

The Central America Women's Network (CAWN) is a London based organisation that supports women's org in Central America. We currently have a project in Honduras on **Challenging violence against women, identifying the links between poverty reduction and promoting women's rights** in partnership with the women's organisation Centro de Estudios de la Mujer (Centre for Women's Studies).

Central America is a post-conflict region, over 10 years of the signature of the peace agreements of Guatemala, and before that of El Salvador and Nicaragua. Also it has been experienced strong neoliberal policies but with a huge poverty gap, the main business partner has been the US.

CAWN has continuously expressed in the strongest terms its condemnation of the military coup d'état in Honduras last year in June and the events that followed. As you may recall, the coup itself was widely condemned by the International Community, the UN, the EU and the OAS (Organisation of American States) as a violation of the principles of democracy and the rule of law.

The president of the National Congress of Honduras, Roberto Micheletti with support from the majority of members of the Congress, the Chief of armed forces, Romeo Vásquez Velásquez and the military personnel, took the Presidente Manuel Zelaya by force to the US Military base in Honduras (Palmerola) and flew him to Costa Rica, denying him the right to return to Honduras and to a fair and public trial. Michelletti then became the de facto president.

Members of the Congress, supporters of Zelaya or from the opposition parties, were forbidden to enter the Congress to vote against this and further laws that were passed during the regime. Members of his cabinet were immediately persecuted, **Public servants** supporters of Zelaya's government **lost their jobs**. Even the **Minister for Women** had to go into hiding.

Independently of the questionable internal reasons and the legality of these actions, **which I will not address in my presentation**, I want to focus on the facts that affected the stabilisation of the country and the Central American region, followed by events of public military violence throughout the country, and in particular against peaceful protesters against the coup.

The coup:

Four days before the coup, we received communication from our partners of threats of some military activity, some women leaders received messages to report themselves to the police. A young girl was killed and her body was placed in a box, tied up with a ribbon in a parody of gift-wrapping, and sent to the police. Although the Honduran media presented this -once again as a gang killing-, its timing is suggestive: the coup was already in preparation, and **this Femicide illustrates the ways in which the murder of women becomes a weapon and a political message**. Since the coup, there has been a rapid increase of Femicides.

Central American women's organisations use the term Femicide as a legal and political term to refer to the torture and murder of women because of their gender. It is an extreme form of VAW linked to discrimination, poverty and the backlash of men against women.

As the threat of a coup loomed, **women's organisations sprang into action to prevent an armed conflict, they started organising peaceful marches, mobilising rural and urban women, informing people by writing and distributing bulletins**, and sending public statements and eyewitness images around the world by email, blogs and social networking media. They came together as a network call **'Feminist in Resistance' to oppose, resist and protest peacefully** in response to the coup and the events that followed. Their main slogan during the marches was "No coup d'état, no beating of women".

Women's Machineries:

This political crisis has had particular implications for women's sexual and reproductive rights mainly because of the active involvement and support of the conservative Catholic and Evangelical Churches. Central America is a region where conservative Christianity is strong and they have established themselves widely with great political influence, particularly in policies related to reproductive rights, contraception and the ban on abortion. Although **Honduras has Latin America's highest annual birth rate and the highest incidence of HIV and AIDS**, the disproportionate influence of these churches makes women's reproductive and health rights and education extremely **limited, difficult and dangerous to access.**

Last year before the coup, the National Congress, under pressure from the Church and conservative politicians, passed a law prohibiting the emergency contraceptive pill (the 'morning-after' pill). **It was vetoed by President Zelaya after the lobby from feminist organisations and the political intervention of the then Minister for Women.** However with the coup, the de facto government has discarded the presidential veto and reintroduced this bill.

Zelaya's modest but real domestic initiatives while not directly aimed at promoting women's rights, such measures have clearly been beneficial for women. His proposal to change the Constitution was highly supported by different social movements, including the women's sector, as important policies to advance women's rights were part of the agenda, such as:

- Secular state,
- equal opportunities and rights for women
- sexual and reproductive health rights,
- sexual education at schools,
- the right to a life free of violence
- political participation, the allocation of quotas
- among other issues relevant for women's empowerment

At the **National level**, the office of the National Institute for Women (INAM) was occupied on 14 July by soldiers and police officers. Feminists in Resistance stationed themselves opposite the office protesting against the militarization of the institute. By this stage the de facto government had appointed a new Minister for Women (*María Martha Díaz*). This appointment wasn't well received as it didn't follow a consultation process with women's organisations. But most importantly, because this new appointed minister is a representative of a fundamentalist religion group, the Opus Dei.

At the **Local level**, there are **Women's Municipal Offices**. Women's organisations had been 'struggling for a long time to get these Offices included as legal entities' in support of rural

women, and have been lobbying for funding, capacity training and technical assistance for them. During the coup, the then **Congress, rushed to pass the Local Government Act (Ley de Municipalidades) which has excluded the Women's Municipal Offices** as part of the official National planning programme.

