

Our Identities in Networks and Alliances: *Our Strength on the Move*



Results of a
participatory
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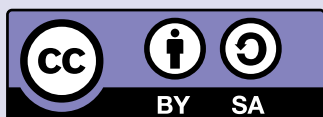
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Index

Acknowledgments	4
Prologue	5
Introduction	6
A shared history: organized women, women in alliances	7
Committing to strategic alliances: a sensed need, a shared political agenda	9
Connecting efforts: the internal organization of strategic alliances	14
Life in alliances: continuous learning and growth	17
Strategic alliances: organized but not institutionalized	20
International cooperation: a historical relationship and an unresolved debate	21
In conclusion: the message we are left with	24

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And to Oxfam International, a deep and sincere appreciation for your presence in Central America and for your efforts to support organized women and accompany initiatives to combat the violation of women's human rights.

Tanya Lockwood and Elizabeth Clarke



Prologue

This study marks the tenth anniversary of Oxfam International's joint program, Women and Rights. This program aims to strengthen women's movements in Central America by supporting women's networks and coalitions.

Why women's movements? We believe that development cannot occur without first ensuring women's rights and gender equity. An important element for achieving change is citizens' collective action, and where women's rights are concerned, these movements are the best expression of this collective action.

During these ten years, we have had the privilege to accompany brave, rebellious, innovative, and persistent women, and to learn from their efforts in order to build movements that defend and promote women's rights.

The creation of collective spaces is not easy, nor is it linear, nor can one predict their development: they can take off quickly or they can die trying. With a lot of commitment, reflection, respect and work, they can be strengthened and sustained over time, by women who are convinced of the importance of joining forces to achieve greater impact, and have the understanding that it takes considerable effort to do so.

We hope this study will help us better understand the identities of networks and coalitions, so we can contribute to their consolidation: who are they? why do they exist? what are their characteristics? what do they think? what do they feel? what do they want? and what challenges do they face?

We know that this study does not cover the approaches of all of the coordinations and networks in the region. However, we believe that the information gathered from the nine counterparts who participated in the program is a good representative sample. We hope that the experiences and reflections documented here will serve to provoke debate and generate a greater understanding of the challenges faced and how to overcome them.

Finally, we would like to thank all of the women that are part of these initiatives, who have also accompanied us and who have shared their wisdom for the benefit of others.

Roxanne Murrell

Oxfam Canada, leading agency of the Women and Rights Program

Oxfam International



Introduction: an idea of the context

The women's networks, alliances and coalitions in Central America have been key actors in the women's and feminist movements in the region since the 1990s, contributing significantly to the advancement of women's rights and their empowerment. However, there is not sufficient research on these movements. As well, most of the information that exists regarding networks and alliances is from outside of the region and very little is dedicated specifically to women.

Due to the lack of documentation and knowledge on these organized efforts in Central America, a participatory research process¹ was initiated. The goal was to determine the identities of these initiatives, as well as their internal challenges and external needs, in order to strengthen them.

Oxfam International consulted with a number of counterparts on whether such a study would support them. Upon receiving a positive response, they proposed that Fundación Acceso carry-out the process.

This participatory research process was conducted jointly with seven national women's networks, alliances and coalitions and two regional ones. The national participants were: the *Red de Mujeres Contra la Violencia* in Nicaragua; the *Mesa Permanente de Mujeres Rurales, Concertación Feminista Prudencia Ayala*, and the *Alianza para la Salud Sexual y Reproductiva* in El Salvador; the *Sector de Mujeres, Red de la No Violencia*, and the *Alianza de Mujeres Rurales* in Guatemala. The regional participants were: the *Red Centroamericana de Mujeres en Solidaridad con las Trabajadoras de la Maquila*, and the *Red Regional Feminista contra la Violencia*.

The research began with the development of a literature review. Following this, group and individual interviews were conducted with the networks, alliances and coalitions and other key actors² in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. The process was concluded with the encounter "*Our Identities in Networks and Alliances: Our Strength on the Move*", held on August 26th and 27th, 2008 in Managua³.

This publication aims to summarize the complex identities of these collective spaces, as well as to promote reflection on the needs of the networks, alliances and coalitions, so that they themselves, their members and international cooperation can provide more organized support.

1. Research was carried out from April to September 2008.

2. Key actors were Hivos (Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador), Diakonia (El Salvador), Central American Women's Fund (Nicaragua), FLACSO (Guatemala), and CEFEMINA in Costa Rica.

3. 22 women participated from the networks, alliances and coalitions, as well as one woman who was a special guest from the Dominican Republic. In addition, an Oxfam Canada delegation attended the beginning of the encounter.

"It seems to me essential that you are proposing a study starting from the identities of these networks, as it is precisely the construction of their identities that strengthens their political action, and, the level of construction of this collective identity is what sharpens the political action for the change that these networks propose."

(Interview with Julieta Hernandez - Hivos, Guatemala, June 2008)

A shared history: organized women, women in alliance

The identity of any organized initiative is closely linked to the historical and social context in to which it was born, and particularly to the identity of the individuals and organizations that gave it life.

Identity is a process that is in constant construction and change, the internal and external contexts of these organized initiatives play a fundamental role in their development. In this regard, the majority of women and women's organizations that take part in these networks, alliances and coalitions come from diverse experiences in difficult and complex contexts, however, they share a common struggle: the struggle to change the historical situation in which they live.

Many of the participants that shaped and organized the initiatives under investigation, were involved in the left-wing revolutionary processes and popular movements that took place in the 1980s in Central America. Participants lived in contexts of armed struggle and extreme political repression in which they experienced and survived painful situations such as: the expropriation of land, forced migration, torture, sexual violence, the loss of relatives and friends and the deprivation and violation of human rights, among many others. As well, and particularly in El Salvador and Guatemala, many women participated in the peace processes and the peace accords negotiations from their mixed-gender or women's organizations.

