

## Gender and Poverty Reduction Strategy processes in Latin America

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## 1. Introduction

In 1999, countries that wished to qualify for the Enhanced Initiative for the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC initiative) had to elaborate Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) and had to do so with participation of civil society. Since then, the elaboration and subsequent implementation of PRSs (Poverty Reduction Strategies) have been seen as a tool for the international donor community to guarantee that not only debt relief, but also aid in general would be spent well. The aim of this paper is to investigate the extent to which gender has been incorporated in these processes. It analyzes the contribution of the PRS process to promoting gender equity in policies to reduce poverty and in strengthening the women's movement. Taking into account unequal gender relations and promoting gender equality are important not only for addressing female poverty more effectively, but also for the reduction of poverty in general. Effective poverty reduction policies require that gender issues are addressed, and this in turn implies that gender gaps in all possible dimensions are reduced.

A first question is to what extent has the emphasis on participation in the preparation of the strategies led to the involvement of women and women's organizations, and to what extent have these processes empowered women? Second, did the strategies themselves and the poverty reduction policies actually carried out take unequal gender relations into account, and did they result in more gender equality? The paper focuses on three Latin American Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPCs), namely Bolivia, Honduras and Nicaragua.

When reviewing the literature so far on gender and PRSPs, two conclusions can be drawn. First, most studies have been conducted in the first years after the introduction of the PRSPs. After that the attention for the topic seems to have vanished. Second, and as far as results are concerned, the conclusions are mostly negative. There was insufficient attention for participation of women in the consultation processes and the large civil society organizations that were invited hardly paid attention to gender issues (Bell 2003; Bradshaw and Linneker 2003; Whitehead 2003). Furthermore, if women participated their interventions seldom made it to the actual strategies (Zuckerman 2002a; Wandia n.d.). Rwanda seems to have been a positive exception (Zuckerman 2002b). The incorporation of gender in the contents of the strategies varies from very little to substantial, but the latter are a minority (Bamberger *et al.* 2001; Zuckerman and Garrett 2003). There is a general lack of data on income or consumption poverty by gender and consequently gender is almost absent from poverty diagnoses (Bell 2003; Rodenberg 2003; Whitehead 2003). There is usually some attention for gender in the human development chapters of the strategies but the theme is invisible in chapters on economic policies or governance (Bradshaw and Linneker 2003; Rodenberg 2003; Whitehead 2003).

The present paper aims to go beyond these first studies. It has been undertaken in the context of a long-term investigation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy processes in Bolivia, Honduras and Nicaragua.<sup>1</sup> This means that it can also look at the longer term results for gender empowerment and for gender-sensitive poverty reduction policies, and it can put the gender outcomes of these processes in the context of the overall results of the PRS process.

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<sup>1</sup> The study "Evaluation and Monitoring of Poverty Reduction Strategies in Latin America 2003-2007", has been commissioned by the Swedish International Development Agency to the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague and for which the present author has been subcontracted. Annual country and thematic reports, including country gender reports, are available from [www.iss.nl/prsp](http://www.iss.nl/prsp).

The paper begins by a brief overview of the PRS processes in Bolivia, Honduras and Nicaragua. Then it examines the extent to which women and women's organizations participated in the elaboration of the PRSPs, and to what extent these strategies incorporated gender issues. Then the longer term effects of PRS processes on gender and gender equality policies are examined: the empowerment of women and women's organizations, the availability of gendered data and statistics, and the actual implementation of gender equality policies.

## **2. Brief overview of PRS processes in Bolivia, Honduras and Nicaragua**

The introduction of Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS) in 1999 was meant to embody the following five principles: broad-based ownership, comprehensiveness, long-term orientation, a focus on results, and improved partnership with donors. This was all meant to enhance democratic processes, to improve poverty reduction policies and to bring about more effective aid. What is referred to as "PRS process" usually implies that countries prepare a PRS and do so with participation of civil society, but also that they implement the PRS and that they establish and maintain institutions for monitoring this implementation in which preferably civil society is represented. Furthermore, countries are expected to revise their strategies regularly and this should also be done with consultation processes. In a way, the responses of the donors also form part of the process. This holds, in particular, for some key events showing that donors are approving the process, such as the achievement of the HIPC Completion Point and the agreements with the IMF.

However, being "on track" with the formal elements of the process does not guarantee that the objectives of the PRS approach are achieved or that all the principles as defined in the PRS approach are embodied. In fact, it can be argued that the focus on technocratic and comprehensive strategies cannot bring about the execution of improved poverty reduction policies or more effective aid (Dijkstra 2005). It brings about two disjunctures (Gould 2005): between policy formulation and policy implementation, and between policy and politics. In other words, it may be the case that actual policy implementation has little to do with what has been written down in the PRS. In addition, for domestic politics it may be just business as usual, implying a high degree of clientelism and ad hoc decision making.

Table 1 gives an overview of the state of affairs with respect to the PRS processes of the three countries, indicating the months and years in which countries passed its elements. The changes in government are also included in the Table, since they often influence the other elements.

