

Women and the Economy: the Challenges

Solidarity-based economic practices: between resistance and social justice

Introduction

This paper is very largely based on work conducted by the WSSE Women and Economy Workshop, piloted by a committee of academics and practitioners: the University of Quebec (Josée Belleau and Cécile Sabourin), the ADEL (Madeleine Hersent) and the GRESP (Nedda Angulo). It has been compiled based on case histories (also produced by academics and practitioners), observations and proposals arising out of various meetings, as well as the intermediate summary reports written by Cécile Sabourin¹. This summary report places these works in perspective, in the light of the more general problem of gender inequality.

Summary

Whilst male/female inequalities remain remarkably entrenched, many female-led local initiatives combine economic and solidarity-based actions with the aim of providing fairer access to basic economic, social and political rights. Despite their weaknesses — which are, furthermore, very largely the result of their invisibility, of unequal access to resources and the inadequacy of traditional regulatory frameworks and project-support procedures — these initiatives play an essential role in compensating for the gaps in, or even absence of, social justice. It is thus vital and urgent to recognize the true value of these initiatives so that they may be afforded the resources needed to reach their full potential. Altering the balance of strength and power at the global level and ensuring that rights are respected are two obvious priorities. However, faced with the inertia of social norms and the depth of local resistance — often underestimated — these can only be effectively achieved if promoted and sustained by locally-based initiatives. The role of such initiatives consists in identifying and placing needs in their context, then expressing them and making them public, primarily at the local level — a stage that often involves demanding and seemingly interminable consultation, negotiation and bargaining — and possibly at the national or even international level. We further note that many of these initiatives socialize elements of reproductive activities traditionally provided by women. The next stage is then to denature the sexualized character of the production/reproduction pair, which itself also goes a long way to explaining gender inequalities. Denaturing is a means not only of according a just value to women's contribution to the production of wealth, it is also a way to break with the hyper-individualist and materialist paradigm that rules our daily lives at present. The time has come to take up the challenge: what is at stake is the ability of our modern societies to address the struggle for equality on every level, and to devise new forms of solidarity.

¹ Aside from papers produced specifically for the Workshop and cited in the Bibliography, we also benefited from the participation and input of: Vincent Comenne, Laurent Fraisse, Xaritou Frosso, Elizabeth Hauschildt, Esther Hinostroza Ricaldi, José Hipolito Santos, Maria Rosa Lotti, Marie-Hélène Mottin-Sylla, Joelle Palmieri, Brigitte Ricci, Pierrette Soumbou and Anastassiou Vassiliki.

PERSISTENT INEQUALITIES: THE INERTIA OF THE BALANCE OF POWER AND THE DIFFICULTIES OF PUTTING RIGHTS INTO PRACTICE

Women — across the world and without exception — continue to suffer discrimination on multiple levels. Despite many advances, not only legal but also in terms of education and health, the results in terms of real inequalities are, sadly, deeply disappointing not to say disturbing, since they illustrate how complex and painstaking the quest for equality remains.

Economic and material inequalities²

The situation of single women — single mothers, widows and elderly women living alone — is extremely worrying. In the mid 90s, over half of women over the age of 65 in Asia and Africa were widowed, compared with only 10 to 20% of men the same age. Many of these women suffer from monetary poverty and social exclusion, and their vulnerability is only going to increase as the population ages. With the same responsibilities, training and work experience, women remain less well paid than men. Their wage represents around three-quarters of men's; the difference in education only explains a fifth of this discrepancy, the rest springing from diverse standards and areas of discrimination. Women remain at a disadvantage in terms of accessing property. This is caused by the inequalities inherent in inheritance as well as various social norms that forbid women from owning a property title or benefiting from it, even where legislation provides for equality of rights. And access to property, if it needs specifying, remains the principal source of economic, social and symbolic power.

