The role of the women's movement in institutionalizing a gender focus in public policy: the Ecuadorian experience

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Introduction

The institutionalization of a gender focus in state policy is a long, complex process. It presupposes intervention in a variety of areas and further presupposes the active presence in society of actors who campaign, promote and lobby in order that the gender dimension becomes visible in political and social relations. In this chapter I present the experience of the Coordinadora Política de Mujeres Ecuatorianas — CPME (Ecuadorian Women's Political Coordinating Organization), one of whose strategies is to work with members of Ecuador's women's movement for a gender focus in public policy.

CPME was founded in February 1996 at a National Women's Conference in which more than 800 representatives from 21 provinces participated. That Congress, the first of its kind in the country, was preceded by wide-ranging discussion throughout the country of an Ecuadorian Women's Political Agenda. This process of consensus formation led to the strengthening of the organization and the creation of closer ties among women's groups. Congress participants voted in favour of the Political Agenda as the founding document of CPME and, in a secret ballot, elected a group of fourteen national leaders. CPME's reason for being is to implement the Women's Political Agenda, a document that includes an analysis of the situation of women in Ecuador and a series of proposals for change intended to bring about social and gender equity. The Political Agenda contains sixteen chapters in which the general proposals and those related to specific interest groups are synthesized.

Why does CPME use the word 'political' to refer to the Agenda and the organization formed to realize its goals? This is because CPME is working to bring women's issues into the public sphere in order that they be dealt with as political issues on the national level — as issues appearing on the agendas of elected representatives. Further, CPME uses this word because it defines its actions as political. However, CPME is not a branch of any political party but is instead an organization made up of women from a wide variety of backgrounds who hold varying political and ideological beliefs and have had a range of organizing experiences.

The creation of the Political Agenda required a significant effort by members of the women's movement to develop an ability to analyse and think systematically about women's problems in the national context, as well as the ability to offer proposals while, at the same time, building an organization that would be capable of generating opinion, making its presence felt and negotiating from a position of strength. The development of the Political Agenda also led women's organizations, especially a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in existence since the 1980s when they began accumulating knowledge and experience, to realize that the moment had come to work together in a permanent fashion in CPME. Previously, women had coordinated efforts on specific issues, and had even attempted to build a national organization in the midst of preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995). However, that effort failed because it did not provide for the coming together of a significant and representative contingent of women's organizations.²

The national political context

CPME was formed at a time when the state body responsible for women's issues was in transition. The Dirección Nacional de la Mujer, DINAMU (National Office for Women), was one entity among many within the Ministry of Social Welfare. It had a weak political presence and a limited budget, and was dependent, in administrative and

financial terms, on the Ministry. The marked political instability that has characterized Ecuador's recent history was also evident in DINAMU, especially between 1992 and 1994, as a result of which a series of directors were unable to develop long-term policies. Beginning in the 1990s, women's organizations, together with several directors of DINAMU, proposed the creation of a Women's Institute as a state body charged with the institutionalization of a gender focus in public policy. At that time a number of studies were undertaken for this purpose, but the political will to put the ideas developed into practice did not exist.

When the administration of Abdala Bucaram took office in 1996, an individual with no ties to the women's movement was named Director of DINAMU. The Director's goal was to use the office to implement small, traditional welfare projects which could have only a limited impact. Bucaram was forced to step down by a wave of protest from citizens and members of Congress after six months in office. The interim government inaugurated in February 1997, indebted to the social movements that had participated in the downfall of Bucaram, signed an executive decree creating the Consejo Nacional de las Mujeres, CONAMU (National Women's Council), in October 1997.

CONAMU is situated in the President's Office, and is charged with institutionalizing a gender focus in public policy across all state sectors. It functions through a board of Directors³ with three representatives of national women's organizations. CONAMU's President is appointed by the President of the Republic. During its first months, CONAMU concentrated on putting in place its administrative and financial organization and on strengthening its institutional base as national political structures stabilized, with the interim government giving way to a democratically elected constitutional government. CONAMU's Executive and its technical team have maintained the organization's stability during this period of uncertainty.