Some of the women who participated in, and who helped strengthen, the mixed-gender organizations of the popular and revolutionary movements became aware over time (through their realities and that of others) that women's emancipation was not a priority on the agenda of these movements, and that violence and inequality toward their gender was not a result of armed conflict, but rather a result of a patriarchal and exclusive system that crosses all social classes, all political and private spheres, and all cultures.

In this process of taking ownership (appropriation), of being a woman and being a woman as a political subject, in diversity and from autonomy, other factors also contributed to strengthening the foundations of women's and feminist movements in Central America. At the international level, the movements grew and strengthened, knowledge generation and political-ideological feminist approaches demonstrated the unequal power relations between men and women that were created by the patriarchal system.

Thanks to these efforts and struggles, the international community began to include gender inequality as a concern to be urgently addressed from the perspective of holistic development, peace and equality, declaring the United Nations Decade for Women – 1975 in Mexico – and creating the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted in 1979.



"In general the Sector consisted of very diverse, predominantly middle class, women. I say this because we were women of the revolutionary movement and the principle element was the class struggle, but then later, we were strengthened when the gender struggle (being a woman) began. We, women, began to see ourselves, to know ourselves, and we realized that the class struggle is not everything, it's patriarchy and racism."

(Group interview, Sector de Mujeres, Guatemala, June 2008)





"In the 1990s, many women's and feminist organizations began to see the need to network, to highlight some common concerns and to see how far we could go in developing a process to eradicate violence against women. Between 2000 and 2001, as a result of a CEFEMINA project, the need to create a Central American regional mechanism was identified -- one that would specifically address the issue of violence against women and also the entire situation of the assassination of women, the experience of each of the compañeras, the need for teamwork."

(Group interview, El Salvador chapter of the Red Regional Feminista contra la Violencia, El Salvador, June 2008)

During the Decade of Women, institutions and mechanisms were created for the advancement of women (UNIFEM: United Nations Fund for Women, INSTRAW: the International Institute for Research and Training for the Advancement of Women, and CEDAW, the Committee monitoring the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women). As well, several international conferences⁴ were held. In addition to this international context, women's and feminist movements organized a series of Latin American and Caribbean feminist encounters during the 1980s and 1990s (Bogota 1981, Lima 1983, Bertioga 1985, Taxco 1987, San Bernardo 1990, El Salvador 1993, Chile 1996, Dominican Republic 1999).

Also during the Decade of Women, international cooperation dedicated significant resources to the advancement of women's and feminist political and collaborative agendas in the world, and in particular, to women organized in less developed countries.

In this context, women and women's and feminist organizations created their own space (from the local to the national and international) from a place of autonomy (as political subjects claiming their rights), with their own resources (knowledge, experience, leadership, militancy and commitment) and generated their own alliances with other women's and feminist organizations, with mixed-gender organizations (such as human rights organizations), with international cooperation in the region, and with international institutions dedicated to the advancement of women.

It is in this way that the networks, alliances and coalitions who participated in this study developed from the needs of women and existing women's organizations and joined with others at the local, national and regional level, in order to challenge with a united front, the violation of women's rights, characterized through the following social, cultural, political and economic problems:

- Violence against women (sexual violence, physical violence, psychological violence, patrimonial violence and institutional violence, among others);
- The violation of women's labour and economic rights (garment industry worker exploitation in Central America, the failure of garment industry businesses and tax-free zones to uphold labour rights, unjust dismissals and mass layoffs, and the absence of State intervention to control the violation of labour rights by businesses, among others);
- The exclusion of women in State policies on ownership and co-ownership of land, and access to land that was expropriated during the armed conflict and by private hands;
- The exclusion and discrimination of rural women, peasants, farmers and cooperative workers in the formulation and benefits of policies related to local and national production;

4. International conferences were held in Nairobi 1985; Copenhagen 1980; Cairo 1994; Beijing 1995.



- The lack of access to services and education on sexual and reproductive health from a holistic vision -- without prejudices, with a gender focus, accesible to the entire population, etc. -- and guaranteed by a secular State; and
- The lack of women's representation (with a clear vision of transforming power relations between men and women) in publicly elected positions and in public and state institutions.

Through exchange and political debate, the women's organizations that shaped these initiatives developed strategic agendas, distinct organizational structures, and advocacy initiatives. Over time, they became important stakeholders and negotiators along with other actors such as the State, international cooperation, the media, mixed-gender social movements and with the women's and feminist movement in the region.

A platform for transformative actions

The women and women's organizations that initiated these networks and alliance:

- actively participated in strengthening the foundations of the social and popular movements, and the women's and feminist movements in their countries during the 1980s and 1990s;
- accumulated considerable organizational experience and a wealth of knowledge (political and technical) on the local and national situation of women, and laid years of groundwork with women from diverse areas as well as diverse conditions and identities;
- made visible the agendas of the women's and feminist movements in their countries and in the region, and strengthened alliances at these levels;
- actively participated in Central American and Latin American women's and feminist encounters, further strengthening their national agendas;
- fought to defend the rights of women, by generating research, awareness, mobilization, political advocacy and putting forward public and legal complaints, among others.



Committing to strategic alliances: a sensed need, a shared political agenda

Questions, such as: why an alliance? why ally? and how to ally?, are fundamental to a commitment to alliances. Rather than identifying definitions and categories of networks, alliances and coalitions, it is more valuable to identify the implications of working in collaboration with others, and at distinct levels, for women and women's organizations.



"The beginning (1994), is marked by a historical moment of negotiation of the internal armed conflict. In other words, we only saw that, we couldn't look to the future. However, during this period - and with the signing of the peace accords in 1996 - we had two years to raise awareness, in the public domain and on the negotiations' agenda, that the situation of war was different for women. There were confrontations, but at this point we were able to position women's problems – and the fact that it was not necessarily the war that generated these problems of women's oppression, but rather a more profound, historical and structural situation that has to do with inequality and subordination – in the negotiations."