*Bolivia* followed the process rapidly and successfully in the first years. It was the first country to present an Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy that was approved already in January 2000. This strategy was based on the earlier "Proposal against poverty", of 1997, which was itself a result of an earlier national dialogue. However, in the years between 1997 and 2000 income poverty had not decreased despite increases in government social spending. Since it was a requirement for the HIPC initiative, another "National Dialogue" was held in 2000. The official dialogue consisted of nation-wide consultations in all municipalities. The main

question in this dialogue was whether debt relief resources should be transferred to the municipalities. In addition, there were two parallel consultation processes organized by civil society. All were financed by the donors. However, very little was done with the results of the deliberations held during the national dialogue and other processes. The influence of sector ministries, but also of the IMF, World Bank and other donors on the contents of the final PRSP was much greater (Komives *et al.* 2003). The only result of the dialogue was Parliament's adoption of a Law stipulating, among other things, that HIPC funds should be transferred to municipalities and that a national dialogue should be held every three years. The full PRSP was approved in June 2001, and because the country had been on track with the IMF for a long time already, it could achieve the HIPC Completion Point in the same year.

The government of President Sánchez de Lozada that came to power in June 2002 rejected the "old" PRSP and did little to implement it. In fact, the PRS process was seriously derailed. But the donors attempted to keep the PRS process alive by requiring a new strategy based on a new round of consultations - which was also in line with the law. The government attempted to comply by writing progress reports on the old strategy and by writing a new draft strategy. But none of the progress reports were accepted by the staff of the Bre5tton Woods Institutions (BWI: IMF and World Bank). The revised strategy (in 2003) was not accepted by the donors because no consultations had been held for it. The government was forced to step down after violence in the streets. Vice President Mesa took over and organized a new nation-wide dialogue in 2004, the Diálogo Nacional Bolivia Productiva. In response to the criticism that the PRSP had too much emphasis on social policies, this dialogue and the subsequent strategy, Plan Bolivia Competitiva y Solidaria, focused on productive issues. However, as with the consultation processes for the first PRSP, there was very little relation between the consultations and the actual contents of the strategy (Komives *et al.* 2004).

In all those years of preparing new poverty strategies, little was done to *implement* anti-poverty policies. At the same time, the different participation processes did not allow space for debating the deeper concerns of the population such as macroeconomic policies, the free trade agreements, access to land and control over natural resources (gas). This led to more frustration and more violence in the streets. Donor support for "civil society" in the context of the dialogues may even have supported these actions (Komives *et al.* 2004). It all led to two more violent changes in government, followed by the election of the main leader of the opposition, Evo Morales, to President in 2006. His government presented a lengthy National Development Plan in 2007, but it has so far not been accepted by the donors as revised PRS. So the future of the PRS process remains unclear.

*Honduras* also reached the Decision Point of the HIPC initiative on the basis of an Interim PRSP. Drafts of this Interim strategy were discussed in meetings with civil society representatives in eight cities. After the approval of the Interim strategy, a more extensive consultation process was organized in 2001. However, the agenda for the meetings was totally determined by the government and doubts were expressed on actual influence of civil society. In practice, the influence of the donors was strong, both on safeguarding some participation of civil society and on the contents of the strategy. On the initiative of the World Bank, a Poverty Reduction Fund Law was adopted in Parliament that established a Consultative

Council for the PRS to monitor its implementation and in which civil society played a central role (Cuesta and del Cid 2003).

The government entering in 2002 (President Maduro, 2002-2006) at first did not accept the PRSP but later began writing Progress Reports on it, which, contrary to those in Bolivia, were accepted by the staffs of the BWI. The Consultative Council of the PRS was maintained. Formally the PRS process was therefore still alive. But not much happened in the implementation of the PRS – apart from the execution of donor-financed projects. Within the country the PRS had a low profile and it was mainly the donors who kept talking about it (Cuesta 2004). Nevertheless, and given that before 1999 Honduras had no experience at all with civil society participation, the fact that there was a Consultative Council to which the government had to listen was already a step forward (Seppanen 2005).

The Maduro government had problems in concluding a new IMF agreement, which was finally achieved in 2004. After one year of keeping on track with that agreement, the country achieved the HIPC Completion Point. In 2005 and 2006, the PRS process seemed to experience a revival in domestic attention because HIPC resources finally came in and a lively discussion began to take place on how they had to be spent – as if there was no PRS nor a Law stipulating how decisions on these resources should be made. The Maduro government organized a round of consultations all over the country just before the elections. When a new government came to power (President Zelaya, 2007-), new decisions were made on the spending of these resources. Most of the additional debt relief resources were spent on increasing the salaries of health and education workers and on hiring more police officers. A relatively small amount of the resources from debt relief was left for “implementation of the PRS”. After a successful intervention of the National Assembly, this amount was fully transferred to municipalities. They could spend it for poverty reduction projects but under rather strict restrictions as set by the Assembly, and in which suggestions from the Consultative Council and from the earlier dialogue were taken into account (Jong *et al.* 2007). The new government also elaborated a new National Development Plan but this was done without civil society consultations. It is not clear yet whether the donors will accept it as revised PRS.

