



BRIEFING PAPER

October 2008

Economic Literacy – a tool for women's empowerment in Nicaragua

The Central American Women's Network (CAWN) has had a long collaboration with the Movimiento de Mujeres Maria Elena Cuadra (MEC) and from 2005 to 2008 we worked together in a project¹ that involved capacity-building in micro and macro **economic literacy** for women. Through an empowering understanding of economic and trade issues women in Nicaragua have been enabled to promote and defend their interests, push for gendered laws, influence corporate, national and local government policy and practice, and advocate to curb the negative effects of free trade agreements on women living in poverty in Central America. The project was ground breaking in questioning stereotypes prevalent in Nicaragua that the economy and trade are 'men's issues' and that women contribute little to the economy.

MEC work simultaneously at different levels: the personal (change in beliefs and attitudes), by organising in the community and in the workplace and to influence local and national government. MEC's organisational strategies bring together feminism, self-esteem and economic literacy with a gender perspective that provide a powerful basis for bringing about change. Their training in these topics has been very effective on a large scale. During the three years of this project more than 3000 women have received training: ABC Económico in the first year, basic training on Budgets in the second and an advanced course on local and national Budgets in the third year. Training on gender and trade has also taken place in large national events: the theme of the annual Debate (the 'Coloquio') in March 2008 was the Central America European Union Association Agreement, bringing together about 1,200 women to learn, discuss and analyse the proposed new free trade initiative for the region.²

The Maria Elena Cuadra Women's Movement (MEC)

Founded in 1994, MEC is the largest women's organisation in Nicaragua, with 70,000 women members, who are textile factory workers in Economic Processing Zones (EPZ), domestic workers, self-employed, small farmers and unemployed women from urban and rural areas in 7 of Nicaragua's 16 departments. MEC has a national assembly, a Council of elected national leaders, 3,000 voluntary promoters (local leaders), as well as 57 members of staff in their central and departmental offices. As an organisation representing the interests of women workers MEC promotes governance: dialogue and negotiation over and above confrontation, with particular emphasis on national and local government, textile companies and international corporations, to seek improvements in the quality of life of their membership and fellow workers. MEC negotiates from a position of strength, as they represent so many women.

MEC's annual consultations bring together 1200-1500 women workers to debate themes such as: a national employment policy with a gender focus, equality of rights and opportunities for women, health rights and labour security. They were able to influence government policies and their proposals were subsequently passed as laws. Other issues discussed and consulted in annual debates during this project were women's labour rights, sexual and reproductive rights and therapeutic abortion.



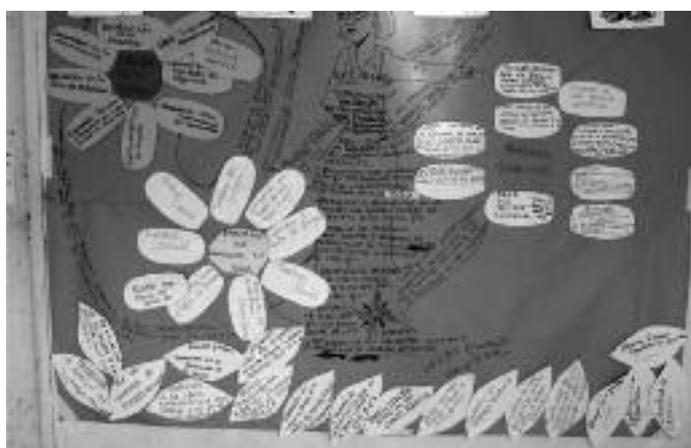
MEC's public demonstrations

The Methodology of ABC Económico

Economic Literacy is a tool to promote wider public participation in the debate and development of economic policy. It has developed in response to demands by women's organisations for information and training on gender, globalisation and trade and the relevance of and impact on women's lives of macro economic issue, to question official agreements but also to develop women's alternative economic proposals.

