

## ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

In April 1996, the Pan American Consultation of Legal and Health Experts met at American University's Washington College of Law to examine some of the obstacles to better coordination among the legal community, health professionals and other advocacy groups in Latin America in combating violence against women. The meeting was co-hosted by the Washington College of Law's Women and International Law Program, the Pan American Health Organization, and the Health and Development Policy Project. It consisted of legal and health experts from Mexico, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, Columbia, Peru, and the United States. In its *Conclusions and Recommendations*, the group found that the traditional model of legal education encountered in most of Latin America remains one of the biggest obstacles to efforts to improve the legal status of women. They also concluded that any effort to integrate a gender perspective into law school curricula must be part of a larger strategy regarding the operation of gender within the legal doctrine and legal institutions of Latin America.

A distinctive feature of civil law education is its methodology, which embodies the tradition of scholar-made law. In civil law countries, where case law does not have the same precedential value as in common law countries, the principal sources of law are the codes, as interpreted in doctrine by eminent legal scholars. Most law schools maintain a model of legal education where students study the codes and treatises, learning primarily through a system of lecture and memorization. Modern treatise writers often reinvent the writings of scholars of the past. Legal scholars writing and teaching from a gender perspective are isolated within the academic community and their scholarship is not recognized as doctrine. The incorporation of international obligations affecting women's rights into domestic law through the development of legal doctrines within domestic law is for these scholars an issue of vital importance.

Between November 3 and November 6, 1997, American University's Washington College of Law hosted *The Pan American Conference on Transforming Women's Legal Status: Overcoming the Barriers in Legal Doctrine and Legal Education*. The Conference was an opportunity for academics, advocates and university officials to

examine Latin American legal systems from the perspective of gender and to exchange experiences regarding the challenge of integrating the intersecting perspectives of gender and human rights into legal doctrine and the law school curriculum. The event consisted of a series of presentations, teaching demonstrations, round-table discussions, and small group exercises and focused on both content and pedagogy. Law teachers exchanged and developed teaching materials in working groups organized by subject matter and returned to their countries with the teaching tools and materials that they need for integrating a gender and human rights perspective into their own course work. In strategy discussions they explored ways to work with law school officials and faculty members to integrate gender perspectives into other law school courses.

This event was part of a larger project at the Washington College of Law to support the work of women's advocates and academics writing and teaching from a gender perspective at law schools in Latin America. It has several phases, including 1) the Pan American Conference; 2) a pre-conference publication compiling some of the best articles analyzing Latin American legal systems from a gender perspective; 3) a post-conference publication, including selected papers and teaching materials exchanged and developed at the conference; 4) development of a casebook on *Women and the Law* for legal academics in Latin America; 5) *Teaching, Research and Advocacy* Fellowships at the Washington College of Law; and 6) fellowships at law faculties in Latin America for Latin American advocates and legal scholars writing and teaching from a gender perspective.