The need for debt relief made that *Nicaragua* also went through the first steps of the PRS process rapidly. Like in Honduras, the country had a bad track record with the IMF and its 1998 ESAF was almost continuously off track. Nevertheless, international pressures for more debt relief led to the approval of the HIPC Decision Point in December 2000. Until then, the government had presented an Interim PRSP (August 2000) which had hardly been discussed with civil society. Donors pressed for a more extensive dialogue on the full PRSP, including departmental consultations and participation of the poor themselves. However, the government delayed this participation process. In the end, consultations were held between February and August 2001. However, the results of consultations held after May could not be included in the strategy because the government wanted to present the final version in August to the Boards of the BWI. Civil society organizations criticized this rush and the limited impact they had had on the contents of the strategy (Guimarães and Avendaño 2003). The donors and in particular the World Bank and the IDB had been able to define the priority programs in the strategy - which mainly had been *their* projects and programs. Despite the

largely symbolic nature of the consultations and the doubts of many donors regarding the real interest of the Alemán government to reduce poverty - given the ever more clear signals of corruption - , the full PRSP was approved by the boards of IMF and World Bank. US pressure to support the governing party in the face of a possible Sandinista victory in the November 2001 elections played an important role in this approval (Dijkstra and Evans 2003).

The government entering in 2002 (President Bolaños, 2002-2007) came to power on the basis of its own National Development Plan. It rejected the ‘old’ PRSP saying that it was a donor-driven strategy, but then did begin to cooperate with the process by writing Progress Reports. In addition, it began to write a revised version of its NDP to bring it in line with donor wishes. This meant including paragraphs on poverty reduction and on health and education, among other things. After several attempts, a second PRS was finally approved in November 2005 (Guimarães *et al.* 2005). The Bolaños government (with a strong base in the financial sector) had less problems than Honduras with concluding an IMF agreement and staying on track with it. For this reason, the country could reach the HIPC Completion Point earlier than Honduras, namely in January 2004.

But during the full period of this administration development plans played a subordinate role in actual policies and politics. The Bolaños administration had won donor support by putting former President Alemán in jail because of his engagement in corrupt activities. But he lost domestic political support, as the members of the National Assembly who were supposed to be his faction, became his opponents as they continued to support the former President. Bolaños therefore very much needed the support of the donors. He continued with the symbols of the PRS process although poverty reduction was not among his first priorities. His permanent fight with the National Assembly made the implementation of whatever strategy difficult and even endangered compliance with the IMF program – except in times of “emergency”, that is, when all members of parliament were convinced that compliance was necessary to get important debt relief or aid.

Table 1 confirms that the process has been derailed in Bolivia: no approved national plan exists, nor approved progress reports. In Nicaragua there have been progress reports and a revised version of the NDP has finally been accepted as PRS 2 by the donors. But the PRS process played a negligent role in domestic policies and in domestic politics. In addition, the situation is uncertain after the Sandinista victory in the November 2006 elections. Honduras still appears to be on a PRS track. Since the arrival of debt relief resources in 2005, there is heightened debate on the use of these resources and this has given the PRS process a high profile in the country. However, the debate only focuses on a small percentage of national spending and of national policies, and is to a large extent a façade behind which traditional policies and politics can continue.

In general, the high expectations on PRSPs as a tool for effective poverty reduction policies were not met. There proved to be a wide gap between formal and often cosmetic participation processes and real influence, and between strategies - on paper - and actual policy implementation, as also documented in other studies on PRS processes.

Table 1. Overview of the formal characteristics of PRS processes in the three countries

	Bolivia	Honduras	Nicaragua
Interim PRSP	January 2000	April 2000	August 2000
Decision Point HIPC	February 2000	July 2000	December 2000
Full PRSP approved	June 2001	October 2001	September 2001
Completion Point HIPC	June 2001	April 2005	January 2004
IMF Program	ESAF-PRGF 1998-2001 Standby February 2003, extended until ..2006 but often off track	ESAF 1999-2001 but with problems PRGF February 2004-	ESAF 1998- but often off track PRGF December 2002- end 2004, then off track PRGF December 2005-
Institutions monitoring PRS with participation civil society		Consultative Council PRS	CONPES has limited role
Laws resulting from PRS process	Dialogue Law Municipal Transfers Law	Poverty Reduction Fund Law	
Progress Reports, * if approved	Several 2002-2004, but none approved	November 2003* January 2005*	November 2002* November 2003* December 2005* (included in new NDP)
Government changes, * if after elections	June 2002* October 2003 June 2005 January 2006*	January 2002* January 2006*	January 2002* January 2007* (foreseen)
New national development plans, * if approved by BWIs	Government Plan 2002 Revised PRS 2003 Bolivia Productiva Plan 2004 National Development Plan 2006	National Plan 2002 Revised PRS 2006	National Development Plan (NDP) 2002 Revised NDP 2003 DDP-O 2004 New NDP = PRS 2 December 2005*
Participation for new plans	“Bolivia Productiva” dialogue 2004	Consultation on use of extra debt relief funds 2005	Regional consultations for NDP 2004-05

### **3. Initial results**

#### *Women's participation in the elaboration of the strategies*

Of all three countries, Bolivia had the most extensive consultation processes. The social dialogue for the PRSP in 2000 had a strong municipal focus. In the nine municipal roundtables, the four-person representation of each municipality had to include at least one woman, as representative of the municipality's civil society. This procedure was the result of pressure from the Vice-Ministry of Women (VMM) that had been established in this country already in 1993. Although in itself important for the visibility of women in the process, it did not mean that gender issues were taken into account in the consultations. As indicated above, the agenda for the municipal consultations was mainly limited to the question whether debt relief resources should be transferred to municipalities. In addition, the consultations in general did not influence the contents of the strategy - which was far more determined by priorities of sector ministries and of the donors.

