT member Honoría Martínez , CCT member Iris Alemán, district education office director Sergentina Madrid, local government council member Alba Cruz, child defence lawyer Basilia Alfaro, court secretary and solid waste management council board member for the area, women’s network Mirza Sánchez, local government council member Teodolinda García, magistrate</p>
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4. Observers of change

It was only the citizen participation programme that worked on gender issues. ASONOG had a well-written gender policy document, but in reality gender was not made into a cross-cutting theme throughout the organisation. The results achieved by women have motivated us to standardise the topic (ASONOG’s director).

ASONOG is a civil society organisation that focuses on coordination. It was founded in 1988 and is made up of 15 different nongovernmental organisations working in the western region of Honduras. Its strategic plan (2009-2013) states that ASONOG is a network that aims to maximise the work carried out by its affiliate organisations. It also implements and coordinates advocacy and development processes in their different dimensions and adopts the position of an organisation that promotes alternative proposals from the local level.

The coup d’état of 2009 and its political, economic and social effects on the country added to the effects of the global financial crisis and had a dramatic impact on reducing the availability of funds at all levels. The need to confront the challenges arising from this new context led ASONOG to initiate a long internal restructuring process, which began in 2011. This process involved not only structural change but also change in the focus of the work being carried out. The focus has shifted from one of low-profile coordination and linkage programmes to a more global focus, in which ASONOG’s programmes are integrated and coordinate with one another, following a more institutional vision in all of their interventions. This change of vision was brought about in parallel with the implementation the RHV programme, the daily work carried out with women, the support provided to them in their personal growth, the work to strengthen their organisations, and their achievements in the municipalities. Being observers of change has taught them lessons and has led them to a change of vision in their gender policies and interventions.

ASONOG’s participation in RHV has made a significant contribution to strengthening its own capacities and experiences in the area of gender. Although the organisation did not start from scratch, as it had already carried out initiatives with women, both in the CAFEG Association of Municipalities and in other Associations of Municipalities in the region, its participation in the RHV programme helped it to expand its work in promoting, forming, and strengthening women’s networks at the municipal level. This process encouraged internal reflection and led the organisation to produce a vision of gender as a theme cutting across all of its programmes. The advocacy work being carried out by women’s networks at the municipal level, their achievements, and the development observed in them has permeated ASONOG, leading it to change its vision.

5. The road yet to be travelled

Women's strength, their tenacity, and their wisdom are the most underused resource of humanity. The challenge consists in showing how this resource could be used effectively to everyone's benefit (Michelle Bachelet).

Women's network members are clear on the road to be travelled in order for them to *get more women involved their organisations. Challenges will be faced one step at a time. First form organisations and raise awareness. If they do not know why they are forming organisations, they will not do so. They want to move forward, overcoming their fears, participating in organisations, and making decisions* (workshop with women's network members).

Women's networks' achievements and the changes produced in women, together with the methodology implemented in training sessions, helps to guarantee the networks' continuity with a view to the future. All of the women interviewed confirmed that they feel they have the capacity to continue training and raising awareness among other women, expanding their networks and carrying out advocacy work, even though economic factors are a constant concern for many of them. As Ingrid García, Erandique local government council member and vice president of her municipality's women's network states *we feel emotionally prepared, but things are more complicated economically speaking*. In spite of the fact that the "training facilitators" strategy being implemented by ASONOG offers women *a tool box that facilitates their performance* poverty continues to be an obstacle to their participation. Over the course of the last few years, RHV has helped these organisations and their members to participate without economic losses. However, with a view to the future, the economic difficulties associated with travel to meetings and training sessions, covering travel costs and childcare, and buying materials, are still present.

One of the programme's achievements is that the women involved have overcome their fear to speak. They do not just receive knowledge; they pass it on to their families and communities (ASONOG).

In order to cover these costs there is the option to work towards guaranteeing that local governments allocate part of the 2% of their budgets to women. *Maybe we would have to ask the Mayor's Office for more money, or to allocate the 2% of the local government's budget towards training for women*, states Ingrid García...*and try to benefit women through other local government funds*. The vice mayor of Gualcinse shares this view. *OMMs should be given the liberty to decide, but from the Mayor's Office. We are carrying out advocacy work aimed at making sure that the projects implemented benefit women and provide them with training*. But support for this point is not unanimous among women's network members. In general, they are inclined to request that these funds are allocated to seed capital for agricultural production projects.

Two future challenges are added to the existing challenge of continuing to grow and make progress at people and as organisations: Stepping up to the national level, which involves finding participation channels for rural women in national politics, and increasing the participation of young women in women's networks, currently at low levels. These challenges relate to issues yet to be resolved. More work must be done in order to continue making progress along the road to equality.

ASONOG has sowed the seed. We have to let it grow, share what we have learnt with others, expand the training sessions and make progress (workshop with women's networks).