The National Constitutional Assembly met between December 1997 and May 1998. During this time CPME, CONAMU and other women's organizations developed an active presence, lobbying delegates for the inclusion of a number of constitutional reforms dealing with women. CPME's strategies for influencing public policy varied

depending on the specific political circumstances and the changes taking place in state's women's machinery devoted to gender issues, first DINAMU and then CONAMU. In the following sections I examine the role of CPME and CONAMU in three different periods: (1) February 1996 to November 1997 — influencing public policy; (2) November 1997 to May 1998 — influencing constitutional provisions of the new constitution; and (3) September 1998 to the present — focusing on the social and political fabric rather than the state.

Lobbying the state/influencing public policy

The Bipartite Technical Commissions: the first phase

In 1996, CPME developed a strategy of engagement with the state based upon 'Comisiones Tecnicas Bipartitas (CTBs—Bipartite Technical Commissions). These were implemented during the short-lived administration of Bucaram (August 1996 to February 1997) and during the interim government. CPME conceived of the CTBs as bodies made up of state technicians (Ministry officials, congressional consultants, and so on) and representatives of CPME, whose role would be twofold: as technicians in their area of expertise and as political representatives of CPME. The purpose of the CTBs was to develop goals for different social sectors for a specific period, taking as a starting point the Women's Political Agenda on the one hand and, on the other, to assess proposals submitted by ministries and other state entities. Initially, the CTBs negotiated these goals and, when agreements were achieved, provided follow-up and oversight to ensure that goals were achieved. Representatives of CPME and the CTBs were required to coordinate their activities with other CTBs and to keep all those involved informed of their actions so that the members of the women's movement could respond effectively, through lobbying or social mobilization, to policy changes that might affect compliance with the agreements reached between CPME and the CTBs.

Fifty women technicians were added to work on a volunteer basis for around fifteen months on the implementation

of this strategy. After the start of the CPME–CTB partnership, the Gender Equity Fund of the Canadian International Development Agency provided a grant to support this process which, for the most part, has been carried out in an enthusiastic and militant fashion by women from CPME. This was a recognition of the significance of the Women's Political Agenda and to the plural character of CPME which has generated confidence in a collective effort not subject to co-optation by particular interests.

To commemorate the first anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, in 1996 CPME organized a nationwide event entitled 'From Words to Actions', in which a Public Commitment was signed by representatives of the state for the functioning of the CTBs. Signatories to this agreement included the President of Congress, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Relations, the Minister of Industry, Commerce and Crafts, and the Minister of Agriculture.

CTBs: Assessing the first phase

Given the short period of time that the administration was in office, and the political upheaval that characterized those six months, the CTBs barely had time to begin working. Nevertheless, their usefulness was apparent in the following respects: first, the creation of a CTB in the Ministry of Government was decisive in halting the direction in which the six Women's Commissaries existing at the time were being pushed. Given the populist character of the government, the Commissaries, along with all public appointments, were being handed out as political favours to friends of the administration, in spite of regulations that required the participation of non-governmental counterparts. The pressure that CPME exerted through the CTB, and public criticism from the women's movement, mitigated this tendency. Second, CPME achieved an official presence on a number of congressional commissions: Budget, Public Management and Women.⁴ For example, during those months members on the Budget Commission concentrated primarily on ensuring that the funds for existing and planned Women's Commissaries were not eliminated. Also, the Commission established in the Ministry of Agriculture was able to work with new administration appointments to

strengthen the Office for Rural Women. The CTB was initially asked to promote a process of training in gender issues for ministry employees. However, this was something CPME could not involve itself in. Progress was made in new initiatives in law in the interest of gender equity. A new law governing water resources, an important issue for rural men and women, was formulated and the Bill was sent to Congress for debate. Third, in the congressional Commission for Public Management, members began working on the decentralization and social participation law. CPME was actively involved in the months-long discussions, which involved fourteen workshops providing a forum for public consultation and debate with other actors interested in local development. The resulting law includes a number of CPME's suggestions though it still contains, generally speaking, many gaps and is not entirely satisfactory. Fourth, the relationship established with the Ministry of Foreign Relations was fruitful as it provided for close collaboration on the inclusion of gender issues in documents prepared for the Hemisphere Summit that took place in Santa Cruz, Bolivia in December 1996. As a member of the Political Coalition of Andean Women,⁵ CPME worked to include in all Summit documents related to 'sustainable development' concrete statements on gender equity. The success of this effort is apparent in the Final Declaration of the Summit. The Foreign Office of Ecuador proved very willing to work with us on this matter.