MEC uses popular education methodology in their workshops to make the connections between micro and macroeconomics and the impact of globalisation at a local level accessible to women without much formal education. Economic literacy is a process as well as specific exercises. Popular education is based on the ideas of Paulo Freire³ and his approach to adult literacy. This starts from the premise that everyone has the capacity to become critical thinkers and resolve their own problems as "active subjects" and not "passive objects" of development. During the workshops the facilitators do not offer solutions but ask questions and pose problems relevant to the daily lives and experiences of the participants. They then work in small groups to find solutions. The process develops the critical awareness of participants to analyse their own reality and to challenge the status quo.

In the training MEC use *The Wall* methodology that was developed in Canada (see Further Information section). It is a tool for gender analysis of the global economy starting from women's own lived experience. The image of the wall represents the economy. The women start by identifying their contribution and what they value most about being women in relation to the home, the community, workplace and organisation. Participants share their ideas and write them on paper stones, which they then stick onto a large paper wall.



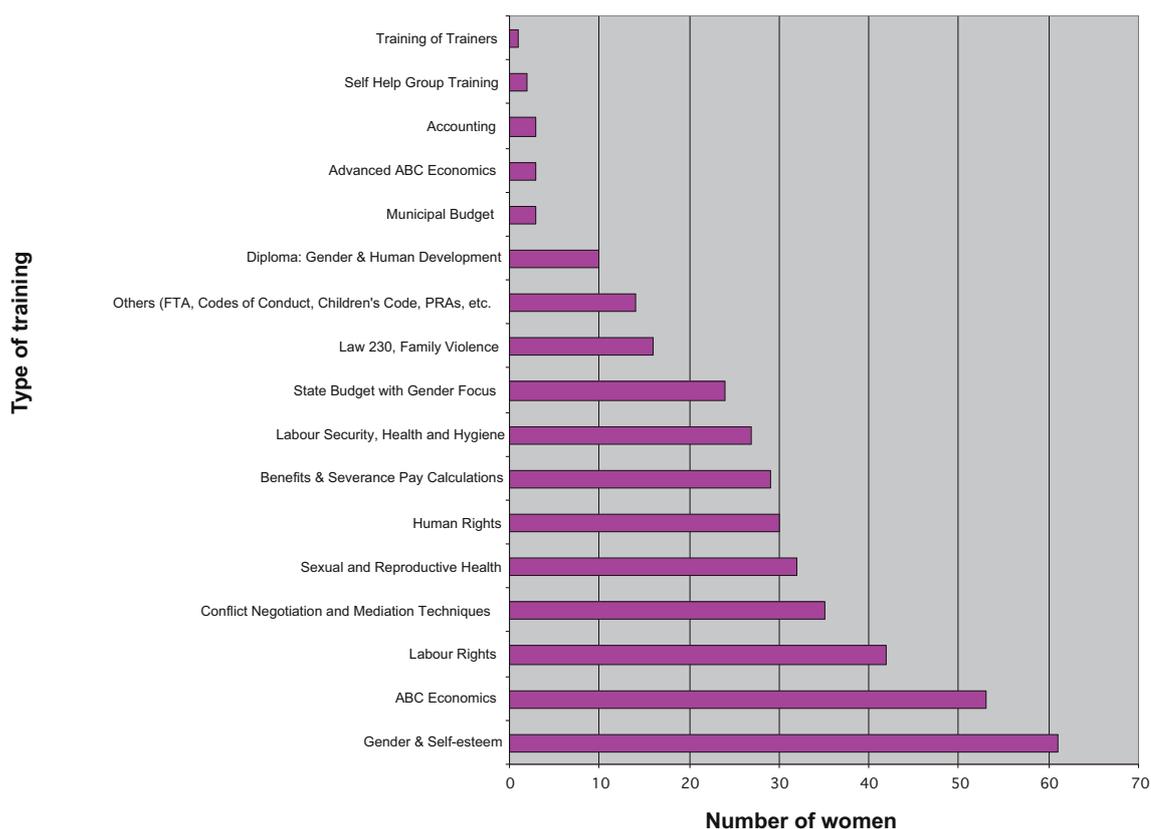
The Wall

Themes discussed in Economic Literacy include:

- the gender division of labour
- sex discrimination and labour segregation
- the impact of globalisation
- international trade and the impact of trade liberalisation.