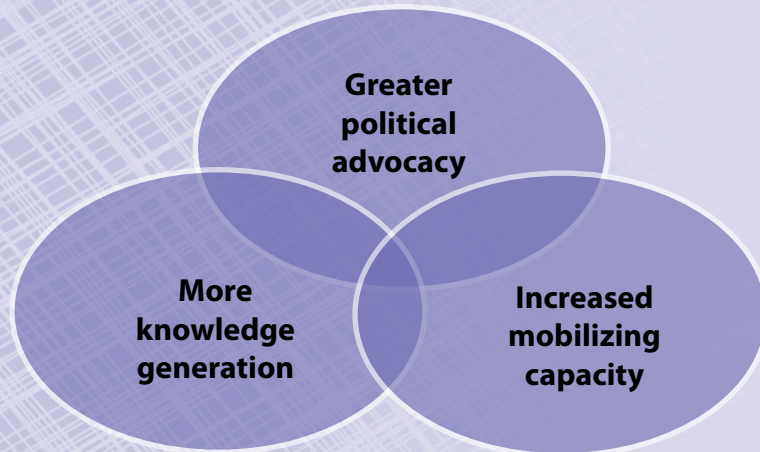
(Group Interview group, Sector de Mujeres, Guatemala, June 2008)

The networks, alliances and coalitions were created through the women's organizations' specific need to unite with others who were working on women's rights at the local, regional and national level. In some instances, these initiatives were formed as temporary or ad-hoc alliances; however, as shown in the "Shared History" section of this paper, they developed into strategic and permanent alliances⁵. That is, they became spaces for articulation and collaboration based on a political agenda, determined by objectives, and with agreed upon principles.

Women and women's organizations collaborate in networks, alliances or coalitions because:

- They achieve greater political advocacy, greater social force, greater impact and greater reach;
- It is imperative given the global paradigm of unequal power relations between men and women;
- Knowledge exchange with others has tangible and visible results in the fight for women's rights;
- Women's organizations that participate acquire greater visibility for their work and more knowledge; and
- The identities and diversity that comes together in these spaces is an opportunity to broaden women's demands.

Working in these collective spaces means greater social impact for transforming the disparate power relations between men and women. Some of these social impacts are:



At the same time, these social impacts facilitate the strengthening of the women and organizations from the women's and feminist movements, as they involve individual and collective empowerment processes.

In this context, empowerment is understood as the process of deconstructing internalized patriarchy and other systems of exclusion and discrimination, and constructing women as political subjects. That is, the consciousness of being woman,

5. The networks, alliances and coalitions in this study have all existed for more than 8 years.

of participating actively in decision-making and in the creation of political proposals and approaches in order to transform unequal and unjust relations of social, political, cultural and economic power that half of the population experiences, in both public and private spheres.

About principles

Women's networks, alliances and coalitions work on the basis of agreed upon principles. In these initiatives, four common principles that are closely linked to reflections by the women's and feminist movements in the region on the relations between women and their approaches to social transformation, were found. Their principles generally include the following:

Autonomy. This principle has two key meanings. The first is the autonomy of networks, alliances and coalitions compared to other sectors or actors, such as political parties, international cooperation and mixed-gender social movements. The other is the autonomy of women's thought and political action to create and strengthen their own social movement. The second meaning is considered a right. The first, however, is more vulnerable to trends, processes and political and social contexts. The right to autonomy raises two questions for these initiatives: How do we maintain it? and How do we highlight it?

Diversity. Given the multiple identities of women and women's organizations that come together in networks, alliances and coalitions, respect for diversity is often one of the established principles. However, some argue that respect alone is not sufficient for strengthening the women's and feminist movements, but rather that it is necessary to defend and promote the demands of diversity and the rights of all women.

Horizontality and Democracy. Another agreed upon principle concerns the political practices and perceptions of the women in these initiatives. Horizontality is ensured through the right of all members to propose, debate, dissent and decide, in open, decentralized forums for participation and strategic and political decision-making, generally referred to as "assemblies". Horizontality is also an integral part of relationships, and creates awareness of women's demands to transform vertical and unequal power relations that result in unacceptable vertical actions⁶. Democracy in these initiatives involves maintaining and strengthening participatory processes for debate and knowledge exchange for reaching a consensus as well as having respect for, and highlighting, dissensus, making informed and strategic decisions, maintaining and defending the initiative's autonomy, and including diversity in their proposals and political agendas.


Solidarity or Sisterhood. This is one of the principles that characterizes the beginning of the networks, alliances and coalitions. Solidarity, or sisterhood, is intrinsic in a commitment to give and receive support for furthering common struggles. Solidarity is contrary to systems that promote individualism and competition, although it should

6. For example: speaking out of turn, not considering the opinions of others and verbal aggression, among others.

"We emerged from the encounter "United in Diversity", where several thematic networks were created -- one was on violence against women where diverse women from various organizations that work with female victims of violence, came together. We identified with that struggle because we also had a history of abuse and violence."

(Group interview, Red de Mujeres Contra la Violencia, Nicaragua, July 2008)





not be understood as “unconditional support” or “friendship” among women. It is a principle built on processes that generate mutual confidence, achieve expectations, and share risks and benefits, among others.

Factors that matter

Associated with the above, the following have been identified by networks, alliances and coalitions as important or required factors for continued unity and strength:

- Transparency and accountability;
- Confidence (interpersonal, inter-organizational and political);
- Leadership that facilitates reflection, participation and decision-making;
- Free and liberal knowledge exchange (without competition, without selfishness);
- The ability to listen to others;
- Permanent spaces for meeting and debating;
- Clarity of the member organizations on the strategic importance of the initiative;
- Negotiation and dialogue in disagreements;
- Fluid communication;
- Conviction and commitment to the cause of the collective struggle;
- Active participation of the members;
- Flexibility and openness to new ideas;
- Creativity; and
- Awareness and recognition of other organizations in their capacities and contributions.

In order for a network, alliance or coalition to remain united, much more than just clear objectives is required.

Unity involves consolidating agreements on the basis of principles that foster relationships of solidarity and trust, enable innovation, strengthen collective and collaborative work, and create conditions for the development of democratic, inclusive and transparent leadership.

