

Latin American Women Breaking Isolation and Building Alternative Spaces for Participation

PAULA HEVIA

Cet article explore comment les femmes de toute l'Amérique latine, participent à la création d'espaces et de pratiques solidaires dans leurs luttes contre la pauvreté et les inégalités sociales. Les exemples de l'École Alternative de Femmes du Chiapas, du Centre de Recherche et d'Action pour la Femme Latinoaméricaine (CIAM), et le Réseau de Femmes pour le Développement, seront utilisés pour illustrer ces processus.

Este artículo explora como las mujeres participan a la creación d'espacios y de participación solidarias en sus luchas en contra de la pobreza y de las desigualdades sociales. Los ejemplos de la Escuela Alternativa de Mujeres de Chiapas, del Centro de Investigación y de Acción de la Mujer de América Latine (CIAM) y la Red de Mujeres para el Desarrollo, serán utilizados para ilustrar estos procesos

Approximately 30 years after the implementation of neoliberal reforms in the region, broad sectors of Latin American societies continue to cope with the consequences of major reductions in States' expenditures and trade liberalization policies. These measures have resulted in the privatization of social welfare institutions and public services, the elimination of governmental subsidy programs, and the deregulation of national markets. Also known as structural adjustment policies, these measures have come at a very high social cost: increase of poverty levels, high unemployment rates, exacerbation of social inequalities and growing insecurity. As a result, many men, head of households, lost their jobs making low income families even more vulnerable. Consequently a greater number of women have entered the formal and informal labour market in the past years (mostly in the service sector or working in maquiladoras), while some have chosen to migrate in search for work. Although women's experiences have varied from one country to another, it is fair to say that the kind of work women are confined to do have low social and economic value, little if any benefits or job security and are often executed under very difficult conditions.

In recent years Latin American women have been at the forefront of a number of innovative initiatives in an effort to create new forms of solidarity and spaces for participation. Self-identified as mothers, workers, refugees, poor, Indigenous, entrepreneurs, catechists, artisans, feminists, lesbians, and migrants, organized women have created alternative spaces for their participation from which they have successfully generated their own agendas for action and social change. In this brief article, I wish to highlight two initiatives: the Alternative Women School of the Centro de Investigación y de Acción de la Mujer de América Latina (CIAM) and the Red de Mujeres para el Desarrollo (Women's Network for Development). I was fortunate to come across the work of these two collectives in the context of my doctoral research and through my collaboration with the International Secretariat for Human Development at York University.

The School is located and works with women from the state of Chiapas, in Mexico. In its work, it has adopted a right base approach and is openly feminist. The Network brings together women from across the Americas and focuses mainly on supporting income-generating micro-projects through the exchange of information. Even if some affiliates self-identify as feminists, the Network as a whole is not explicitly feminist and is not political. Hence CIAM adopts what Maxine Molyneux calls a strategic gender needs approach, which consist in challenging women's subordinate position in society to achieve greater equality. The Network, on the other hand, adopts a practical gender needs approach since it seeks women empowerment by providing responses and support to immediate productive related needs without directly questioning gender roles and unequal social relations (Molyneux).

The Alternative Women School of Chiapas

The Alternative Women School of Chiapas is an initiative put forward in 2003 by the CIAM. Since 1991 CIAM,



Participants from the Escuela Alternativa de Mujeres de Chiapas the day of their graduation. San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico, November 2006. Photo: Paula Hevia

an independent non-governmental organization, has worked jointly with Indigenous communities to promote development initiatives and gender equity in Chiapas. Throughout the years, CIAM has articulated its work around four key issues: health, sustainable agriculture, gender analysis, and education. The area of education includes a literacy and leadership development program, to which the Alternative Women School of Chiapas belongs. The School is based on the premise that female leaders exist everywhere and that they play an active role within their respective communities, towns, and cities. By building on women's "know how," CIAM facilitators are aware that a whole community will benefit, directly or indirectly, from women's learnings (Arias Leal).

Inspired by popular education methodology, CIAM facilitators designed a program that corresponded to the needs expressed by women from grassroots organizations in Chiapas —mainly but not exclusively Indigenous— through which they could explore different aspects of their lives as women and as leaders. During the first cohort the methodology for the School was organized around the following themes: human rights; sexuality and reproductive health; political participation and analysis; methodology and popular education.

