

Creating a Community of Women Leaders



Colombia's Network of Women Mayors for Democracy and Peace

Colombian Women in Local Government

In Colombia, women represent half of the population and yet are significantly underrepresented in local government. Women face many barriers that hold them back from their initial entry into politics, such as limited education and political experience, gender norms that place household responsibilities on women, lack of support and financial resources, lack of information and resources, and a lack of confidence. This was demonstrated in the latest (2015) local government elections where 132 women were elected as mayors, representing only 12% of 1,101 municipalities. The few women who do become elected face further obstacles that may prevent them from remaining or excelling in the position, including political violence, intimidation, and sexism.

The Challenge

When women elected officials take office, they are confronted by a political environment dominated by men, a way of working that they are not familiar or comfortable with, and continued sexism towards (and even between) women that put higher expectations on them. In this environment, they may lose confidence, feel isolated, or lack the skills to lead effectively. This case study shows how women can support each other to overcome these challenges and lead the development of their communities with confidence.

"The value added of being part of the Network of Women Mayors is, firstly, to be united and support each other in this titanic job that is being political leaders in a world dominated by men."

Yudy Pulgarín, Mayor of Frontino, Antioquia, Colombia



The Revival of the Network

In 2005, the Federation of Colombian Municipalities (FCoIM) created a network of women mayors as part of a process to promote gender mainstreaming. However, with little momentum and direction, it became inactive within several years. In 2016, FCoIM decided to reactivate its Network of Women Mayors for Democracy and Peace (hereafter “the Network”) with the objective of promoting the leadership and participation of women mayors. The reactivation was stimulated in part as a way to encourage the record number of women elected as mayors in the recent elections. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities offered support to the Network through its CISAL project (Sustainable and Inclusive Communities in Latin America) through the engagement of Canadian municipal experts, as it aligned with the project’s objectives to strengthen the inclusive governance of local governments in Colombia and Peru.

To launch the Network, all the women mayors were brought together in a workshop to develop a strategic plan for the period coinciding with their term in office. From the very beginning, FCoIM delivered the message that they are stronger when they work together towards a common objective. The mayors identified the priority actions within three main areas – advocacy, intergovernmental dialogue, and governance with a gender focus – as well as training needs. Canadian Mayor Joan Westland of Bolton-Est, Quebec, participated in the event to share her own experience overcoming barriers to entering politics and giving guidance on communication, leadership and planning.



The Network in Action

Over the three years that followed, the Network engaged its members through a series of initiatives:

1. Nominating **spokespeople** from geographical areas, as well as subject matter experts, creating a link between the national and local levels
2. Establishing a **What’s App** group to facilitate communication between the women, as well as with the FCoIM.
3. Facilitating **workshops** on priority topics, such as developing a joint position to be presented to national presidential candidates.
4. Providing **training opportunities**, such as webinars led by women mayors in their area of expertise and reserving spaces
5. Offering **online training** in Strategic Communication and Political Marketing to help women speak confidently in predominantly male settings.
6. Creating **community of practice** by identifying skills among the group, documenting good practices, and developing a micro-site where the women mayors can access a variety of resources.
7. **Peer-to-peer** learning from women leaders around the world on leadership and building a legacy.

Building a community of women leaders

The main impact of the Network is that the women mayors feel empowered, supported and heard, whether they are from a large municipality or small community. When asked about the main benefit of the Network, Mayor Libia Castillo of Yacuanquer, Nariño says, "...the teamwork, knowing that we are not alone, and that the Federation of Colombian Municipalities supports us...It has provided us with the tools to have confidence and assume our role in our communities." At all times and in all activities, it is the women mayors that set the agenda for discussions, identify priority needs, and flag issues that FColM should raise at the national level.

The women mayors have internalized the message that they are stronger together and the peer support they provide each other has created a tight-knit community of women leaders. The *What's App* group has provided the women Mayors with a venue to find the guidance they need to manage the specific challenges that they face. The nomination of spokespersons has further strengthened the community through continuous communication. The spokespersons consult with the women of their region to bring their views to the national level, and then disseminate information back to the group from the meetings and seminars attended. The spokespersons also talk about the Network in the media and highlight the great work of their peers.

The Network has contributed to increasing member's confidence and identifying subject matter experts on topics like governance, accountability, communication and project development. All the women know who has expertise in which topic. This allows them to seek support within the Network first, have training provided by peers who understand their unique challenges, and have knowledgeable leaders advocate to the national level on their behalf with a unified voice. At the international level, several women attended high-level conferences, such as the World Economic Forum, to share their good practices on engaging women in community development.

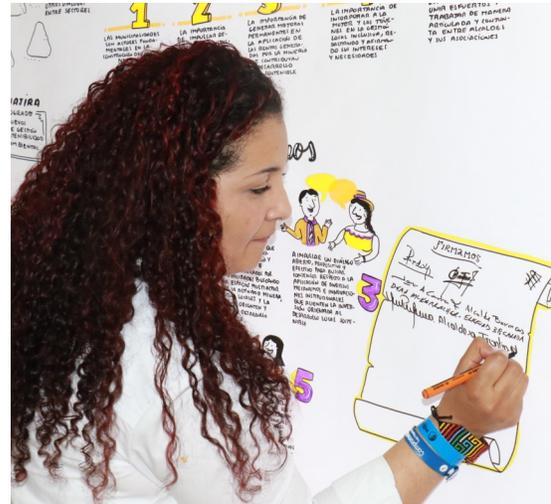


"I am a spokesperson for the Agenda 2024: a roadmap for the next women leaders of the country. Through this [agenda] we try to leave them a path that is more viable and safe, so that they do not have to live the series of inconveniences and situations that we have lived... so they do not commit the same errors."

Teresa María Salamanca de Avilez
Mayor of Chinú, Córdoba

Supporting the next generation of women leaders

In Colombia, the mayors are limited to one four-year term, which means that the Network welcomes new women leaders after each election. FCoIM has garnered support from a number of international institutions, such as UN Women and the International Republican Institute, who contribute to the Network's strategic goals and plan. This will ensure that the Network remains active. More importantly, however, is that members of the Network are motivated to support and share their experience with the next generation. That is why the FCoIM has organized a group of mentors to help connect the outgoing mayors with incoming mayors. The mentors begin their functions by organizing the first meeting of the Network following elections to motivate the women, share lessons learned, and introduce the subject matter experts they can contact when they need support. Most importantly, they continue to spread the message that they are not alone and that they are stronger together.



Additional Resources

The case study is one of a series that will highlight the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' work on empowering women leaders in its international and national programs. For more information visit fcm.ca.

View videos of Canadian municipal experts providing advice to women leaders in Colombia.

Joan Westland, Mayor of Bolton-Est, Quebec:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIOZbwg7d-g>

Joyce Timpson, Councillor Sioux Lookout, ON:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JuajxFFXAw0>

"We [women] have to work twice as hard to get half as far."

Joyce Timpson,
Councillor, Sioux Lookout, ON



Credits

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