The above factors lead to the concept of “belonging”, which is considered the **key element** for the development and sustainability of these initiatives. This sense of belonging is more firmly entrenched when the networks, alliances and coalitions take into account and translate the needs, demands, ideas and proposals of their members and member organizations into actions. This sense of belonging is contrary to a sense of **benefiting from** or of **representing** an organization as part of an initiative, which generally result in the need to reflect on internal participation processes and admission mechanisms.

Along with the social impact, the agreed upon principles and the factors that keep these initiatives united, there are a number of additional elements conducive to their operation. These elements are considered essential in order for strategic alliances to achieve their mission or political agenda:

- Having a strategic agenda or a strategic plan;
- Having a clear organizational structure and a balanced distribution of responsibilities;
- Having a coordinating body;
- Seeing some struggles achieved;
- Linking the local with the national and the global;
- Having information and communication strategies (internal and external);
- Having sufficient financial resources to implement and sustain the agenda or the strategic plan;
- Strengthening the member organizations (technically, politically, and economically); and
- Permanent political analysis.



Beyond the challenges

These operational aspects imply various challenges for the networks, alliances and coalitions, such as:

1) Defining what to change (mission), which is generally not difficult to determine in these initiatives. The major challenge lies in how to make the change (approaches and strategies). In this sense, there are fundamental discussions such as: advocacy or resistance.

2) How to organize the alliance for operational matters (the implementation of actions, activities, and negotiations) without becoming a non-governmental organization (NGO) and without creating too much bureaucracy. One of the principle challenges for the organizational structure is the creation of forums for strategic decision making as well as the establishment of work environments with active and voluntary participation.

3) The coordination of these initiatives is almost always voluntary. Generally, there is a group or organization that the assembly designates with the responsibility of following up on strategic decisions and for everyday and formal tasks (management, finances, legal aspects, administrative affairs, relationships with other actors, etc.). Often, the challenge for the women is balancing their responsibilities in their own organizations with those of the network, alliance or coalition. This usually involves work overload and high levels of attrition.

4) Reflecting on lessons learned and transforming them into permanent strategies of the networks, alliances or coalitions. Successful struggles provide considerable motivation and illustrates that the internal and external conditions of the networks, alliances and coalitions were handled strategically. However, these initiatives often find their struggles cut short by the political context. In this sense, the expected results and impacts are constantly at risk and threatened by external factors⁷.

7. For example: a campaign on sexual and reproductive health may have little impact if the country has a high level of religious fundamentalism, or advocacy to introduce or reform laws favouring women can be blocked when there is no awareness or political will in the national governments.





5) How to take the local and the national to the regional level. This challenge is intimately linked to the diverse national contexts, the priorities of the women's and feminist movements, and the existence or absence of regional mechanisms for political advocacy and the defence of rights. Local and national articulation has been less difficult when the member organizations do grassroots work.

6) Internal and external communication strategies. These are extremely important for the networks, alliances and coalitions when: there is a broad geographic membership, there is a close relationship with the media (mass, alternative and/or community), there is a lack of resources for conducting regular face-to-face meetings, their strategies include a public complaint component and awareness campaigns, the level of use, access and ownership of information and communication technologies is unequal among the membership and, when they handle sensitive information that could be stolen and used by others.

7) Access to resources in order to successfully implement the initiative's agenda or strategic plan, which is a constant challenge just as it is for women's organizations in Central America. The withdrawal of international cooperation, their changing priorities, the lack of public budgets for women's organizations and the lack of resources available to the membership, among other factors, has led to slowed progress against an increasingly repressive, violent and exclusive system for women.

8) The technical, political and economic strengthening of the member organizations is essential in order to strengthen the coordination and mobilization structures.

9) Updated political analysis, which points to the need for the networks, alliances and coalitions to permanently engage in research, reflection and discussion on all social, political, economic and cultural aspects and trends that infringe on women's rights. Without this analysis, actions may be lacking strategy.

Taking into consideration all of the above, the women's networks, alliances and coalitions represent for their members:

Organized articulations of the autonomous women's and feminist movements in Central America, in which diverse women (organized or individual) mobilize around a mission and a strategic agenda in order to have a greater impact on transforming unequal power relations between men and women, through: knowledge exchange and construction, political advocacy, organizational strengthening, strengthening identity and autonomy, constructing the political subject, transforming the collective imagination and creating a new women's citizenship.

Connecting efforts: the internal organization of strategic alliances

The women's networks, alliances and coalitions are dynamic and flexible organized bodies, that are in constant change. Knowing how they work internally helps to better understand



Our Identities in Networks and Alliances: Our Strength on the Move

their organizational activities and decision-making processes. It also facilitates in understanding some significant differences between the networks, alliances and coalitions and other forms of organization, such as NGOs.

The research process yielded interesting information regarding how little the internal organization of the networks, alliances and coalitions, differ and found that the biggest dissimilarities are among national and regional initiatives.

The internal organization can be divided into four components: 1) Strategic-Political Decision-making, 2) Operational-Strategic Work, 3) Administration and Legal Aspects, and 4) Membership.

The following tables outline each component, from a national to a regional level, as well as aspects particular to these initiatives and some general observations:



Strategic-Political Decision-making

National networks, alliances and coalitions

- In all cases, there is an assembly where the members gather periodically in order to make strategic decisions (sometimes every 15 days).
- As well, in all groups there are coordinating structures made up of women designated by the assembly or rotated by organizations, where strategic decisions are carried out and interaction takes place with other actors that support the political or financial sustainability. These structures are called: Linkage Committee, Coordination Commission or simply Coordination.
- Participation in these coordinating structures is for a period established by the assemblies that can be one or two years, with the possibility of re-election for two consecutive periods.

Regional networks, alliances and coalitions

- In all cases there is an assembly made up of national networks, country chapters and national organizations, that meets annually.
- The two regional networks have a coordination that rotates between countries.

Specific cases

- In the case of one of the national alliances, there is a mini-assembly called "inter-organization"; however, they can not make any decisions without first consulting with the assembly.