In Honduras the draft PRSP was discussed in many meetings at local, regional and national level. In many of these meetings, women's organizations participated. However, this participation and the proposals made had very little effect on the contents of the strategy (Kennedy 2004). This was due to the limited influence of the participation process in general, but also to the limited influence of women's organizations on the big NGOs that dominated the consultation process (Bradshaw and Linneker 2003).

During the consultation process for the PRSP in Nicaragua the women's movement did not play a large role. There was no explicit attention for women in the design of the consultation process, and as described above, the process itself was largely symbolical, as an important part of it took place too late to be able to influence the strategy. The civil society organization that was invited most to discuss drafts of the strategy was the Coordinadora Civil, an umbrella organization. But within the Coordinadora gender issues were not well represented (Bradshaw and Linneker 2003).

#### *Gender and the contents of the initial strategies*

In all three original PRSPs, gender is officially a "cross-cutting issue" but in the cases of Nicaragua and Honduras this does not mean much. Women are mentioned as vulnerable groups along with children, elderly and disabled persons. In this context, there is some reference to gender violence, and women are mentioned as beneficiaries in the areas of health and education. In Nicaragua, some figures are presented on socio-economic gender inequality in the diagnosis section, but these figures are not used later on in the strategy. When it comes to the priority programs and projects, gender issues do not play any role. In Nicaragua none of the targets of the strategy is related to gender equality, while in Honduras there are only two, namely the reduction in maternal mortality rates and increases in UNDP's GDI and GEM.



In the Bolivian PRSP there is more attention for gender issues. All four components of the strategy contain some projects with a gender focus. This was not due to the role of women in the participation process (since there was little influence from participation anyway) but to the influence of the Vice-Ministry of Women on the strategy. With support from the donors, this Vice-Ministry was able to influence the PRSP when it came to actual writing. Gender projects include, for example, campaigns to prevent gender violence and to promote a more equal division of labor in the household, and programs to promote women's access to credit. However, many of these plans were not very concrete. Moreover, they were listed in a separate chapter with little relationship to the other chapters and policies, and no agency was made explicitly responsible for their execution. This made implementation less likely. In fact, only those gender projects that were already underway before 2001 were actually implemented; the innovative gender projects in the socio-economic area were not started (Calderón and Larrea 2004). The Bolivian strategy also contains more gender-related progress indicators and targets than the other two. These not only include female enrolment rates at all levels of education, female access to basic health insurance, and maternal mortality rates, but also, for example, the share of female-headed micro enterprises benefiting from technical assistance. At the same time, some important gendered indicators are absent, such as access to credit, to land titles and to employment.

Although Bolivia is a partial exception, the overall outcomes on women's participation in the consultation processes and on the addressing of gender issues in the actual strategies is disappointing. This is in line with the results of other studies on gender and PRSPs. However, these results are not unique to gender and reflect more general problems of the strategies:

- Consultations processes in general did not have much influence on the content of the strategies
- Poverty diagnoses in these strategies not only lacked attention for gender inequalities but also for other (ethnic, income, etc.) inequalities as causes of poverty
- The first generation of PRSPs was very much focused on social policies and gave much less attention to (macro) economic policies, access to land and to credit, etc.
- As mentioned above, there were general problems with the implementation of the strategies.

#### **4. Participation after the initial consultation processes and empowerment of women's organizations**

The PRS process or approach did not only stress participation for the elaboration of the first PRSP but envisaged more continuous participation of civil society, for example, in the monitoring of the implementation of the strategy and in the elaboration of revisions of the strategy. This section examines to what extent women's organizations have been involved in these processes and whether these processes have contributed to the strengthening of the women's movement in the three countries.

With respect to the empowerment of the women's movement, the experiences in the three countries are different. In Bolivia, the Vice-Ministry of Women played an important role. This already had some effect on the participation for the first PRSP, but even more during the consultation process for the next "National Dialogue Bolivia Productiva" in 2004. Female participation in this dialogue was both more extensive and also more substantial than for the PRSP.

The VMM itself was member of the National Directorate for the 2004 Dialogue, along with two other women's organizations from civil society. During the pre-dialogue phase, the VMM organized meetings of women at departmental level in which the participation of women in the national economy was discussed as well as policies to remove bottlenecks for this participation. This helped to sensitize the other members of the National Directorate, and promoted a gender sensitive consultation process in the next rounds of the Dialogue. Participation of women in the different phases of the Dialogue was relatively high (ranging from 36% at departmental level to 26% at municipal level) and ultimately this led to 84 concrete proposals related to gender issues, mostly directed to improve women's productive capacity. However, these proposals did not make it to the actual strategy. The "Plan Bolivia Competitiva y Solidaria" was suddenly presented by the Ministry of Economic Development without including any of the consultation results. In the following weeks, the National Directorate tried to incorporate the results of the Dialogue in the Plan, but this coincided with the fall of the Mesa government. Nevertheless, the inclusion of women and gender issues in the Dialogue and in the results of the Dialogue was an important result in itself.