Through the workshops participants develop an understanding of the connections between women's daily experiences and global economic trends and they analyse how women and men are affected differently by economic changes. They identify cause and effect of various economic issues such as: increased cost of living; cuts in public services; difficulties in earning a living. For example, one impact of the economic downturn in Nicaragua is increased migration, which can lead to family disintegration, mental illness and other problems. There are also positive aspects to migration, which can widen women's options and empower them within the family and in their relationships with partners when they bring needed resources into the household.

TRAINING RECEIVED BY WOMEN



At the end of the two-day workshop the participants identify groups of women that are discriminated against, such as pregnant women, and then discuss how to confront discrimination. These skills also help the women's movement to analyse the economy in order to identify actions for change, to develop a strategy, a campaign or collective action.

The Gender and Economy booklet provides useful educational material for women with secondary school education. With 40 pages of script, interspersed with cartoon drawings, the document is a useful reference for women who have taken the workshops.

This methodology has been a useful tool in getting across complex concepts and a way of approaching subjects often believed to be beyond the reach of women living in poverty. By making visible women's contribution to the economy, both in terms of non-paid reproductive care and housework, and the fact that women pay indirect and hidden taxes on a daily basis, the method is empowering to women, strengthening their sense of self-worth and contribution to household, local and national economies. This was confirmed in different focus groups where the women we spoke to made constant reference to their contribution to the economy and their increased capacity to manage their household budgets.

MEC has a low drop-out rate of women from their training activities. This is achieved by an interesting training model which brings together a set of self-contained workshops that, together, comprise an integrated whole. Further incentives are provided to attend all the workshops, as in order to become a MEC promoter, women need to have attended 8 different training workshops. The women who completed the basic two-day *ABC Económico* workshop then went on to take the more complex workshops on local and national budgets with a gender focus. These were taught in a more

traditional manner and some of the feedback from the participants suggested that the methodology could be revised to make learning about budgets more fun.

Changing Women's Lives

One of the greatest strengths of the project is the empowerment and capacity created in thousands of women living in poverty. This has been the result of working on women's self-esteem, providing relevant and stimulating training, in many cases discovering –in others, consolidating - the women's capacity to organise and mobilise and to feel that one is an agent of change, overcoming common attitudes of apathy and incapacity which are the effects of grinding poverty and low self-esteem resulting from gender discrimination in the home and in the workplace.

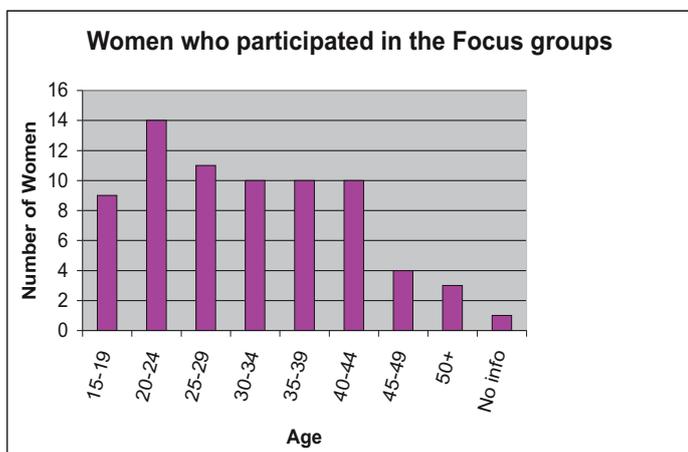
"We promote a sense of identity in women, a sense of belonging and empowerment"

Josefina Ulloa, MEC Director, Leon

Through the courses on Gender & Self Esteem and Economic Literacy gender equality is actively promoted both in the home and the workplace. The women we spoke to in the focus groups made continual reference to changes at home with husbands and sons now doing housework, men looking after children, and women being freer to participate in MEC activities. They attributed this to the training through which they became aware of the sexual division of labour and women's rights.



