

# Social and Economic Independence for Women in Chile

Chile is a thin strip of land 3,500 km long and never wider than 402 km. The country's climate varies greatly with its vast longitudinal distance and, in general terms, the geographic characteristics of the different zones define the social and cultural characteristics of the population. Chile has a very poor distribution of wealth and there is an **increasingly wide gap between rich and poor**. Access to social services like health care and education is also inequitable.

Over one-third of Chile's 15 million people live in and around the capital of Santiago. This project takes place in two *comunas*, or poor neighbourhoods, on the outskirts of Santiago. The comunas of San Bernardo and El Bosque are characterized by a high concentration of poor sectors – a product of government policy in the 1980s to eradicate poor encampments from the central areas of the city and move them to the periphery of greater Santiago. This resulted in a population explosion in the receiving communities, which did not have the social or economic infrastructure necessary to deal with the newcomers. Since that time, largely due to increased urban migration, the situation has worsened considerably, and the unemployment rate in poor comunas has now risen above 30%. The **increased levels of poverty have resulted in the presence of severe social problems**, including drug abuse, delinquency and unemployment.

These comunas are characterized by basic housing with poor sanitary conditions and limited access to services. Although every house has access to utilities such as water and



lights, these services have been privatized in recent years and, as such, the costs to residents are higher. Access to public services such as health centres and schools is also limited and very basic at best. Although there are government-run health centres and schools in El Bosque and San Bernardo, the services are nowhere near sufficient to satisfy the needs of the population. At the community level, both men and women have seen their economic situation deteriorate as a result of the economic crisis affecting Chile. **Women, however, suffer additional discrimination** as they have

more limited access to employment, receive lower salaries and are often the only income earner in the family.

Despite the strength of the women's movement in Chile, women still occupy very traditional roles in the household and are generally responsible for domestic duty and childcare. In the workforce, Chilean women are paid a much lower salary than their male counterparts and occupy only 13 seats in parliament compared to the 107 occupied by men (1999). Traditional values perpetuate the marginalization of women, especially in poor areas. Women are generally less educated than men, and, unless employed in a servile job to help support the family, their activities are usually limited to the home. Furthermore, on average, Chilean women of the lower classes have three children under the age of 18, during their most productive economic years, which makes it all the more difficult to leave the house for extended periods of time, and resources do not exist to guarantee child care.



**CHANGE FOR CHILDREN ASSOCIATION (CFCA)** is an Edmonton-based non-profit, non-governmental organization with a 28-year history of working for sustainable, grass-roots community development in Latin America and the Philippines. Our development projects, their cost and priority, are determined by our Southern partners according to the needs of their communities. In Canada, our education program engages the public in a process of awareness raising, analysis and action on issues of global justice.

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Canada



The creation of low quality jobs, as well as the persistence of low salaries are at the root of the progressive increase in poverty in Chile. Many jobs that do exist are insecure, and there is a marked inequality in the distribution and access to available work—the unemployment rate among the poorest 20% is currently three times the national average. Unequal income distribution over the past 30 years has resulted in 70% of Chilean households earning less than the national average. The international financial crisis and its repercussions in Chile will only result in the slowing of growth and a further reduction in employment. This will affect the poorest segments of society most severely.

CEPPAC, a Chilean NGO that has been working in community development for many years, will implement the **Building Social and Economic Independence for Women in Popular Sectors** project. CEPPAC operates three principle programs of social assistance: a Children and Adolescents Program, an education and risk prevention program aimed at child street workers; a Vocational Training Program which provides training and support for youth, women and entrepreneurs to pursue income generation opportunities; and an Adult Formal Education Program, an adult study program in basic education designed to help individuals obtain their secondary education requirements and pursue post-secondary education if desired.

The project's **principal objective is to generate income in the families of 60 women** in the comunas of San Bernardo and El Bosque. It also seeks increased community participation by these women and the amplification of micro-enterprise support networks, which will result in the social and economic integration of poor women into the skilled labour market. Vocational qualification and income generation will offer a sustainable self-employment alternative to menial low-paid labour.



This project allows for the introduction of technical, formative and organizational tools to a marginalized sector of the population. As the project promotes the economic participation of women, it will serve to decrease social inequalities between men and women as well as improve the quality of life of women. Although the project is directed towards women, it will indirectly **improve conditions for their families and the community at large**. While both men and women require projects like this one in order to improve their situations, CEPPAC believes that it is important to give worth to and emphasize the role of women in the economy. This is based on the fact that there is a high percentage of family households that are run by women. CEPPAC maintains that a project such as this will improve the conditions in the community at large, and because of its focus on women, it will ultimately have a greater impact on improving the conditions of poverty.

Participating women will expand their capacity for action through a process of technical training for work and the creation of micro-enterprise initiatives (collective and individual). This will help them to achieve greater levels of economic independence (personal autonomy) and interdependence (social organization) and as such contribute to the betterment of their quality of life and that of their families.



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