Also in later processes, for example during the preparation for the Constitutional Assembly, special attention was given to female participation in Bolivia. Between end 2004 and July 2006 meetings were held in 150 municipalities to discuss proposals for this Assembly. Around 20,000 women participated, representing 1,707 organizations (Aguilar 2006). The Morales government presented its National Development Plan without preparatory consultations. But this plan is based on the election program of Morales' party, the MAS. This plan had been discussed extensively with grass roots organizations, including women's organizations. Currently, the VMM (now called Vice-Ministry of Gender and Generational Issues) is dominated by representatives of these grass root organizations, in particular the female farmers organization Bartolina Sisa.

For Bolivia, it can be concluded that the consultation processes in the context of the PRS have strengthened the women's movement. The role of the VMM has been important and this institution also achieved fruitful cooperation with women's organizations from civil society, in particular during the 2004 National Dialogue. Currently, the organizations of poor and indigenous women are represented in the government of Evo Morales. But their demands are not focused on specific women's rights or on reducing gender inequalities. This has brought to light increasing divisions in the women's movement, and especially between the urban-based organizations focusing on female rights and achieving more gender equality (the more

“strategic” gender needs), and the rural and indigenous organizations focusing on more basic (or “practical”) needs such as access to land and credit for the family.<sup>2</sup>

Honduras has a strong women’s movement, consisting of many different organizations. They all attempt to influence state policies, and sometimes successfully. However, there is little cooperation between the different organizations. In the context of the PRS process, this caused problems when they had to agree on one candidate for the PRS Consultative Council. In 2004, the PRS Law was changed leading to an expansion of its membership and to the inclusion of one member formally representing the Honduran women’s movement (along with more female members as representatives of other civil society sectors). It took until October 2005 until an agreement was reached. In the meantime, the Consultative Council had already made many decisions. Furthermore, the woman occupying the position, a “campesina”, expressed some doubts on the possibility for effective participation. Due to lack of access to internet and to resources in general, she did not always have access to information on the meetings and on what was going to be discussed, and she could not sufficiently communicate with her constituency.

Another problem for the integration of gender issues in the PRS process was the fact that the National Institute for Women, the INAM, did not form part of the Social Cabinet, the institution to which the PRS Consultative Council formally advises. This hampered possibilities for cooperation between this government institution promoting women’s interests and women’s organizations of civil society.

In addition to the Consultative Council of the PRS, women’s organizations are also represented in some of the sector roundtables in which government, donors, and civil society discuss sector policies. This is the case, for example, in the roundtables on health and on legal policies. In health this has led to some influence on the Five-Year Plan for the sector.

With the change in government early 2007, the INAM was finally admitted to the Social Cabinet. But the women’s movement was still divided on a new candidate for the PRS Consultative Council, so that the position again remained open for almost a year. All in all, the PRS process did not lead to a strengthening of the women’s movement and may even have contributed to more divisions.

Nicaragua also has a strongly developed women’s movement. After the Sandinista period (1979-1990) in which there was one big organization that was largely controlled by the state, the women’s organizations became independent. At the start of the PRS process there were many different organizations, ranging from female (cooperative) farmers organizations, unions, to research and lobby institutions and to NGOs providing refuges for victims of gender violence. There was limited cooperation between the organizations but several of them attempted to influence state policies.

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<sup>2</sup> The difference between strategic gender needs and practical gender needs is elaborated by Moser (2003: 38-41).

The Bolaños government did not set up national consultations for the revision of its NDP but did organize consultations at sector, regional and departmental levels. In some of these, women's organizations participated extensively and sometimes they were successful in influencing plans and policies. In health for example, the Autonomous Women's Movement worked hard to elaborate proposals in the area of sexual and reproductive health care. However, by 2006 there still was no national health policy so it is not clear whether the proposals will be included, let alone will be implemented. In some of the departmental consultations women were also very active. In Matagalpa and Ocotal, a women's organization managed to influence the municipal development plans. In addition, in several municipalities official 'Women's Secretaries' (Secretarías de la Mujer) were established in order to monitor the execution of the proposals made by the women's organizations.

At the national level, the Instituto Nicaraguense de la Mujer (INIM) attempted to influence the revised NDP directly, for example by proposing targets and indicators for monitoring gender equality. But actual influence has been limited. On the other hand, there was a successful experience of women's influence on the national employment strategy. The INIM and an independent NGO (the female workers movement María Elena Cuadra) worked together in pushing for gender issues in the strategy such as elimination of discrimination and segregation at the workplace, equal pay for equal work and equal training opportunities (Agurto 2006). It remains to be seen to what extent these principles will be implemented. But this fruitful cooperation between a state agency and a civil society organization holds out promises for the future.

In sum, the PRS process did contribute to the empowerment of women's organizations in Bolivia but much less so in the other two countries. In Honduras, it may even have led to more divisions in the women's movement. In both Honduras and Bolivia, increasing conflicts of interest can be observed among women's organizations, and especially between rural and urban women. In Nicaragua, the situation is more favorable in this respect. There have been some positive experiences recently in cooperation among women's organizations and between women's organizations and state institutions.