CTBs November 1997 to May 1998: extending lobbying through participation

When the Bucaram government was forced to step down, CPME proposed the re-launching of the CTBs to the new authorities. While the presidential government was replaced after the elections, there was greater continuity of personnel in Congress, in spite of the fact that the President of the legislature moved to the executive branch after being named Interim President. The BTCs became more flexible during this period in order to bring together a greater range of actors, as new ways of dealing with the state were developed and because at that point the National Constitutional Assembly was gradually becoming the focus of political attention. One new way of dealing with the state

was participation in processes and objectives arising within various state entities and taking place within a fixed time period. For example, during this period the nation's planning body and the National Security Council launched 'Strategy 2025', a long-term planning proposal for development in Ecuador, and invited CPME and CONAMU — which had only recently been created — to work on the gender focus for this strategy. This was a task that CPME and CONAMU delegates accepted. The Legislative Commission on Women, Children and the Family worked with a number of women's organizations to develop a draft of penal code reforms, and these organizations were present during the discussions leading to approval of the reforms. The most important among these reforms were inclusion of sexual harassment as a criminal offence and more severe penalties for rape. Similarly, the Ministry of Health asked CPME and CONAMU, together with the Gender and Health Coordinating Committee, a group of NGOs working in this area, for comments on the gender focus of the *Health Procedures Manual*, used by Ministry personnel providing health services to the public.

The two organizations also participated in getting representation for women within other bodies, such as the National Education Council and the Inter-institutional Forestry Committee of Ecuador. While the law does not require that women be represented on the National Education Council, the Minister, recognizing the importance of a gender focus in education, invited CPME to participate. CPME worked on the design of policies for the training of educators and also coordinated with CONAMU the training of a group of women as gender trainers within the Ministry of Education's teacher-training programme.

Participation in the Inter-institutional Forestry Committee of Ecuador took place when CPME realized that the Forestry Plan of Ecuador did not take into account the interests of all actors involved in the use of forest resources. Together with representatives of indigenous communities, the timber industry, and environmental organizations, CPME pointed out the need for women to be represented on the committee. This demand was not understood initially, but was gradually proved legitimate and CPME was charged with developing one of the programmes constituting the

'Forestry Plan: Participatory Forestry Development with Rural Populations'. At present, with the Ministry of the Environment and the forestry sector having undergone an institutional reorganization process, CPME continues to be called upon for consultations.

Assessing strategies, reviewing processes: post-1998

CPME has drawn a number of conclusions based on its first attempts to work with the state in order to lobby for public policy with a gender focus. First, in order for the women's movement to plan a strategy that will have an impact on the state, it is indispensable to develop a process for defining proposals that deal with the major problems affecting women and the country. In Ecuador, this was achieved with the development of a Women's Political Agenda which provided guidelines for action. Second, together with this programmatic basis, it is also necessary to develop the political ability to anticipate and judge key opportunities and possibilities for effective political impact. Apprenticeship in how to combine negotiation, pressure and censure takes time, but it is important in safeguarding the autonomy of the women's social movement *vis-à-vis* the state and thus avoiding co-optation by the state, as has occurred in some other Latin American countries. CPME's experience in testing various strategies for working together with state sectors under the Bucaram government was valuable, as was the simultaneous active commitment in publicly censuring and opposing government actions harmful to the dignity of women and to citizens in general that took place during that administration. Third, given the weak institutional presence of a gender focus in Ecuador, a problem complicated by the political and institutional instability that has characterized the country in recent years, it was exhausting for a women's organization to maintain a permanent and global presence in state bodies, especially as every appointment of a new minister meant a new beginning of the lobbying process. Thus CPME was probably more effective in achieving concrete results due to participating in processes that were fixed in respect to time limit, objectives and area