Women workers in the shadows

Women remain concentrated in the least prestigious and therefore least well-paid business sectors. This gender-biased labour market exists in every country: women are over-represented in service posts, technical and professional positions, and office and sales jobs, whereas men are in the majority in production jobs as well as management and administration posts. In countries that favour salaried labour (countries in the northern hemisphere), women are far more numerous in insecure and part-time jobs, work which is often imposed rather than freely chosen. In countries where self-employment and the informal sector are dominant, women are almost totally excluded from formal jobs and thus from any social protection. In rural areas, they are confined to cultivating food crops, and whilst these do provide for their families' food security, they are far less well paid than the export crops, reserved for the men. In the urban environment, small businesses, catering and sub-contracting in the form of homeworking are often the only possible options due to a lack of capital, training and time. For in general, women work more than men. Statistics produced by the UNDP during the 90s showed that, in nearly all countries, the hours women spent working are longer than men's, but the work remains largely invisible since unpaid. Around two-thirds of men's working time is spent on remunerated activities; this proportion is reversed for women, reaching three-quarters of working time in Southern hemisphere countries (UNDP, 1995). This inequality leads to another, linked to time management. Regardless of the country, women take on nearly all family tasks, and sometimes also local community tasks, whilst increasingly also carrying out paid work. By choice, but also by necessity, notably for the poorest women.

Education and health: some very slow steps forward, and some steps backward

The right to a decent education, in spite of some acknowledged progress, is still far from established. In all Southern hemisphere countries, inequalities continue to be marked for secondary, higher and technical education as well as for subjects seen to be more prestigious. The rate of school dropout is also much higher for girls, to the extent that, in the final analysis, progress in terms of literacy remains very slow. Over 56% of the 104 million children not in school are girls, and women account for almost two-thirds of the 860 million plus illiterate people (UNDP, 2005). Having risen regularly over recent decades, life expectancy is now dropping (UNDP, 2005). Two factors can explain

² All data in this paragraph is sourced from a World Bank report (World Bank 2003).

this: the prevalence of Aids in Africa, which affects more women than men, and the high mortality rate amongst young girls in India and China.

Access to power: a male bastion

Whether at the family, community or institutional level, women's right to speak out remains largely theoretical. In many countries, they still do not have the right to own land, manage a property, manage a company or even to travel without their husband's consent. Aside from a few exceptions, women's involvement in political life is embryonic. Although the right to vote has been established in most countries, women remain largely underrepresented in local and national assemblies, with an average of under 10% of seats in parliament, with the exception of East Asia where they occupy between 18 and 19% of seats. In regions considered to be developed, women barely attain 8% of ministerial positions (World Bank, 2003).

Why such disappointing results?

The inertia of social and cultural norms, which in their various ways endorse women's inferiority, and the force of resistance to any change largely explain the slow progress made in the quest for equality. If policies promoting equality of the sexes initiated over the last few decades have such trouble producing the expected effects, it is also because they are proving to be incapable of taking into account specific national and regional characteristics. Gender inequalities are a social construct, variable in time as well as space. As long as universalist policies remain blind to specific local particularities, as well as to women's visions and aspirations, they are condemned to remain a pious hope (Dubois, 2000). Whilst our conception of wealth and efficiency remains anchored in the dominant economic paradigm, the thorny question of women's access to power is also condemned to failure; we need to act as well as to *think* on different lines (Sabourin, 1999).

THE GENDER OF ECONOMY

Over and above cultural and historic specifics — each society constructs its differences — does a common denominator exist? The nub of the matter indisputably lies in women's reproductive role and the ensuing physical, biological and psychological differences. Asserted openly and unambiguously by the gods or nature in so-called traditional societies, modern thought embraces an approach to women's role that is more discreet, but also more insidious and thus even more dangerous. Based on the concept of collective utility, biology and the political economy are now used to 'scientifically' justify the relegation of women to the domestic sphere and their disappearance, both physical and symbolic, from the public arena (Perrot, 1995). You would have to be naïve — or really be acting in bad faith — to contest the fundamentally gender-biased nature of a series of pairs that reinforce each other: public/private, market/non-market, professional/family, production/reproduction, and egoism/altruism. We shall take a brief look at the three hypotheses that underpin economics. They are supposed to merely simplify reality in order to make it easier to explain, whereas in fact their normative power is significant.³

Masculine freedom and rationality *versus* feminine dependence and altruism

The first hypothesis is that of a rational, free individual whose choices are sovereign in terms of ties of personal subordination and the weight of religion. What this theory does not mention is that this individual — the famous *homo economicus* — is also fundamentally masculine. Whilst constant effort is made to liberate men from the links of personal subordination, women are asked to look after the harmony of the family space. Whilst dependence is considered as a serious obstacle to human dignity, women's obligations condemn them to dependence.