## **5. Availability of gendered statistics**

The fact that a gender focus was almost absent from poverty diagnoses of the PRSPs is generally said to be at least partially due to a lack of gendered statistics. But in these three countries this is not the full story: there was much more statistical information available than what has been used and presented in the strategies.

Yet, the PRS processes have to some extent contributed to a search for more gendered statistics. In Bolivia, the National Dialogue for the PRSP in 2001 promoted the search for gendered poverty data. These efforts were financially and technically supported by NGOs and by foreign aid agencies. Since 2003, the National Statistical Institute has published several reports on poverty in which gendered data are included. Bolivia has not published official PRS Progress Reports (those that were prepared were not approved) but it has published Reports on the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. In these reports, the

available gendered statistics are reported, for example on school enrolment, literacy, and figures on maternal mortality rates. However, gendered poverty data are still scarce in Bolivia.

Honduras has a tradition of carrying out Household Surveys every year. This has improved data on poverty including gendered data. For example, the reports include figures on enrolment and literacy by sex and by income quintile, showing the large inequalities. But there are still many gaps in data on socio-economic participation of men and women. Honduras has published three PRS Progress Reports but these reports hardly pay attention to gendered data, not even on enrolment or literacy. Out of the 23 indicators in health, there are only a few related to the health situation of women, for example the percent of deliveries attended by qualified health staff and the proportion of caesarians. A recent Progress Report shows that the incidence of HIV-AIDS has increased, but does not report that there is an accelerated increase in the number of women affected. The Progress Reports do include figures on the two official gendered targets mentioned in the PRS, namely the maternal mortality rate and the GDI and GEM. However, recent data on the maternal mortality rate is not available and for the GDI the 2006 Progress Reports only shows the 2002 figure. The most recent Honduras Human Development Report published by UNDP shows that the GDI decreased between 2001 and 2004 (Kennedy 2006).

Pressure and support from NGOs and international aid agencies also improved data availability in Nicaragua, and this occurred already before the consultations for the PRS. For example, due to pressure from UNIFEM and national NGOs, the 1998 Living Standard Measurement Survey of the Statistical Bureau included a module on time use by gender in the household. However, these data were only processed with delay and hardly disseminated when they were finally ready (Agurto 2005). In 2001, the Gender-Focused Indicators System was established (SIEG) with support of civil society and international agencies, in particular UNDP. SIEG managed to bring together 108 gender indicators but these efforts did not result in a publication and the system has so far not been updated. In general, and thanks to the surveys carried out by an independent NGO (FIDEG), Nicaragua has many gendered data available, also on socio-economic issues. But just like in Honduras, the official PRS Progress Reports published by the government hardly include gendered data, not even those pertaining to the Millennium Development Goals.

In sum, there has been some improvement in the availability of gendered data but this progress is mainly due to efforts of NGOs and international aid agencies, and was mostly independent of the PRS process. In all countries important statistics on the relation between gender and poverty are still missing, including, for example, time use data and gendered data on consumption. Furthermore, government interest in the collection and presentation of relevant gender data appears to be limited.

## **6. Gender policies implemented**

This section examines the progress in the actual implementation of gender policies in the three countries. It begins by looking at the execution of policies and projects as defined in the

original PRSPs that have possible gender effects. It then examines gender policies and results beyond these original PRSPs. These policies and their results are usually related to National Women's Plans or Gender Equity Plans that were formulated in all three countries. These plans were developed by the specialized state agencies (Vice-Ministry of Women in Bolivia, National Women's Institute INAM in Honduras and Nicaraguan Women's Institute INIM in Nicaragua) in cooperation with women's organizations. These institutions and the plans have been supported by the donors, often organized in a Gender Inter-Agency Group.

In Bolivia, and as was mentioned above, none of the new and innovative socio-economic gender policies from the original PRSP were implemented. Implementation was limited to policies that were already under way before 2001, such as the universal insurance for integrated mother and child care. This has indeed achieved a large reduction in the maternal mortality rate (from 417 in 1990 to 229 in 2003), although it is still far from low (Larrea and Aguilar 2005). By 2003, the poverty reduction policy discourse in Bolivia moved away from social policies to economic policies. This was reflected in the formulation of the National Public Policy Plan for the Full Implementation of Women's Rights (PNPPM) in 2004. This Plan was set up by the Vice Ministry of Women with support of women's organization and donors.

The plan has three dimensions: economic, with attention for access to land, credit and employment; social, with attention for violence, health, education; and a governance and institutional dimension, with attention for political participation of women, legal reforms, and communication and culture. The financing of the more operational Institutional-Strategic Plan 2004-2007, based on the PNPPM, was mainly secured by donors. Implementation of this Plan started and produced some results.