In November 2006, the first generation of 30 women graduated from the Alternative Women School. For the majority of participants, which in the most part had not finished their elementary education, it was the occasion

to celebrate an important personal accomplishment. From 2003 to 2006, they acquired new organizational skills and analytical tools, and they strengthened their self-confidence as women and leaders, while creating long-term bonding with women from across the state of Chiapas. At the political level, participants discussed, analyzed, and exchanged their understandings of the different power relations prevailing within their society in order to strengthen their own process of empowerment and autonomy at the local level. The School has therefore been a space from which women have openly discussed aspects of their lives that would, otherwise, go unquestioned.

If we consider that until recently Indigenous women had limited access to spaces from which to organize outside their communities, the creation of the school is particularly innovative in the Chiapanecan context (Bonfil Sánchez, 60; Arias Leal). This is not to say that women have not been organizing in the past decades but rather that their participation has historically tended to be marginal or as an extension of their relation to a brother, a father, or a husband, leaving them limited opportunities to participate autonomously as women (Garza Caligaris 115). This can in part be explained by the fact that women have generally not been perceived as political subjects and only under rare circumstances are they recognized as having rights to land (or *ejido*). Most importantly though, and as guardians and transmitters of their respective community's cultural inheritance, Indigenous women are often faced with the re-

sponsibility of ensuring the material and social reproduction of their community, even if it means reproducing unequal power relations between women and men (Bonfil Sánchez 63; Hernández). This has been reinforced by the important role Indigenous traditions have played for Indigenous people, both as a tool of resistance and as a mechanism of social cohesion, making it difficult for women to openly challenge well-established social roles and responsibilities. On a more pragmatic level, and given the explicit and implicit social mores prevailing in Indigenous communities, nowadays it is still difficult for a woman to travel on her

posed by poverty, social inequalities and exclusion. Among these projects we can mention recycling centers, bakeries, eco-tourism, radio programs, art craft cooperatives, and cleaning service agencies among others. As the following testimony corroborates, this kind of micro-businesses have demonstrate that despite women's modest resources they were capable of putting together successful small businesses beneficial to a whole community.

The majority of people that live in our community, from displaced and itinerant vendors, have scarce

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own, especially to attend workshops and meetings, without being the target of malicious comments, threats and even physical intimidation. Finally, and even when women do have the conditions (i.e. a supportive husband, father or family) to have an active life outside their community they are no less required to have tended to all their responsibilities before considering the possibility of doing something outside their already busy schedule.

In 2008, CIAM's School re-opened its doors to a second cohort of Chiapanecan women. Just before going to press, I asked CIAM's coordinator, Gladys Alfaro, how different from the first generation the second experience of the School was:

Better. The first experience helped us strengthen our methodology in our work with women. We have integrated the theme of "agro-ecology" as a result of our analysis of the situation of women living in poverty and their need to create alternatives. Now what we are trying to do is to integrate practical work that better suit their needs. We have also integrated the theme of "political impact" to do follow up work around the invitations women have received to participate in the Social Forum of the Americas, the Hemispheric Encounter Against Militarization, the World March of Women, the Latin American Feminist Encounter. . . . [Finally, we] have also started working on "masculinity" with the organizations to which women attending the School are affiliated. We still need to assess results, but from my point of view, the proposal is very interesting for the women.

The Women's Network for Development

In the past decades, women across Latin America have come up with innovative initiatives to overcome the challenges

resources. The streets have open sewage and public services are inefficient. As a group, we have wanted to improve the conditions of people living here, through a project called "win-win." [The project] consists in receiving material to recycle for which people get points they can later exchange for basic products, like food and school material [in our barter shop]. With this exchange we are able to commercialize the material that is brought to us and use the profits to keep the project going." (Woman from the Asociación de Recolectoras de Basuras y Reciclaje del Sur Occidente de Soledad, Barranquilla, Colombia, qtd. in WND 2007:1-2)

Aware of the importance of these local initiatives for local communities the founder of the Women's Network for Development (WND), Nancy Boye, wanted to create a forum for women involved in productive projects across Latin America. The idea was to develop a communication strategy that would allow women to distribute and exchange resourceful material on their own organizational experience to support one another. For Boye, this initiative was beneficial for women and their projects, but was also a response to the selective nature of international aid interventions in the region which tended to concentrate resources and support in sub-regions deemed priorities according to specific geopolitical conjunctures (Boye). What was therefore envisioned was the creation of a community articulated around its affiliates' organizational needs, horizontal exchanges of information, the recognition of local women's "know-how" and the benefits of relations of reciprocity among people facing similar problems.