72 women participated in focus groups in Managua, Masaya and Nindirí. May 2008.



Women's voices

What did you learn in the Economic Literacy Training?

Women who have little money coming in need to know how to stretch it further and those who had been on the course discussed how it had helped them to manage their housekeeping money better:

"I've learned how to budget my basics. I work as a domestic worker and earn very little. I have 4 children and the oldest wants to study to be a beautician but costs are sky high! The youngest are still at school and although we don't have to pay fees they always ask me to buy them things, like pencils and notebooks."

Maria, MEC community promoter

- **Savings:**

We learnt how to save and to put aside money to cover housekeeping costs and how not to get into debt... before I used to borrow money every month to pay my bills.

- **The impact of inflation:**

How much things really cost. Inflation means that every week we see an increase in the cost of the basic food basket.

That we have to shop around to find cheaper prices

- **How to budget:**

Now I know how to calculate the cost of food, transport and I understand that I can only buy clothes from time to time and usually have to buy second- hand clothes.

- **To avoid getting into debt:**

It has really helped me to manage my income better. Without this information we get into lots of financial trouble.

- **The Economic value of women's Work**

We became aware that housework is not valued as work.

That we are economic agents: we pay taxes and contribute to the economy of the country.

Understanding Empowerment

The women's views, captured during the focus group discussions in the final evaluation of the project, show they fully understand the concept of women's empowerment and are putting it into practice in their daily lives. They identified different categories of power: finding their own inner strength, promoting power among other women and taking collective actions to claim and defend their rights. Many of the women said that the training had increased their self- esteem, gave them strength and helped them to be positive and to value what they have. This confidence helped them to resolve conflicts, to take decisions and to find solutions at an individual level such as, *"convincing your husband to let you go to a meeting and winning his support"*

Several talked about how being aware and having knowledge to share with other women was empowering. Knowing they had rights had spurred them into taking actions in their communities and workplaces. Others said they felt empowered by being in an organisation such as MEC that builds confidence and encourages them to go out and organise others and to participate in the community *"to exercise their rights to a voice and a vote"*

Women's Definition of Poverty

The women understood that poverty made them vulnerable and identified different types of poverty – not just relating to money but also emotional poverty, a lack of knowledge and education. They considered that governments who mismanage the country's resources cause poverty. But it is also the result of lack technical training and secondary school qualifications, which means that women have fewer work options and are forced to take badly paid jobs. Poverty for these women meant not earning enough to make ends meet and having to prioritise what they could buy. Poverty also meant not knowing how to defend and enjoy their rights.



Focus groups, May 2008

Putting Empowerment into Action:

Economic Literacy leads to changes at a personal, work and community level. The following findings from the final evaluation highlighted these changes.

What is the most important *personal* change for you?

Many women said that they had been stimulated and encouraged by the workshops and frequently said that their self-esteem had been improved:

"I didn't know anything and was very shy. I learned to value myself and to feel equal to everyone else."

"I learned to stand up for myself and look after my interests".

Others said that they were taking actions based on what they had learned to improve their family life and relationships:

"I left my husband because of his abuse and learnt that I have rights and that I can be an independent woman without a man".

"My communication with my children has improved a lot."

Thus, at an individual level, the work of MEC and of this project in particular, is highly sustainable: once women have gained self-esteem, understand that they have rights, have had access to knowledge and information, and realise that they can set goals and make decisions, this brings about lasting changes to their lives, as it changes attitudes, behaviour, and the feeling of having some control over their lives.