Observations:

- Decision-making in the assemblies is more complicated in some cases than in others, due to various factors: the number of members and their diversity, the established decision-making structure, the democratic models implemented and the complexity of the decision being made.
- Often, women in these initiatives debate for a long time before making a decision, and aspire to consensus, but at the same time, they value the dissensus process, which is considered a right of all members

Operational-Strategic Work

National networks, alliances and coalitions

- All have created structures for working, called work roundtables or work commissions, and when areas or programs exist, they are termed area teams or program teams. Usually the areas or programs have staff and volunteers that accompany them. In other cases, the work commissions
- support the fulfillment of objectives of a specific area or program.

Regional networks, alliances and coalitions

- The strategies as well as the concrete actions are negotiated in each country and taken on by the national network or their member organizations.

Observations:

- The work structures are responsible for coordinating or implementing concrete actions based on the strategy of the network, alliance or coalition. These actions can be permanent or temporary as defined by the assembly, the coordination or the actual political situation in the country.
- Usually they have work plans, work agendas and, in many cases, projects negotiated with international cooperation.

Administration and Legal Aspects

National networks, alliances and coalitions

- Some national networks and alliances have an administrative area with employees: while in other cases the administrative responsibilities are taken on by a member organization.
- Only one of the initiatives is legally registered (legal status), however this registration is only for administrative purposes: the political structure is above the legal or formal structure. The rest of the networks, alliances and coalitions utilize the legal registration of one of the member organizations.

Regional networks, alliances and coalitions

- Administrative responsibility is taken on by a national network or a coordinating organization from their own location and depending on their fundraising activities.
- None are legally registered – they usually work with the legal registration of their focal point organization in each country or with the legal registration of one of the member organizations of the national networks that make up the regional network.

Observations:

- Creating an administrative structure is a constant preoccupation due to the organizational costs that require funding and, in general, creates bureaucratic processes that take resources and time from the group's political action.
- The general perception is that being legally registered implies formal institutionalization and has legal requirements commonly characteristic of NGOs.

Membership

National networks, alliances and coalitions

- Few networks and alliances include mixed-gender organizations – in general they are networks, alliances and coalitions of women's organizations.
- In other cases, the members participate as individuals, and each network, alliance and coalition has their own processes and debates regarding membership.
- They work from the local to the national level, and vice versa, as the membership works in various regions in the country through the participating organizations.

Regional networks, alliances and coalitions

- The two regional networks are made up of national women's organizations or networks, and not of individual women.
- Regional networks work from the local-national to the regional level.

Other factors that influence the internal organization of the networks, alliances and coalitions in Central America are:

- 1)** Most of the work carried out in networks, alliances and coalitions is voluntary;
- 2)** There are various levels of membership participation, related to the following factors: the level of ownership of the initiative, the resources and capacities, the internal changes in the member organizations and the distinct national priorities and contexts;
- 3)** These initiatives have few financial resources, which are, in general, generated through projects with international cooperation agencies; and
- 4)** Most have admission mechanisms but not exit mechanisms (see margin). In two specific cases (a national alliance and a regional network) the membership is historic in that the initiative is made up of the original founding organizations and for the moment, the need to expand membership has not been raised.

Life in alliances: continuous learning and growth

All networks, alliances and coalitions have experienced significant moments that led to profound changes in terms of the processes of collective identity construction and changes in strategy and structure. These significant moments are referred to as life-cycles.

These cycles, with the exception of the one entitled "Genesis, beginning, birth", repeat and overlap during the various stages of organized life. The life-cycles have a logical - as opposed to a chronological - order (according to their history, context and struggle).

Genesis, beginning, birth. All of the networks, alliances and coalitions came about out of a need to unite women's organizations and individual women in a common struggle. They were all self-convened by women's organizations and women who had been working on – and living – the violation of human rights, and in particular, women's rights. Even when they were created as temporary or short-term alliances, they gradually transformed into strategic alliances.

Ownership and positioning. This life-cycle is repeated frequently in the various stages of the existence of the networks, alliances or coalitions. Its significance is related to the initiatives "self", and is based on its diversity and how it operates without limiting its own goals, political agenda, and strategies, all of which are based on its member's needs and struggles.

Admission Mechanisms

In some cases, the participation of individuals and organizations in the networks, alliances and coalitions is controlled through admission processes (more structured in some cases than in others). These admission processes establish letters petitioning for admission, selection and acceptance processes, and commitment letters, among other things. These admission processes rarely include monitoring mechanisms (organizational visits, self-evaluations regarding participation, data-base updates, membership renewal), which in some cases, results in a "phantom" participation that doesn't allow the network or alliance to know who they can really count on for moving their political and strategic agenda forward.

Exit Mechanisms

Often the networks, alliances and coalitions do not have good feedback mechanisms for the person or organization that is exiting. This leaves important questions unanswered: Why are they leaving? Has their decision to leave been affected by an internal situation in the network or alliance? What was their experience of this initiative? Is a temporary alliance in the future possible? What does the network, alliance or coalition need to improve? The biggest dilemma, however, is when the reasons or mechanisms for when and how some members are asked to leave has not been addressed.

Some debates and factors that characterize life cycles

- Unequal power relations between men and women in a patriarchal system.
- The importance of building and strengthening the women's and feminist movements (their identity and political autonomy) in the various countries and at the regional level.
- Significant support from international cooperation in the development of proposals, agendas, and women's and feminist organizations.
- The issue of being a woman, and a woman in diversity and difference.
- The definition of the space (a political alliance? an alliance of organizations and women? a feminist alliance? an alliance with mixed-gender organizations?).
- The initiative's autonomy from political parties, government, international cooperation, and mixed-gender social movements, among others.
- The definition of political agendas.
- Visible articulation of the initiative at the local, national and regional level without making the women's organizations that participate, invisible.
- The withdrawal and trends of international cooperation in Central America.
- More time dedicated to fundraising and less time to political advocacy: the political leaders become technical leaders and fund administrators.