The self-regulating market: the feminine exception

3 Criticism of the sexism inherent in economics is evidently nothing new. Here we are providing a very brief and partial summary of many different works. See, for example, Folbre (1997), Sabourin (1999), Verschuur and Reyssoo (2000) (all written in French).

The second hypothesis is that of the self-regulating market, alleged to optimize the exchange of goods and services. Here once again, women represent a departure from the rules. In the name of family well-being and the well-being of the nation, feminine employment needs to be regulated. Upheld explicitly during the industrial revolution, this feminine ‘exception’ remains in place: feminine employment, as we know, remains a variable that adjusts to masculine employment. And if the issue of the fight against gender inequalities has made any progress, it is above all in the name of collective efficiency⁴.

A materialist and hyper-individualist conception of wealth

Ever since the origins of national accounts, and despite the recurrent criticism they have been subject to, the notion of wealth has remained limited to the production of goods and services sold or likely to be sold. Activities considered to be domestic are excluded from this perception. Women are thus considered to be unproductive and relegated to the category of inactive and dependent members of society. The theoretical and political implications of this development are considerable. It goes without saying that, in terms of women’s status, this invisibility establishes their inferiority and creates a vicious circle that is difficult to break, since their dependence has long prevented them from accessing civil and political rights. The consequences are also considerable for society as a whole. This classification produces a totally truncated representation of reality: according to various estimates and depending on different national contexts, domestic production represents between 30 and 70% of the total production of goods and services. A further effect of this classification is to launch a hyper-individualist and materialist conception of well-being, as illustrated by the much-vaunted Gross Domestic Product (GDP) which allegedly reflects the levels of national wealth. All notion of social utility, whether individual or collective, is now repudiated. Everything that creates links, and which women are largely responsible for, is now ignored. The same applies to the costs and negative externalities created by production, particularly environmental damage and the depletion of natural resources. Questions of distribution, and thus inequalities, are also overlooked. Education, health and, more generally, the ease and quality of access to public services, so essential to well-being, meet with the same fate, and there are many more areas that the system fails to address, including the vitality of democracy and the notion of solidarity.

The various works produced by feminist economists, particularly ecological feminism, have led to considerable conceptual progress being made in the analysis of the diversity of forms of wealth, trade and organization, both positive and negative in terms of equality and preservation of the environment (Sabourin *et alii*. 2000). The economist Amartya Sen’s 1998 Nobel prize raised the profile of some of their demands, particularly the critical need to tackle intra-family inequalities. It also raised awareness amongst the international community of a notion of development based not on growth but on real (and not theoretical) rights and personal freedoms by insisting on the essential interaction between economic and political rights. We are now facing a dual challenge: to pursue the task of consciousness raising, a deeply laborious undertaking in the face of the inertia of the systems of representation, and to describe these different works, still very conceptual and normative, and compare them with projects in the field. This is precisely where the Women and Economy Workshop’s goal lies.

SOLIDARITY-BASED PRACTICES

Throughout the world we can observe new forms of feminine action. Often lying outside recognized and institutionalized feminist movements, these initiatives are conceived primarily as pragmatic responses to the problems of daily life. In many southern countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South America, these forms of collective action are not new. To tackle their many domestic and farming tasks as well as their ritual and religious obligations, women have had no other choice than to organize. What is new, however, is the emergence of projects expressing societal and environmental demands, as well as the support, for better and for worse, of many NGOs and bilateral or multilateral aid development agencies. In sub-Saharan Africa and many Asian countries, in the name of women’s exclusion from all forms of public life, the concept of feminine collective action is

4 Reports from the World Bank and UNDP leave no room for doubt on this point.

just emerging and its legitimization, still uncertain, already represents a major step. And in the majority of northern countries, despite resistance being much weaker, these intermediary spaces are also in an embryonic phase.

Multiple and highly diversified experiences

We shall attempt a rapid description, in no way exhaustive, of recorded activities, which cover the entire spectrum of basic economic, political and social rights.