In particular, the Gender & Self-Esteem workshops, the psychological support offered by MEC and the setting up of local self-help groups have had a significant impact on the lives of members of MEC and their families. Different women in the focus groups (depending on their own lived experience) made specific reference to:

Greater self-esteem: *"before I was unable to defend my rights, my self-esteem was at rock bottom, my husband was always undermining me, now nobody plays around with me".*

Realising one has rights and fighting for them: *"We've learned to defend ourselves, so as not to be squashed like cockroaches".*

Losing fear and a sense of shame (fear of talking in public, fear of partner, fear of what others might say, fear of losing one's job). Better relationships with one's children; capacity to express more affection; ability to handle rebellious teenagers; children helping out more with the household chores.

Being able to stand up for themselves, breaking away from being *"conformist women falling into the hands of abusive men who tell them 'you should be grateful to me, thanks to me, you're something'."*

What changes have you seen in your workplace?

The training helped women workers to gain knowledge about their labour rights and to communicate this to other women workers. In particular, women who are MEC promoters in the *maquila* factories felt the training had improved their work relations: they now felt respected, valued and supported by their colleagues. They had also learned leadership skills and felt able to speak out as workers and citizens. They also appreciated that as workers they make a contribution to the economy through their work and by paying taxes. Women workers in the *maquilas* talked about their achievements as promoters in the workplace:

"Because of the training I realized that we had not been paid enough severance pay, so I organised a petition and got many workers to sign it and we forced them to pay us. After that my work mates look up to me."

"I was working in a factory that got closed down, so I contacted MEC's lawyers to help us and we reached an agreement with the company to pay us severance and other benefits that were owed to us."

"The company said that belonging to MEC was prohibited as it was like a trade union but I stood up to them and defended my rights: they paid me what was owed."

Through the training women workers had been helped in different ways. They had learnt the importance of being able to calculate their pay and entitlements. MEC had produced a booklet that helped them to work out severance pay, holiday pay, annual bonuses and back pay. MEC also helped in cases of discrimination, for example the Legal Advice Office helped them by putting forward claims in cases of violations of labour rights. As workers they had organised on a number of occasions to demand that the Ministry of Labour carry out factory inspections when the companies violated labour codes:

"we got organised because the toilets were filthy. We put in a demand and the Ministry arrived to carry out an inspection."

In 2007, MEC was involved in a consultation on a new Equal Opportunities Bill. The workers put forward their concerns and were involved in getting support for the Bill by raising 50,000 signatures in a petition. It was passed as a new law in April 2008.

"our demand was for the Bill to include labour rights such as: equal salary for men and women, and stopping compulsory pregnancy tests in the factories. We got support from women workers, the community and university students who signed our petition."

What changes have you influenced in your community?

The MEC community promoters are better equipped to participate in local authorities as a result of MEC economic literacy training. The women we spoke to have had a number of successes in the local councils – they are recognised as leaders in their community and have direct access to the mayor, they are actively participating in economic and environmental working groups and they have a good relationship with the media and get wide coverage on local radio and TV.

During the evaluation the community promoters proudly reported many achievements: they organise and motivate other women, talk to them about their rights and encourage them to participate in local activities. They carry out consultations by asking their neighbours what changes they want and then take these proposals to the local council. Some MEC promoters are also members of residents associations where they present women's concerns. They speak to parents and children when they see problems such as family violence, children on the streets and vandalism. They have helped with family problems by bringing the MEC psychologists to speak with the families and to mediate between husbands and wives.

The community promoters are essential in ensuring that MEC grows as a social movement by bringing in new members. They consider an important part of their role to share their learning with and support other women and to set up a local women's network. The women we spoke to were very dedicated to the organisation and to seeing it growing and had each brought a significant number of new women into the organisation at a local level, for example: *sharing what I learned with 20 women; setting up a women's network of between 15-20 women who meet every fortnight in my neighbourhood; organising 30 women and bringing them here to MEC; multiplying our efforts – I have reached 100 women in 10 years as a promoter; I went door-by door and spoke to 150 women in my neighbourhood.*

Women in MEC participate in town council development processes, although in order to be accepted into working groups they need to be accredited, so MEC helps them by sending letters of support to the Mayor. A number of promoters are active in their local councils and are getting their needs and interests into local development plans.