of action. In the experience of CPME, invitations for participation in processes of this type have generally involved consultations over documents and policies, for example, Strategy 2025, the penal code reforms and the *Health Procedures Manual* — but CPME has not been able to do follow-up in these matters, which suggests a serious weakness from the point of view of its ability to measure the extent to which participation in processes of this type has led to real improvements in the situation of women. Fourth, given the limited knowledge and assimilation of the gender focus among political authorities in general, individuals, personal contacts and friendships with government officials have been almost decisive in identifying points of entry and support for initiatives proposed. The presence of special offices and individuals charged with gender issues within ministries is useful in this sense in order to have reliable counterparts within state entities. It is thus effective to create 'alliances' with mid-level state personnel who are, in general, more open and more stable than appointed and/or elected officials at the top of the political machinery. Requirements included in international cooperation agreements also aid in pressuring state entities dependent on financing through such agreements. Finally, while state entities specializing in gender, such as CONAMU in Ecuador, have a more specific technical function in their relationships with the rest of the state, the role of the women's movement is that of proposing, pressuring, negotiating, overseeing, criticizing and demanding explanations; that is, a specifically political role. Nevertheless, the political role requires technical skills in order to be effective, just as technical advisory roles require political clarity and astuteness. The two are important as they contribute to empowering the women's social movement through being effective in lobbying the state for change and also in keeping feminist state bodies and NGOs in tune with the women's movement. An absence of this dialectical relationship would lead to a weakening of the women's movement and increase the threat of co-optation of women's national machineries. A greater clarification as to CONAMU's role and those to be assumed by the women's social movement is still required in order to avoid conflicts and negative duplication of efforts. The

subject of the autonomy of the movement *vis-à-vis* specialized state entities continues to be a topic for discussion in Ecuador.

Constitutional reforms and the creation of a state office

The popular movement that led to the overthrow of President Bucaram not only rejected a series of policies and a style of government thought by the citizenry to be ineffective and an insult to the dignity of the country, but also expressed the desire for deeper changes. A range of social movements proposed a new Constitution and established the parameters for the changes it would include. Political elites tried to twist the popular will and to limit as far as possible the reach of the Constitutional Assembly, which began work in December 1997 (one month after the creation of the National Women's Council).

The election of Assembly representatives took place through a new electoral system which considerably restricted the participation of minorities, and in which a law requiring quotas for women was only partially applied.⁶ Women accounted for 10 per cent of Assembly representatives. CPME came up with the slogan 'Women in the Assembly with their own voice' and actively supported women candidates. During the campaign, CPME held workshops in provinces for the discussion of proposals to be presented to the Constitutional Assembly, and worked with CONAMU and other women's organizations for a number of months in preparing a single document (the new Constitution of Ecuador) that was presented in conjunction with a women's march.

CONAMU and women's organizations were helped by consultants — in the case of CONAMU — and lobbyists — on the part of the women's movement — activities which bore fruit, specifically the inclusion of a number of important rights. These included rights to:

- 1 *personal integrity*, that is the eradication of physical, psychological and sexual violence, and moral coercion;
- 2 *freedom and responsibility* in making decisions regarding sexual behaviour;

- 3 *personal freedom* to decide the number of children a couple will have;
- 4 *equality under the law*, ending discrimination based on sex, health status, age and sexual preference;
- 5 *equality of rights and opportunities* for men and women in access to resources for production and economic decision making in the administration of the conjugal relationship and of property;
- 6 *recognition of unpaid domestic work* as productive labour;
- 7 *equitable participation* of women and men as candidates in the popular election process.

The new Constitution also states that 'The state will formulate and execute policies to achieve equality of opportunities for women and men, through a special entity which will function as determined by the law, will incorporate the gender focus as well as plans and programmes, and will offer technical assistance for its obligatory implementation in the public sector' (Article 41). It is believed that this Article will result in greater stability for CONAMU which, up to now, has existed as a result of an executive decree that could be rescinded at any time.