- Food/nutrition: purchase groups and cooperatives, social grocer's shops, restaurants, soup kitchens, catering services, collective kitchens, cereal banks, food counters, self-sufficiency and resistance actions, etc.
- Sanitation and health: management of water points and community wells, community medical clinics and mutual benefit societies for health insurance, people's pharmacies, production and promotion of medicinal plants, etc.
- Education: reading and writing teaching groups, people's training centres, groups for sharing and transmitting knowledge, learning and skills, teaching activities focusing on gender relations, forms of discrimination and exclusion, etc.
- Production and sales activities: production cooperatives and producer groups, community fields, fair trade, etc.
- Financial services: savings and credit cooperatives, mutual aid groups, loan circles, etc.
- Protection of the environment: organic production, sustainable management of natural resources (particularly water and forests), recycling, eco-villages or sustainable villages, ecotourism, etc.
- Mediation with the public authorities, the goal simply being the application of legislation and effective implementation of public programmes.
- Local lobbying aiming at obtaining certain rights or seeing them applied, particularly access to property.
- Childcare and care for the elderly: parent crèches, kindergartens, people's nurseries, community centres for the elderly, etc.
- Sewing and laundering: laundries, mending, dry cleaning, ironing, fashion shops, etc.
- Culture and communication: media, outlets for political and cultural expression, etc.

Many of these initiatives are not confined to one sector, but combine various forms of action. Although a few projects have succeeded in attracting media attention, the vast majority remain in the shadows. Ignored and despised on the pretext that they are limited to the sphere of daily survival, they nevertheless, in our opinion, play an essential role. It is therefore urgent that these projects be recognized and their true worth appreciated. Based on European, Latin and North American, African and Indian projects, the texts produced by the Workshop represent a significant step forward on this path. Despite their hugely diverse origins, these projects share several similarities: they fight for *real* access to rights and they place economics in a context of solidarity.

Action for real access to rights

The first of these similarities lies in the efforts undertaken to promote real access, rather than theoretical or abstract access, to rights: rooting in the community and in collective action as well as uniting actions that are both militant and professional are decisive in this area.

Community rooting and local links: contextualizing needs

One of the major results of the Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen's work is to have shown that rights and resources do not necessarily translate into the real capacity to be and do. Each community, each living space, models social norms as well as the balance of power. Only spatial, social and cultural proximity can enable shortcomings and blocking factors to be identified and then suitable and realistic responses and forms of governance to be invented with pragmatism. Without idealizing localism and romanticizing the concept of small is beautiful, we cannot avoid acknowledging the failure of universalist and standardizing measures, incapable of adapting to meet specific local needs. The strength of the initiatives described here is precisely their capacity to identify the difficulties encountered by people in transforming their rights and resources into concrete possibilities. The responsibilities that women assume within the family and networks of parents and sometimes neighbours puts them in an ideal position for listening to what people need and what they lack.

The rooting role of collective action: sharing resources, initiating social change

Collective actions plays a decisive role, manifested more as a springboard, supporting action and providing a method (planning, reflection, sharing resources), rather than as action-taking itself. Many of these initiatives are primarily individual, whilst remaining part of a local or community development process. Without collective action, changing people's mentality has little chance of succeeding: certain patterns of behaviour, considered as deviant, are only accepted when incorporated into a collective process, whose influence ends up overcoming local inertia and resistance. Leadership is just as determining a factor, both in terms of managing collective action and in weaving links with the outside world. If the line between leadership and authoritarianism, or even a hierarchy, is often a fine one, if the boundary between personal interest and the group's interest is sometimes blurred, it is nonetheless true that women leaders are providing a good example. They serve as the vehicle for the progressive diffusion of new ways of acting and thinking. And although feminine commitment and activism are evidently essential, without the help, support and sometimes protection of certain men — family members and local leaders — many of these initiatives would not survive (Semblat, 2001).