In the economic dimension, the plan has achieved an increased participation of women in the 'Inverse Trade Fairs'.<sup>3</sup> Women constituted 44 per cent of the beneficiaries of financial assistance for participation, and 34% of the beneficiaries of technical assistance. With respect to the social dimension, educative material has been developed to inform women and girls on their sexual and reproductive rights. In addition, a national system was developed to improve the registration and prevention of gender violence, and to give coordinated attention to its victims. In the governance area, campaigns were held to promote female candidates in the 2004 municipal elections and the 2005 national elections. In spite of this, the proportion of female senators and deputies decreased compared to the 2002 elections. On the other hand, 33 per cent of the members of the Constitutive Assembly (elected in 2006) were women. However, three-quarters of them represent the MAS, the governing party of Evo Morales. This means that indigenous interests probably dominate feminist ones in this Assembly.

The new Vice Ministry of Gender and Generational Issues that succeeded the Vice Ministry of Women in the Morales government, intends to continue with the implementation of the PNPPM. However, donor representatives are concerned about the reduction of staff in this

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<sup>3</sup> 'Ferias a la inversa'; in these fairs, the production of small and medium enterprises is stimulated through the expression of demand instead of supply.

Vice Ministry (from 23 to 4) and also about the fact that gender is not well integrated in the current National Development Plan (Aguilar 2006).

The Honduras 2001 PRSP also focused on social policies, for example leading to continued programs in mother and child care. Also in this country, the maternal mortality rate decreased, from 147 in 1999 to 108 in 2002. On the other hand, the overall female mortality rate increased in the same period due to the impact of HIV-AIDS and probably also to increased violence against women. These issues get little attention in the PRS or in Progress Reports. Although violence against women was mentioned as problem in the PRS, there was no follow up in the form of concrete projects or policies. NGOs maintain some refuges for victims, without any government support.

The Honduran PRS does include some economic projects with an apparent gender focus, including, for example, programs of credit or technical assistance to women that want to set up traditional female activities in rural areas, such as keeping chicken or pig, yard activities, food conservation, stitching, bakery, etc. However, the majority of these programs is directed to families, not to women, and they tend to increase the female workload in the household. They do not have a bearing on unequal gender relations and may even reinforce them. Other projects, for example support for micro, small and medium enterprises are said to benefit many women, but Progress Reports do not give a breakdown of the beneficiaries by sex (Kennedy 2005).

Already in 2002, so in the wake of the first full PRSP, the INAM elaborated a National Women's Plan. The Plan has four pillars: health, education and means of communication; economy and poverty; violence; and social and political participation. This execution of this Plan was mainly financed by donor agencies. One of the results of the Plan is that text books used in primary schools incorporate a gender focus and that material was elaborated for sexual and reproductive education. The INAM has also been able to establish and strengthen Municipal Women's Offices, many of which had already been set up by NGOs. Perhaps the most significant achievement of INAM and its National Women's Plan is in the area of gender violence. In Tegucigalpa there is now an Integrated Service Center for Women where charges can be reported and where women get medical and legal assistance. Furthermore, in March 2005 "Number 114" (Línea 114) was established, a national phone number for emergency calls from women threatened by gender violence. However, the number can only be reached from fixed phones. Another limitation is that the persons (often men) who should follow up the call and go to the place to avoid further accidents, often don't take the calls seriously. INAM has set up schooling programs but so far results are not yet visible. In 2004 the National Congress approved a new Election Law according to which the female share in Congress in the Central American Parliament, and among mayors and vice-mayors should be at least 30 per cent. However, actual implementation depends on the financial and political resources of women candidates themselves. The number of female deputies in Congress increased from 7 to 25% in the last elections, but the share of female mayors decreased from 10 to 7%. The relatively large number of female deputies does not mean, however, that feminist interests are now well represented. The majority of the female Congress members promotes conservative or even fundamentalist religious values (Kennedy 2006).

The 2007 government change brought a deterioration in gender policies. The budget for INAM did not increase nor was any budget assigned to “Number 114”, to Municipal Women’s Offices and to agencies for the defense and security for women. Congress did not approve the distribution of the guides for sexual education. The execution of the National Women’s Plan continues to be hindered by the fact that other state institutions think it is the responsibility of INAM only, and not of the government as a whole.

In Nicaragua, there has been a general implementation problem due to the continuous political struggle between the executive and the General Assembly. The ten priority projects and programs defined in the PRSP have been implemented to some extent because they were promoted and usually already initiated by World Bank and IDB. The PRS Progress Reports report about some of these projects in the economic area that they have “significant” effects on women, but they do not present figures on numbers of beneficiaries by sex. Another priority program in the social area is the Social Protection Network (Red de protección social). This program gives poor mothers a certain amount of money provided that they bring their infants to the health center for a check on weight and health, and send their older child to primary school. In the short term the effects may be positive but in the medium term the program may reduce incentives to work. In addition, the fact that women (mothers) receive the money does not mean that these programs have a gender focus: there is no change in gender relations, and men may stop working or may claim the money from their spouses for their own benefit (Agurto 2005). Gender violence was mentioned in the PRS but without any concrete projects, nor was any budget assigned (Agurto 2004). In practice, there are some safe houses for victims of gender violence but they are set up by ONGs and usually financed by foreign aid.