The administrative body of the Network, the Coordination, publishes an extensive newsletter three times a year, called *La Red*. Affiliates are regularly invited to post ads,



Affiliates from the *Red de Mujeres para el Desarrollo* from Bolivia and Peru, at the regional encounter in La Paz, Bolivia. La Paz, Bolivia, October 2008. Photo: Paula Hevia

send testimonies and showcase their projects. The following are extracts taken from the newsletter *La Red* and are examples of how women have shared their experiences with other affiliates:

As a group, we have made many of our dreams come true. On a personal level, had I not participated in this organization I would not have learned so many things. I would most likely be at home enslaved by my children, which I think I was before all this. I dedicated myself to them, to clean, to iron and to cook. If I had stayed at home they would only have seen me as a mother.... (Faniem Vargas, from the Asociación de Mujeres Agroindustriales of San Luis de Grecia, Costa Rica, qtd. in WND 2006c: 4)

We now see an increase in the number of years of education in young girls and boys, we have better access to food for our family, and we can purchase equipment for our housing. Women from the group can now do what they want with the money, since they are the ones earning their own income. (Woman from the Asociación de Mujeres Unidas para el Desarrollo Sostenible (ASMUDES) in Sucre, Bolivia sharing changes resulting from their initiative, qtd. in WND 2006b: 2)

Moreover, through the newsletter, affiliate access valuable

recommendations regarding their micro-businesses. More specifically, each edition of *La Red* comes with a detachable one-page brochure called *Como Hacer* (How to do...). In it, affiliates can access valuable tips and information on issues related to their administrative, organizational and productive practices in a very accessible language and format. For Maria Cristina Minuet these brochures have in fact been very useful pedagogical tools in her workshops and meetings with women.

In addition to women involved in productive projects the Network also counts with affiliates whose work is oriented at providing services and support to organized women. Melba Arias, who is affiliated to the WDN through the Comité de Mujeres de INZA (Colombia), is one of them. Since 2000 she, and three other colleagues, have been coordinating and participating in different campaigns in the South-Western region of Colombia for the recognition of female peasants' work, for the right to food sovereignty, sexual education, and to stop domestic violence. As such, her work most often involves activities of dissemination of information, raising awareness, and networking between locally and nationally based organizations.

The work and experiences acquired by these local leaders have been central for the growth of a network such as the WDN. Since direct financial support is not part of the Network's mission, women affiliate mainly to learn about other women's initiatives and share their own experiences with others. These direct contacts have led to the creation

of very meaningful exchanges and networking experiences. For example, this is what Sandra Garcías, coordinator of La Fundación de Mujeres de Quevedo para el Desarrollo (Ecuador), had to say after meeting with Maria Luisa Hurtado, coordinator of Mujeres Negras de Esmeraldas (Ecuador):

Through the Network we were informed that they [the women from Esmeraldas] had been working in this area of social work [popular banks] for three years. This motivated us to visit them in order to

this evaluation are being processed, the encounter was undoubtedly a great opportunity to invigorate a dialogue among women from both Bolivia and Peru and strengthen their commitment of solidarity towards one another.

Conclusion: Women Breaking with “Internal Colonialism”

In the 1970s, scholars argued that the “under-development” of Latin American societies was due to their subordination to the accumulation needs of core capitalists’ countries.

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see what we could learn from their experience and see if they could, in return, learn something from ours. We had the opportunity to attend a course on “Participatory Citizenship” held in their neighbourhood El Quilombo, situated in a much marginalized area of Esmeraldas. As for us, because they were interested in the way we organized our bank here in Quevedo, we gave them access to our files, our formats, administrative and control forms. In summary, it was a real pleasure to meet courageous and brave women fighters that have not lost hope that one day we will live better lives... not by having to wait for the “paternalistic” support of the state, but rather by valuing their skills, talents and capacities. (Garcías qtd. in WND 2006a).