The community promoters told us about their many achievements to improve their communities through local advocacy. These included putting in petitions to have roads paved and contributing and finding solutions for environmental problems such as: contaminated water supplies, rubbish collection and lack of services in their neighbourhoods. Some women fought for a women's unit in the police station (Comisaria) to support women suffering from domestic violence and some are working with the police to deal with young people causing problems in the community.

The economic literacy training on budgets was very helpful to the women who were actively involved with the local councils, they now understood how to interpret budgets and they are able to present a gender perspective for strategic development budgets.

"The ABC training helped us to know what the government does with the budget and now we understand the municipal budget when they are discussed at these meetings"

"We monitor the municipal annual budget and their investment plans for local projects such as on the environment and for youth and children".

In one neighbourhood the women succeeded in negotiating that 1% of the budget in their Council was allocated to a children's centre. This provides a space for 50-60 children who might otherwise be on the streets because their parents are at work. They have developed a Code for Children and Adolescents and are going to elect a child Mayor to represent young people's views on the Local Council

Through these activities the women have been very successful in gaining recognition in a number of municipalities and have raised the profile of MEC at a community level:

"When I first started going to meetings the mayor didn't know who I was but now I've been participating for a while he asks me what MEC is doing."

Key Findings from the Evaluation

Economic Literacy has increased women's self-esteem, promoted individual and collective empowerment, and enhanced processes whereby women are consulted and get their interests included in local development plans and national policy.

- ✓ Women are able to economise and administer household budgets better.
- ✓ Women can visualise their contribution to the home and to the national budget (through unpaid reproductive labour, payment of hidden & value-added taxes)
- ✓ Women are able to calculate labour benefits, extra hours, severance pay, etc.
- ✓ Women are multiplying this information with others:

"In the same way as we have been trained, we have a commitment to support other people, to reproduce this knowledge."

MEC is promoting a Women's Economic Agenda that includes recognising women's unpaid work in the home and women's contribution to the economy. MEC's strategy includes identifying gender gaps in local development budgets and including women's alternative economic proposals in local and national development plans. In November 2007, 600 members of MEC came together in a national forum to build this economic agenda and fed it into the proposed equal opportunities bill.

In Conclusion

The evaluation of the project found that bringing together feminism, self-esteem and economic literacy with a gender perspective, provides a powerful basis for bringing about change. MEC's approach effectively linking the personal, organisational and wider society levels has the potential to address women's inequality.



Sandra Ramos & Gladys Urtecho, MEC and CAWN speaker tour, March 2008

With the conclusion of the project, Economic Literacy has now become a second pillar (along with Labour Rights) of MEC's work. The project fulfilled and surpassed project targets and has paved the way for new organisational growth: deepening and widening economic literacy as a tool for participation, voice and advocacy. It led to the setting up of a Diploma course with the Central America University (UCA) in Gender and Human Development for women workers members of MEC⁴ and other women's grassroots organisations and to developing further MEC's role in capacity-building through the creation of a new Leadership Academy.

Many challenges remain. Women's agency and empowerment in Nicaragua is constrained by the rising costs of living (basic food basket, transport and electricity); the government's inability to curb the increase in poverty; limited public funds; and the withdrawal from Nicaragua of investment in the economic processing zones, leading to job losses. Women's economic opportunities are limited by a lack of decent jobs and by low levels of education and training. In addition, globalisation and free trade agreements have a negative impact on women's rights and livelihoods. Women's organisations internationally are finding it difficult to get a gender focus into trade agreements and larger advocacy initiatives, making it difficult to push women's interests up the economic agenda.