Financial sustainability. There are several debates on how an abundance - or a lack of - resources during the life of a group changes and affects the internal dynamic. It often means that political positions are established based on what resources are desired, from whom, and under what conditions women's struggles receive resources. In this context, "resources" refer to financial and material resources, as it is understood that networks, alliances and coalitions have an abundance of resources related to knowledge, expertise and experience.

Achievements. Achievements are significant moments for the networks, alliances and coalitions as they revitalize the initiative and increase its significance relative to other sectors of society. The achievements are celebrated moments, where the results and benefits of engaging with others are highlighted. Moreover, it is the achievements that improve the conditions of women and motivate them to continue fighting.

Organizational forms. This life-cycle poses the question: how are we - as networks, alliances and coalitions - going to organize in order to operate and to realize our political agenda? However, this question then raises another fundamental one: how do we, women, practice the political?

The analysis of these initiatives has shown that strategic decision-making and the political criteria for the knowledge and expertise required to carry-out the initiative's political action is fundamentally important. The technical - or knowledge and expertise of the initiative - as well as the political, are constantly reflected upon in these initiatives. However, there are also instances of internal debate when organizational forms - characteristic of NGOs - are being implemented, such as: administrative areas, program areas, legal registration, project implementation and project and area evaluation, among others.

Adverse or critical situations. As in any organized initiative, there are instances of adverse or critical situations that naturally affect people and organizations, and generally inhibit advancement of the organizational objectives or strategies. The following adverse or critical situations are organized in three sets: those directly related to the perpetuation of the patriarchal system, those related to social and economic factors that aggravate the situation of women, and those related to internal aspects in the organizations and coalitions.

1) Perpetuation of the patriarchal system established and promoted by powerful institutions, people and sectors in countries. Some of these adverse or critical situations are: a) Religious fundamentalism and governments that fail to respect a secular State, b) The elimination of rights acquired by and for women, such as the prohibition and criminalization of therapeutic abortion, c) High rates of femicide/feminicide in the region and in Latin America, d) Openly misogynous governments, and e) Mass media that addresses violence against women from a simplistic discourse that re-victimizes and blames women.

2) Social, economic and political factors that directly impact the work and struggle of women. Some of these critical situations are: a) Re-militarization in Central America,

b) Neo-liberal economic policies (market liberalization) that intensify poverty and limit opportunities for access to basic public services, c) Organized crime and gangs that have affected citizen's security and the rights of free transit and mobilization, d) The criminalization of organized citizen's protest and the political persecution of female and male leaders of social movements by authoritarian governments, e) The weakening of State institutions and control by the executive branches over all other government branches, f) Widespread corruption in the power circles and at the State level that prevents establishing mechanisms and resources necessary to eliminate it, leading to more corruption and violence with impunity, g) Pre-electoral and electoral processes where women's agendas are continually delayed and their negotiation is used for political party ends – a clear use and abuse of women's rights as political propaganda, and h) The feminization of migration in the Central American region, where women are violated during their journeys.

3) Internal situations in the organizations and coalitions. Some adverse or critical situations have been: a) Divisions between the women's and feminist movements, as well as divisions within the women's movements and within the feminist movements, b) Double militancy (participation in women's and feminist movements and in political parties) of the coalition members, c) Diverse approaches to issues such as violence against women, d) A certain "gap" exists between the political leadership of the women's movements and the places where they work (within international cooperation, international institutions and public positions, for example), and e) The definition of strategies to confront the State: advocate or resist?

Knowing the life-cycles of these coalitions and coordinated initiatives permits a deeper understanding of their organized identities and enables the recognition of their distinct individualities. As well, this facilitates how multiple social actors relate to them, incorporate them and strengthen them. In this sense, it is important to note:

a) Any organizational process requires periodic questions such as: Who are we? What do we want? How are we going to achieve it? What principles unite us? It is common that the answers lead to changes within the internal dynamics (such as the operating structure), continuing with practices that worked before or creating new ones. Therefore, the construction of the organizational spaces of networks, alliances and coalitions does not come from a structuralist vision; that is, the organizational structure responds to internal needs and not the reverse.

b) Developing strategic plans, defining programs, managing projects, having an office and an administrative area, all resemble NGO actions, and networks, alliances and coalitions become concerned that they are transforming into NGOs. Why? Precisely because networks, alliances and coalitions are primarily composed of organizations and many of the tools, methodologies and organizational structures applied in these coordinated and articulated initiatives originate from NGOs. Nevertheless, networks, alliances and coalitions are careful to conserve certain aspects that make them very distinct from NGOs. Some examples are: avoiding bureaucracy in every way, establishing more pluralist and democratic strategic decision-making mechanisms, undertaking the majority of work on a voluntary basis and, although most tend

Some debates and factors that characterize life cycles

- *Competition for funds among the initiative's member organizations and inequality of resources between them.*
- *Definition of broad structures for strategic decision making.*
- *Search for structures based on agreed principles: democracy, participation, diversity, autonomy, etc.*
- *How is the work organized: by area? by program? by commission?*
- *Definition of monitoring of certain processes and of work evaluation.*
- *How to link the local with the national, the national with the regional, and vice versa.*





Strategic alliances are not a merger of organizations, but rather an opportunity for articulation and coordination between organizations.

towards more rather than less organizational structure, they maintain flexibility and openness to change.

c) The achievements of the networks, alliances and coalitions are long-term results. This is for several reasons: 1. Political conditions in the country or region determine the opportunities or threats of the context for women's political action; 2. In order to achieve social power and recognition by the State and its institutions, networks, alliances and coalitions must work from the local to the national and international levels, thus strengthening the member organizations is key; and 3. Ownership of technical and political capacities to confront local and national governments so that they fulfill commitments made to women, requires many opportunities for exchange and learning between members, or with other social actors who can contribute knowledge.

d) Resources have influenced many of the significant moments of these initiatives, either due to a lack of resources, or due to the possibility of obtaining them. It is important to note that the significant moments related to resources are closely linked to discussions on autonomy. In other words, they are related to strong decisions that in many cases have involved terminating the relationship with a donor and returning funding, not accepting significant amounts that could have resolved the initiative's entire financial situation, or rejecting proposals from international cooperation that, although important, did not come from the needs of the women and their member organizations.

e) For the networks, alliances and coalitions, the adverse situations have resulted in huge disappointments, frustrations and set-backs. These situations are experienced collectively and often the network, alliance or coalition needs time in order to find strength and keep fighting.