The Nicaraguan National Gender Equity Plan was set up by INIM in cooperation with donors and civil society. It was officially announced by the government in March 2006. In itself, the existence of this Plan is positive, but since it is so recent results are not yet visible. In addition, the extent of ownership among other state agencies is limited, and so are financial resources for its execution. Also in Nicaragua the new government (Daniel Ortega, since January 2007 in power) is not likely to have positive effects on gender policies. Late 2006, and with support of the Sandinista faction, the Assembly adopted a Law that prohibits all abortions, even in cases of rape or if the mother’s life is in danger. Conservative (catholic) religious forces have become stronger in the National Assembly.

It can be said that the PRS processes have indirectly influenced the implementation of gender policies, because they have stimulated the elaboration of thematic plans on gender equality, usually with some participation of women’s organizations. These plans and their execution have been supported by donor agencies. In itself the existence of these plans is positive. The Nicaraguan gender plan is too recent to show results, but some results of these plans in the other two countries are already visible. But the state institutions promoting the plans often lack resources, and political support in other state agencies for their implementation is limited. Moreover, the general climate for promoting gender equality seems to have deteriorated. Official support for promoting gender equality is declining in all three countries, and especially in Central America there is an upsurge in conservative religious and fundamentalist forces.



## 7. Conclusion

The original PRSPs in the three countries presented gender as a “crosscutting issue”. But the actual attention for gender in the documents is limited. A gender focus is absent from the poverty diagnosis and from the programs and actions. Bolivia is a partial exception to this, as the 2001 EBRP did include several gender projects. However, the gender projects were listed in a separate chapter with little relationship to the other chapters and policies, and no agency was made explicitly responsible for their execution. The influence of women and of women’s organizations during the consultation processes for the strategies was also limited. Moreover, if there was influence of women on the outcome of the dialogues, as was the case in the Bolivian National Productive Dialogue in 2004, this did not influence the content of the strategy itself. These disappointing outcomes on the addressing of gender issues in participation and in the strategies themselves are in line with the results of other studies on gender and PRSPs.

However, it is clear that consultations processes in general did not have much influence on the content of the strategies. In addition, poverty diagnoses in these strategies not only lacked attention for gender inequalities but also for other (ethnic, income, etc.) inequalities as causes of poverty. Furthermore, in all three countries there were general problems with the implementation of the strategies, and not just in the gender projects (to the extent there were any). Gaps were often visible between policies as formulated in plans, and actual implementation. In this sense, the PRSPs failed to achieve their stated objectives, namely more participation leading to more democratic societies, and more effective poverty reduction policies.

The analysis in this paper extends beyond initial results with respect to the integration of gender in PRSPs. It was also possible to examine the medium-term effects of the PRS process on the empowerment of and cooperation among women’s organizations, on the availability of gendered statistics, and on gender policies and their results in general.

With respect to the empowerment of the women’s movement, the experiences in the three countries are different. In Honduras and Nicaragua there was already an extensive women’s movement. The PRS process did little to strengthen it. In Bolivia, the various consultation processes have contributed to strengthening the women’s movement. Currently, the organizations of poor and indigenous women are represented in the government. But their demands are not focused on women’s rights or on reducing gender inequalities.

In all three countries the PRS process to some extent contributed to a search for more gendered statistics. These efforts were mostly initiated by NGOs and were supported by the donors. Sometimes they started before the PRS process. But in all countries important statistics on the relation between gender and poverty are still missing, including, for example, time use data and gendered data on individual consumption. However, government interest in the collection of relevant gender data appears to be limited.

In the three countries, PRS processes have indirectly promoted the formulation of gender policies, because they have stimulated the elaboration of thematic gender plans: National Women's Plans or Gender Equity Plans. These plans were developed by the specialized state agencies (Vice-Ministry of Women in Bolivia, INAM in Honduras and INIM in Nicaragua) in cooperation with women's organizations and supported by donors. The Nicaraguan gender plan is too recent, but there are some results of these plans already in the other two countries.

In sum, the advances in gender equality policies over the last six years are more due to processes that were already under way than to the PRS process itself, or they were the result of the thematic women or gender equity plans. Neither PRS consultation processes nor the PRSPs themselves - written to meet donor requirements - have done much to strengthen women's empowerment or to promote gender equality. Bolivia is a partial exception here, since the PRS related consultation processes do seem to have empowered not only grassroots indigenous organizations (leading to the election victory of Evo Morales in 2006) but also indigenous women's organizations. However, it is unclear what these organizations, now in power, will do to advance women's rights beyond practical improvements in the areas of access to land and credit.

On the other hand, it can be concluded that donor support has been important in the little progress registered in closing gender gaps. In particular, the donor support given to the establishment and implementation of National Women's Plans and National Gender Equity Plans has been effective in bringing about more gender focus in public policies. It can be concluded that if the donors would have restricted themselves to supporting the PRS or subsequent national plans (as was the original intention of the PRS process), they would not even have obtained these limited results in gender equality.

These conclusions confirm that just like in the case of poverty reduction in general, the reduction of gender equality is not a technical, but a *political* issue. It cannot be resolved by writing technocratic, comprehensive, and long-term plans. Political processes only move ahead via building up forces, forging alliances and negotiating small steps in the direction of specific and concrete objectives. It is therefore far more effective to organize participation around specific or sector goals or plans. The elaboration and implementation of specific Gender Equity Plans proved to have more impact than the efforts in trying to change or support the overall Poverty Reduction Strategies.

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