The approach taken by MEC shows the effectiveness of working simultaneously on changing attitudes and beliefs; supporting workers' organising; improving corporate policy and employer practice; lobbying government to draw up legislation and to enforce regulations on labour rights. The combination of these contributes to enhancing and bringing about lasting change for women. However, much remains to be done by women's organisations in Nicaragua to defend women's economic rights and support their social participation.

Footnotes

1 The Project was funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) Civil Society Challenge Fund.

2 See CAWN Briefing Paper: The Association Agreement between the European Union and Central America: its potential impact on women's lives in Central America.

3 See for example: Freire (1977) *Cultural Action for Freedom*, Penguin Books, London

4 The Diploma lasts for 6 months and is taught at weekends so workers can attend. So far, MEC has 5 groups of graduates with 30 women in each and are currently developing 2 further Diplomas.

Acknowledgements

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We would like to thank all those who took part in the evaluation including workshop participants, trainers, lawyers, members of staff, the directors and especially the MEC promoters for their energetic and insightful comments. In particular, we would like to thank Gladys, Josefa and Sandra for the efficient organisation of the evaluation programme and for taking time to give us their support during a transport workers strike in Nicaragua.

Further Information

See the following websites for further information on the work of MEC and CAWN and on Economic Literacy:

MEC: www.mec.org.ni

The Wall Workshop: www.wallworkshop.com

Women In Development Europe: www.wide-network.org

International Gender and Trade Network: www.igttn.org

WOMEN'S RIGHTS in Central America

Although governments in Central America have signed up to international agreements on gender equality, women's rights continue to be violated across the region:

- Women are excluded from decision making processes: In 2007, only 8% of legislators in Guatemala were women. In Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, these levels were 23%, 21% and 17%.
- In Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica combined, it is estimated that at least one thousand women die each year as a result of femicides or other forms of gender-based violence. In Nicaragua, one in three women has suffered physical or sexual violence.
- Women systematically lack access to pre-natal care: In Guatemala in 2005 maternal mortality rates were 290 for every 100,000 women.
- In Nicaragua and El Salvador it is a criminal offence for a woman to have an abortion under any circumstances, even if her life is in danger.
- Despite their high participation in the workforce, women are disadvantaged regarding access to capital and productive resources. Many endure precarious working conditions and the continual abuse of their labour rights.
- In Nicaragua, the number of women that have tested positive for HIV increased by 1130% from 1997 to 2007. Over the same period the ratio of HIV positive women to men rose.

The Central America Women's Network (CAWN) is a network of women united by a commitment to women's rights worldwide. Set up in 1991, CAWN works in solidarity with women's organisations in Central America, supporting them to defend their rights; fostering links, exchanges and capacity building between women's organisations in the United Kingdom and Central America; and raising awareness of the concerns of Central American women among the public, Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) and policy makers, especially in relation to women's economic rights and gender-based violence.

CAWN continues to contribute to uphold the political, social and economic rights of Central American women by working with others to:

Raise-awareness

Among the public of the situation of women in Central America, the possible impact of international, regional or national policies on women's rights and the ways in which these threats are being exposed and resisted by women's organisations throughout the region.

Strengthen advocacy and campaigning efforts

In order to advance the specific demands of women's organisations in the region and to support campaigning to protect and promote the rights of women in Central America.

Promote solidarity links

To develop CAWN's capacity to respond to requests for support and solidarity from women in the region so that they can oppose unjust policies and respond to natural disasters and other emergencies.

"Poverty is an issue of women's organisations but we must change the technical discussion of poverty into a political discourse. It is essential to empower women for them to come out of poverty."

Mirta Kennedy, CEMH – Honduras

"Women need to be empowered with knowledge that will be tools in the search for alternative survival strategies in a globalised world."

Mabel Aguirre, MEC – Nicaragua



The Central America Women's Network – CAWN is a London based organisation that supports, publicises and learns from the struggles of women in Central America in the defence of their rights

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