Strategic alliances: organized but not institutionalized

The networks, alliances and coalitions are not NGOs, however, some of the most common NGO practices⁸ are applied within them. This, in itself, does not adversely affect the initiatives' identity as their identity comes from the organizational experiences of the women who participate and implement the initiative. What is important is to avoid institutionalizing the initiative; that is, to ensure that the following aspects are upheld:

- The autonomy of the initiative and the member organizations;
- The flexibility to change internal organizational forms in order to respond strategically to the political agenda;
- The practices of widespread and participatory consultation;
- Democratic and horizontal decision-making spaces; and
- The commitment to fight for and by women.

8. For example: strategic plans, defining areas or programs, having an administrative area, internal policies, work evaluations, monitoring and evaluation systems and elaborating reports and project fundraising, among others.

In essence, networks, alliances and coalitions require far greater resources and much more time in order to maintain an inclusive, participatory, horizontal and democratic decision-making structure, and to carry-out their joint work and maintain their spaces for reflection and for defining strategies.

Due to the complexity of working in such initiatives, the members and the coordination are required to develop and strengthen organizational capacities and collective commitment to:

- a)** Achieve consensus on their focuses;
- b)** Negotiate with key actors - such as international cooperation - the distinction between their internal processes and those of NGOs;
- c)** Modify organizational practices to respond in an inclusive way to the diversity of participating women and organizations;
- d)** Ensure the visibility of the member organizations without minimizing that of the alliance as well as ensure the visibility of the alliance without minimizing that of the organizations;
- e)** Articulate the local with the national and regional, and vice versa;
- f)** Ensure that all of the members are informed and in close communication;
- g)** Know all of the member organizations (their work, their base, their inner-functioning and their strengthening needs, among others);
- h)** Analyze the context on an on-going basis;
- i)** Monitor the implementation in practice of the agreed principles;
- j)** Ensure that the tools and methodologies for organizational strengthening correspond to the dynamics and needs of the strategic alliance;
- k)** Generate benefits for member organizations, and assume the risks and threats collectively; and
- l)** Ensure that there are the necessary conditions for carrying-out the initiatives' agenda or political project while minimizing: bureaucracy, heavy workload, high expectations with few resources and rigid structures, among many others.

International cooperation: a historical relationship and an unresolved debate

Financing as well as the relationship with international cooperation is a clear quandary in the lives of women who participate and work in organizations and joint initiatives. Essentially, it is related to the economic sustainability of the political and strategic actions of the women's and feminist movements in the region. Although these initiatives have existed with or without funding, the relationship with international cooperation is a historical one that merits addressing.



Questions that international cooperation should ask themselves when supporting mixed-gender organizations...

Do the women that participate in mixed-gender initiatives have decision making power?

Are there internal processes in the mixed-gender organizations for the construction of women as political subjects?

Are women's agendas prioritized in the agendas of mixed-gender organizations?

Do the mixed-gender initiatives support the political proposals and agendas of the women's and feminist movements? In what way?

How much of the budget spent on social movements is dedicated to women's and feminist movements?

Is the funding equitable for women's organizations and mixed-gender organizations?

Which financial and administrative policies in practice promote an equitable distribution of resources and which do not?

There has been evidence of the withdrawal of international cooperation in Central America, and the rest of Latin America, for several years now, and since 1995, international cooperation for women's political agendas has decreased. There are several reasons for this: the Paris Declaration⁹, the end of the United Nation's Decade for Women and the prioritization of the Millennium Development Goals.

At the same time, the tendency towards gender mainstreaming in mixed-gender organizations has fallen short of addressing women's demands to transform unequal power relations between men and women. On the other hand, there have been significant reductions of resources for initiatives and processes that attempt to change this global issue.

Financing procedures have also undergone changes -- changes which have not led to a benefit for women in general nor for organized women who struggle to defend their rights in the region. Partnerships, tripartite projects (State - Civil Society - Cooperation) and the increase in external consultants in organizations, are some of those procedures. The networks, alliances and coalitions agree that these forms of financing have generated negative effects such as: a) not highlighting the work that organizations or networks have undertaken if they are not invited to participate in these initiatives, b) the co-option of technical and political knowledge of the women's organization's leadership¹⁰ and c) the amount of work is greater than the assigned budget, and the administrative costs of the organizations end up underfunded.

On the other hand, women's organizations are strong and adept fundraisers and they generally have a greater chance of receiving funding. The inequality of resources between women's organizations is more obvious within strategic alliances, which is seen in their levels of participation:

"The network's member organizations should be strengthened so that all have the capacity to make commitments at the same level. For example, if one organization has a weakness in terms of financial administration, such as project development, project monitoring, etc. ... then they are more concerned with their sustainability than their active participation within the network -- and this affects the network."
(Plenary intervention, Managua Encounter, August 2008).

9. The Paris Declaration is an international agreement signed in March 2005 where more than 100 Ministers and Directors of international cooperation agencies committed to their countries and to organizations to take steps to harmonize, align and administer development aid through measurable actions and indicators. <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/11/41/34428351.pdf>

10. Like, for example, when products contain author or intellectual property rights.



**Questions that
international cooperation
should ask themselves
when supporting
women's and feminist
organizations...**

One trend affecting women's organizations and strategic alliances is that scarce funds are divided among many, which generates the same workload with fewer resources for covering the administrative costs of managing and sustaining internal functioning. As well, the decline in available resources has generated competition between organizations. This causes, or more accurately reproduces, an exclusive system of "everyone for themselves". It is important to recognize that while there has been strong criticism for the institutionalization of women's and feminist movements in the region, there has also been actions to empower women -- political advocacy requires funds, and it is unrealistic to believe that volunteerism alone can achieve the major transformations necessary for the full exercise of women's rights.