Feminist in Resistance emphasise that they opposed the coup and the de facto government NOT because they totally approved of President Zelaya, but because they consider **the coup was illegal and undemocratic, it obstructed the advancement of women's rights and it had a big impact in disempowering women from poor, rural and vulnerable backgrounds.**

As the participation of women's organisations was very vocal during the coup, they became an important target as a repression strategy. Constant surveillance by police and civilian operatives in vehicles with tinted windows around the premises of several women's organisations was used by the de facto government, as well as the suspension of the transmission of radio programmes from two different women's organisations, for non-specific reasons.

Elections:

The de facto regime, accompanied with a strong militarisation in the country, and despite the disapproval of the International Community, called for elections in December, with one month's notice for campaigning. The opposition party decided not to participate in this election and supporters of the resistance against the coup decided not to vote in protest.

In the middle of this turmoil, many women leaders (some of them running for office at the local government level) had to leave the country for security and some of them were able to return to Honduras just after the inauguration of the new president elected, Porfirio Lobo, in January this year.

Progressively, many countries around the world have started recognising the government of Lobo as a legitimate one, despite the protest of Honduran people, who do not recognise either the process of his election as a democratic and transparent one, or his policies of a government of reconciliation.

After the coup:

A year after the coup, women continue to live in fear of detention, disappearance and rape by the security forces. The constant fear of violence they experienced during the demonstrations, as these were accompanied by heavily-armed soldiers and police with riot shields, tanks and cannons, has impacted their daily lives and mental health. Some of them continue to experience fear that their houses will be raided and their families harmed, as it was the case of one of our female leaders, when she returned from a protest found her partner killed inside the house. **This is a reality for women and girls living in pre-conflict, conflict and post-conflict situations, and Honduras is not the exception.**

Feminist and women's organisations, in protest of violations of human and women's rights, are not engaging with the current Government at any level. There is no communication or participation with the National Institution for women or the Minister for Women. The new Equal Opportunities National Action Plan has changed some sections related to sexual health

and reproductive rights. Trust in the Office of the Public Prosecutor has been broken due to their inability to provide any information on the advancement of investigations into the numerous reports of killings, assault and sexual attacks against women by the security forces at the height of the coup.

Women's organisations are also concerned about the legitimacy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, created to clarify the events that occurred before and after the coup. Women's organisations complain that half of the membership of this Commission is formed by members of the *de facto* government, therefore its transparency it is very questionable.

Militarisation:

CAWN is seriously concerned about the increase of the militarisation of the Central America region, here are some facts:

Colombian ex-president Alvaro Uribe arrived in Honduras for the inauguration ceremony and signed a brief declaration in which both Governments committed to implement an "action plan in security matters" stating that the authorities responsible for security in the two countries will exchange experiences and best practices.

Honduras is now opening the 2nd US military base and since July this year, Costa Rica has granted the US military a six-month window to bring 7,000 Marines, 5 planes and 46 warships into its territory to help stem the flow of drugs northward.

CAWN shares the concerns of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights in its June report, that "high-ranking Army officers or former members of the Army against whom complaints were brought for their participation in the *coup d'état*, are occupying executive positions in government offices under the administration of President Lobo. Thus, Deputy Head of the Security Joint Chiefs at the time of the *coup*, is now Director General of the Bureau of Immigration and Alien Affairs; Brigade General Cáceres is Director of Civil Aeronautics; former General Wily is in charge of the Bureau of the Merchant Marine, and former Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, General Vásquez is manager of the Honduran Telecommunications Company (Hondutel).

Under this militarised context, as you can imagine, the room for a true and full participation of women remains very limited. However, women's organisations are still playing an important role in the prevention of conflict; they have supported peaceful demonstrations, rejected the adoption of arms by the resistance groups, and continue denouncing human and women's rights violations through the avenues offered by the international law. Despite the control and manipulation of the mainstream media, they are developing alliances with radio programmes at local levels and in the internet to disseminate information.

They have strengthening their regional and international networks for support, solidarity and in particular, to make visible violations of human rights, rapes and killings that are happening to women leaders in remote areas.

Although 1325 still remains unknown to many policy and decision makers, civil servants and military personnel. Spaces for women and women's organisations to participate actively and equally in the peace negotiation table are both questionable and very limited. But despite of this, many vulnerable and marginalised women from the grassroots have been empowered to

participate in demonstrations and have gained the confidence of the possibility of political change because of their actions. They are determined to continue working and lobbying for their new constitution, something completely new and challenging during this crisis.

Song: We're going to burn the military uniform, because it represents the perpetrators of the coup and rapists.

Who are we? Feminist in Resistance