



Regional Initiatives: The Americas

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EXPERTS PROVIDE MEDIA TRAINING AT MONTEVIDEO WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

(Leaders refine skills at "Vital Voices of the Americas") (700)

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MONTEVIDEO, Uruguay -- Any woman who aims to succeed in public life needs one basic but crucial skill: the ability to project a clear message that sticks in the mind of her audience, says U.S. media expert Karen Friedman.

"It doesn't matter how important your cause is or how powerful your vision -- you cannot lead if you cannot communicate that vision," she said during one of several media workshops at the "Vital Voices of the Americas: Women in Democracy" conference held October 1 - 3 in Montevideo, Uruguay.

Following the wave of democracy that swept the Western Hemisphere over a decade and a half, women are increasingly occupying leadership roles at all levels of government and other areas of public life. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) reports that from 1997 to 1998, women's representation in Latin and Caribbean legislatures surged 5 percent, bringing the average to 15.4 percent -- more than two percentage points higher than the global average.

Similarly, economic reforms have opened new avenues for women to start their own small businesses or to advance their careers in thriving companies. Throughout the region, women's participation in the labor force has risen over the past three decades, as has their enrollment in universities. In Uruguay, for example, about 60 percent of the university population is female.

A recurring theme of the Montevideo conference, however, was that such progress is not enough. The U.S. Agency for International Development, for example, reports that women in the region still earn on average only 72 percent of men's wages, even taking into account differences in education and skill levels.

The media workshops at the Montevideo conference, sponsored by the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) and organized by Women's Campaign International (WCI) in New York, were designed to highlight the importance of dealing with the media and to refine women's skills in that area. Increasingly, women leaders must communicate with constituents and consumers through "print, radio, television and electronic forums, as well as the more traditional speeches and debates," WCI President Fredrica Friedman pointed out.

"We are at Vital Voices to do media training for USIA because the empowerment of women is the future of sustainable democracies worldwide," Friedman added. "Our voices must be heard and we must be represented at the executive, legislative, judicial and business tables to ensure that

our interests and goals are reflected in the policies of our countries."

The WCI team of experts at the Vital Voices conference included Sylvia Cavazos, a former TV reporter and producer who manages media training and crisis intervention at the Hill & Knowlton firm in Houston, Texas; Patricia Perez, a partner in a Los Angeles public relations firm; Karen Friedman of Philadelphia, who is president of a company that does large-scale training for corporations and universities; and photojournalist Susan Cox of Oregon.

One of the livelier segments of the training involved the videotaping of interviews with the workshop participants, which were then played back on a television screen. All the trainees then joined the workshop leader in offering advice to the interview subject.

The WCI provided similar media training at two previous Vital Voices conferences in Belfast and Vienna, and also worked with women candidates in Sarajevo before this year's September elections. According to Friedman, WCI trainees range from first-time candidates for local office in rural areas to women senators, ministers and -- in one case -- a deputy prime minister.

"What we all know is that we continue to benefit from refining our message, and from preparing and practicing it in the many different media forms and fora that are available," Friedman said.

The conference in Montevideo was co-sponsored by the U.S. government and the IDB and brought together about 400 of those leaders from all 34 of the region's democracies. Over three days, they exchanged ideas and developed strategies in three broad areas: political leadership by women, legal and judicial reforms on behalf of women's rights, and policies that support women's participation in business.