For the networks, alliances and coalitions, it is important to revisit this topic in broader forums of the women's and feminist movements as a political discussion, based on research, and to raise other actions that the strategic alliances can be working on, such as:

- Opening up internal forums with the international cooperation that supports them to analyse the situation;
- Raising the issue of international cooperation on the agenda of the women's and feminist movements as a political discussion, based on research;
- Defending their autonomy and discussing with international cooperation what is negotiable and what is non-negotiable with regards to financial issues;
- Opening up forums for political dialogue with international cooperation partners to seek realistic mechanisms and alternatives with a greater social impact, with the goal of defending women's rights in Central America;
- Being clear about internal processes of evaluation, monitoring and financial administration, and organizational policies, in order to dialogue with international cooperation from the point of view of strengthening, not of charity;
- Resuming political communication with the women in the international cooperation organizations that support them;
- Negotiating agreements based on political trust between women's organizations and the strategic alliance, in order to avoid competition for resources as well as the leaking of sensitive information on the relationship with donors, among others;
- Looking for collective and creative alternatives for ensuring economic sustainability that do not undermine political action or transform the political work of the organizational spaces; and
- Following-up on international cooperation actions, above all asking for accountability regarding their funding policies and their development focus, in order to be assured that the relationship with international cooperation is strategic and not purely economic.

Do our cooperation agendas contribute to women being able to exercise their rights?

Are enough resources devoted to women's organizations so that they are able to carry-out their actions and absorb the administrative costs associated with those actions?

Do our cooperation agendas recognize women's movements as entities with rights and with their own agendas?

Are our financing policies flexible and in solidarity with the rights, needs and strategies of the organizations and the people they work with, as well as in the contexts they live?

Are women's rights still violated in the countries where we work?

How much have we actually spent on women's rights?

Have the States been able to defend the rights of women?

Do we provide sufficient resources to the organizations so that they can meet the labour obligations that arise from the project's contractual relationships?



"I think that the women's networks and organizations do not have a structured strategy in the face of international cooperation. I think that it has been more of a non-political relationship, in the context of resources. But I think this has had to do with the fact that we have not been able to deepen our reflections about international cooperation issues, especially bilateral and multilateral." (Plenary intervention, Managua Encounter, August 2008)



In conclusion: the message we are left with

- The networks, alliances and coalitions are organized expressions that have a proven track record and important recognition in their countries and region. They are made up of women – organized or not – fighters, intelligent, belligerent, proactive and with a great commitment for social transformation.
- These initiatives are political, from the empowerment of women to advocacy of the State and its institutions, and at a local, national and international level.
- Not all members or initiatives have the same level of technical and economic development, For some, this is an on-going challenge, and is related to their own conditions as women expropriating their rights: education, decent jobs and their own resources, among others.
- Both the networks, alliances and coalitions, as well as the member organizations, need resources that support the following actions: sustained participation; community-based, regional-departmental, national and international work; political advocacy; dissemination and visualization of their struggles; strengthening the flow of knowledge and thought; denouncing rights' violations against women; the sustainability of their social force and an active and prepared social fabric.
- Due to the characteristics and identities of these initiatives, it is important that the various actors who support them (international cooperation, consultants, organizational development organizations) identify and adapt processes, methodologies and approaches, as they can not be applied equally to networks and alliances as to NGOs.
- The sense of belonging and ownership in a network, alliance and coalition is a process. Therefore, it is important to not jump to conclusions when members' active participation is imbalanced. Some have taken ownership of the initiative, others have not, some are the initiative's founders and others have joined more recently, some have no decision-making power in their respective organizations and others do. When participation is imbalanced, the perception tends to be that something is not working in the network and that there is too much centralized leadership. However, although this could be one of the causes, the reality presented in this document is more common than we think.
- Generally, the organizations that form part of these initiatives do not periodically evaluate their participation in alliances. This is why many organizations begin

participating “fully” but then gradually recede. There could be several reasons particular to a network, alliance or coalition, however, the decline in participation is also a result of a lack of feedback and support for the person who participates and represents the organization in the initiative, from their own organization.

- Although the coordinating bodies take-on the majority of the political responsibility, other skills are often necessary in order to coordinate and articulate these organized expressions. Some of the actions important to them are: accompanying the members, listening to the needs of member organizations, observing where there are organizational bottlenecks and being realistic with respect to expectations and resources, among others. However, even internally in the coordinating bodies (which are almost always voluntary) the notion of their responsibilities is not clear and they suffer from work overload and burnout.
- The networks, alliances and coalitions (and their member organizations) are political actors with considerable weight at the advocacy, mobilization and public opinion levels. These initiatives are considered allies for many, and threats for others. The networks, alliances and coalitions should be aware of when they are perceived as threats and be conscious of the associated risks, looking collectively for ways to protect and support themselves. This is an important point: many times individuals are aware of the benefits of working in network or alliance, but they are rarely aware of the risks. Therefore, they do not know how to take on the risks collectively or whether or not all of the members are willing to take them on.
- Moments of reflection, transition and internal recovery of the networks, alliances and coalitions are seen by others as great absences and speculation is common. It is important to understand that in any organizational process, external actions are as important as internal ones. More importantly, it is necessary to maintain the balance and energy of the collective. In this sense, they can not be expected to be omnipresent in all political processes and situations. Action requires reflection

The networks, alliances and coalitions are organized expressions of the women's and feminist movements. Knowing their needs, their identities and their track record opens doors for contributing, from their realities, to their development and sustainability.

One of the greatest lessons learned from this research process is that everything flows and converges. Therefore, in order to strengthen the networks, alliances and coalitions, it is necessary to strengthen the women and the organizations that participate. In order to strengthen the women's and feminist movements, it is necessary to strengthen the women's organizations and their strategic alliances.

Consequently, strengthening women's and feminist movements is committing to the transformation of unequal power relations between men and women, which is the structural cause of the violation of women's rights in the world.