Moreover, for Argentinean affiliate Maria Cristina Minuet, what makes the WND a key resource for women is that they are able to collaborate outside the relations of clientelism (Minuet). In other words, the information, contact and visibility the Network provides its affiliates are not conditional to their political support, as often required of them by local political actors. In addition to this, and as underlined by Christian Salas Sanhueza who has been affiliated to the Network and working with Mapuche women from Rayen Folle in Chile for many years, the Network has also allowed affiliates to showcase their products and expand markets for their products (Salas).

Ten years have passed since the WND was created. The Coordination of the Network is now in the process of evaluating outcomes and assessing the challenges that lie ahead. This led to the holding of a regional encounter last October in La Paz, Bolivia. In this occasion participants were asked to give their opinion on the value of their experience as part of the Network. While the results of

Others argued that internal relations of exploitation between classes were as important as North-South relations. For Pablo Gonzalez Casanova and Rodolfo Stavenhagen, relations of exploitation were not determined only by class but also by racial and cultural differences. To illustrate the mechanisms of exploitation between the elite of European descent (*ladinos*) and the Indigenous peoples, they coined the term “internal colonialism.” According to them, Indigenous peoples were not only subjected to class exploitation but also to a form of colonialism based on race and cultural domination (Zapata 256). The idea of internal colony refers to a group or a society with a distinct ethnic and cultural background that is subject to political and administrative control by the dominant classes and institutions of a group or society with a different ethnic and cultural background (Kay 66). Hence, defined in these terms, “internal colonialism” can potentially exist on a geographical, racial, or ethnic basis within culturally dual or plural societies.

Despite the fact that the work of Casanova and Stavenhagen acknowledged the effects of the colonial legacy on the region’s internal relations of power, many critiques were articulated around the limitations of the concept of internal colonialism. Some considered the concept an attempt to circumscribe a reality in a homogeneous and a-historical fashion, while others argued it allowed for the understanding of only some aspects of the so-called “under” development of these societies. In other words, it portrayed Indigenous societies as if they were not themselves structured around social hierarchies and as if all “peripheries” were experiencing the same process of internal colonialism with little differences between one another (Kay 68).

The concept of internal colonialism was, therefore, rather shy in assessing the agency of the population of

the peripheries, as well as the gender component of the social dynamics the concept attempted to describe. Of course, such omissions reflected the state of the debate at the time. Nonetheless one could argue that despite the concept's limitations and in light of more recent social transformations in the region, the term may still be useful to understand the reality that many women face today.

It can be argued that organized women constitute small communities across Latin America on the basis of their gender, social status, and distinctive, yet common, experiences of oppression. As such, they have historically been subjected, in different ways, to political and administrative forms of social control, to hegemonic gender relations as well as to dominant classes, groups and institutions. If we want to push the analogy even further, women's paid and unpaid work, critical for the survival of households, is being used by capital to ensure the social reproduction of society, just as colonies were once used to ensure the consumption and reproductive needs of imperial states. Women are hence exploited because of their class, ethnic and cultural background but also because they are women, subjecting them not to a double but a triple form of exploitation. In this sense, through their collective initiatives, marginalized women are rising against social practices, values and norms that, as a form of internal colonialism, impede them from fully participating within their communities.

As a result, I have highlighted the fact that women's collective initiatives have represented diverse strategies to break their isolation, improve the living conditions of their families and communities and build an agenda for social change. Women have often done so outside traditional organizational arenas, such as political parties, unions, agrarian, and other labour-oriented organizations. While not always interested in adopting a common political agenda, or an openly feminist one, they have actively responded, to the changing world in which they live. They have taken action in identifying their needs, gathering resources, learning new skills, overcoming numerous obstacles and challenges, while extensively sharing their personal and collective dreams and hopes.

Collective initiatives such as the Alternative Women School and the Women's Network for Development have, on different scales, contributed to the mobilization and collective action of thousands of women. These initiatives, while representing very different approaches and strategies to women's needs have nonetheless allowed for the articulation of agendas for action that reflect women's needs and priorities, celebrate their skills and collective initiatives.

Paula Hevia is a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at York University and has been working on gender politics and social change in Latin America. In the recent years, she has done extensive fieldwork in Southern Mexico, Costa-Rica and Bolivia. She is the coordinator of the research project entitled Grassroots Networks and Women's Struggle Against

Poverty: A Study of the Women's Development Network at the International Secretariat for Human Development. phevia@yorku.ca

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