The consolidation of CONAMU as a state machinery for women which is an autonomous institution was a victory for women's organizations which had been fighting for this goal for a number of years. However, some confusion has probably been created as a result, both in CONAMU and in the women's movement, regarding its character and role. It is thought that the women who work as officials in CONAMU are part of the women's social movement, that they have the same objectives and that it is necessary for CONAMU and the movement to work together when approaching other state bodies, for example. However, the question remains: does the women's movement require a stage within the state or does it need to affirm its identity as a movement in order to question the state on an equal footing? Do convictions and love for the cause of women that state bureaucrats (femocrats) may profess to hold automatically make them 'part' of a social movement which has its own dynamic, interests and roles, or is the identification a source of confusion when dealing with other state officials and in their dealings with one another (see Sawyer,

chapter 12 of this volume)? Do agreements on specific issues that may come about among specialized state bodies and the women's movement relieve the state of the responsibility to give an accounting of its activities to a citizen's movement? Does the lack of differentiation between the two work in favour of or hold back citizen efforts in demanding a full accounting from the national state machinery for women?

These are some of the new questions which have arisen in the course of the women's movement's engagement with the state. Often, members of the women's movement want to preserve their identity as actors on the cultural and social stages, as critics who question existing social relations without, as a result, losing the ability to negotiate and achieve concrete goals in the political arena. These are also, no doubt, questions that should be asked by those working in national machineries for women, who should not be looking at the women's movement as an instrument to be used, or a workforce in implementing their strategies, but rather in a broader sense as necessarily independent actors in social processes (see Rai, chapter 1 of this volume). This is a debate that remains open in Ecuador, and in which both sides have expressed a willingness to talk.

Towards enforcement of rights won by women

With the new Constitution that was completed and approved in August 1998, women in Ecuador have embarked on a new phase in which we must put into practice the rights won in that Constitution. This is, without a doubt, a 'long march' that begins with disseminating among women, public institutions and society in general information about these rights, and that also includes the creation of mechanisms for demanding that the said rights are respected.

With the re-inauguration of institutional stability in the political realm as a result of the election of a new President and legislators, a new effort has been assumed by various organizations in the women's movement and the legislative Commission on Women, Children, Youth, the Elderly and the Family, an entity which is now a Permanent

Legislative Commission. Rights specified in the Constitution must have concrete status as laws or legal reforms, a task that is being carried out by this Commission made up of congresswomen from, or with ties to, the women's movement.⁷ Without underestimating the progress that might be made in this fashion, and the effectiveness of the said Commission, I believe it is necessary for the women's movement to question the dynamic that is created when an initiative arises from the state rather than from civil society. Experience demonstrates that there is greater mobilization, greater public visibility, greater impact on public opinion and a greater degree of participation by women when such an initiative arises from below, from civil society, and thus the results will be longer lasting and more sustainable.

CPME's current concern is that of learning from our cumulative experience of dealing with the state and continuing to work together with existing state bodies, but without losing the political initiative that will maintain the social vitality of the change process proposed by feminists.

CPME held its Second National Political Congress in September 1998. At that event, a strategy oriented more towards the social and political fabric than towards the state apparatus as such was proposed. CONAMU now exists with its specific role within the state, but CPME has identified multiple gaps in gender vision in the political realm and in society, beginning with large numbers of women who do not know their rights. Its new strategy does not underestimate the importance of ties with state institutions, but focuses on creating those ties on a new basis or with a different emphasis: not so much to integrate the gender focus into public policies (which process, in many cases, is understood in a technical or instrumental sense) but to crystallize the rights of women and men in relations among citizens, in the political culture, in social practices, in everyday life.

Notes

- 1 I write this chapter in my individual capacity. However, I have based my observations and analysis on my experience as a national leader of the Ecuadorian Women's Political Coordinating Organization.

- 2 The panorama of the women's movement has been changing towards a greater diversity of views.
- 3 Currently, the National Office for Planning, the Secretary of State and the Social Front.
- 4 The presence of CPME on this stage created a permanent channel for communications with Congress. Today, a significant number of legislative commissions sends their Bills to CPME for our comments.
- 5 The Political Coalition of Andean Women (PAM) was formed in June 1996 as a forum for national women's organizations from Andean countries. The purpose of the Coalition is to exercise influence on behalf of women in the subregional integration process and to exchange experiences in follow-up on PAM's compliance in our countries.
- 6 In the three provinces with the greatest number of voters, the quota for women was a minimum of 20 per cent.
- 7 The Legislative Commission has signed an agreement with CONAMU which provides for technical assistance and financial support.