Combining commitment and professionalism

Although it is true that commitment and willingness are indispensable, various technical, entrepreneurial and strategic skills are equally so. The initiatives often involve new services, targeting clients with low solvency, and needing to be produced with limited resources: expert knowledge of local contexts and market analysis, marketing and managerial rigour are therefore essential. Unpaid work is the rule rather than the exception in most cases, so the means need to be found to increase its value and to distribute the resources fairly, which entails innovating in terms of management rules. Faced with permanent instability and the constant need to adapt and be pragmatic, people need to be capable of reacting rapidly and with versatility, whereas it is often more tempting to consolidate or reinforce established notions that are sometimes outmoded. This is the sort of action that can only be taken by someone seizing the initiative. However, in a context that encourages dependence and imitation, taking action entails innovating whilst continuing to act in a manner that is 'acceptable' to local norms and the balance of power, since compromise rather than confrontation is generally the preferred solution. Women need to be able to reconcile collective action, paid work and family obligations. This type of commitment thus calls for a very specific type of time management. Collective action is central, as we have already pointed out, and managing a group is not something that can be improvised, far from it. Convincing members of what is for the good of the group, combining personal and collective aspirations, managing tensions and conflicts: these are all skills that are neither innate nor spontaneous. Participation is at the heart of these initiatives. Once again, willingness to act is not enough. Illiteracy, lack of availability, the inevitable existence of power imbalances, unequal access to information and to a speaking platform, including within collectives of women who are meant to be homogeneous, are all brakes on true participation. Without even mentioning mental and social conditioning, which can only be influenced with the help of real leadership skills. Faced with the diversity and scope of needs, operating as a network is the only

possible solution. Here again, commitment and willingness do not suffice; the constant search for the right compromise between local actions and network actions is therefore vital. In this type of initiative, nothing is taken as read and everything is negotiated, which calls for true social negotiating skills that can be put to use with multiple stakeholders (state employees, elected representatives, local leaders, professional organizations, etc.) on both the horizontal level — local partners — and the vertical level — institutions. Knowing how to form alliances with the media is also a means of establishing credibility and influencing public debate. When it comes to identifying needs, analyzing necessary skills or possible weaknesses, or evaluating the social added value of these initiatives in order to demonstrate their legitimacy, action research has a decisive role to play. On the condition, naturally, that it is suitable, participative and innovative.

Box 1. How to make the right to access and work land effective: an Indian example

In India and many other countries of the South, very few women own or work land, although agriculture is the main source of revenue for 70% of the population. This is not really the fault of local legislation. Formal equality is in place, although there are two main reasons behind the fact that it remains unapplied: the existence of social prohibitions — reduced mobility that makes it impossible to work land, and the fact that it is socially taboo for a women to own and work her own land; the absence of access to resources required to work the land (credit, inputs, irrigation, etc.). Below, we describe an Indian project run at the village level (Pastapur, in Andhra Pradesh) by women with the support and assistance of the DECCAN Development Society. *The original initiative aimed to provide lower caste women with access to the land, and today it is a fully-fledged agricultural development project that can usefully be described as socially sustainable. Many women now work a plot of land. Although each works her own plot, the project would not have been possible without the support offered by a variety of forms of collective action and the backing of an outside body able to act pragmatically and flexibly: collective mobilization to recover land left uncultivated and to obtain permission to put it to use; pooling of resources for obtaining inputs, and transforming and adding value to certain local resources, access to credit, creation of various infrastructures (oil mill, cereal bank to ensure food security) and, finally, the creation of a local market. Each of these economic actions are partnered, whether formally or informally, by social and cultural measures: an alternative school offering technical training and preparation for autonomy; a training and action research centre for organic and sustainable farming practices; a hostel for women and young girls who are isolated, widowed, abandoned or victims of domestic violence; locally-dispensed medical care using traditional medicines or in collaboration with equipped health centres; finally, a local community media resource, operating primarily via a local radio service. The positive results are clear to see and are measured in terms of self-sufficiency in foodstuffs, the invigoration of the local markets, families' independence from the major landowners and, finally, female emancipation. However, the project continues to struggle to achieve recognition and it took 20 years of obstinacy and permanent struggle to convince the authorities to provide funding for a portion of the activities, as well as to progressively change local mentalities, especially amongst men, higher castes and, probably, some women.*

Source: Sabourin, 2004

The economic in the service of solidarity: the beginnings of a new paradigm?

The socialization of domestic knowledge, previously invisible and provided on an individual basis within the private sphere, the creation of interconnections and new intermediate spheres between universes that were generally enclosed and compartmentalized, and various organizational innovations prefigure new ways of producing, consuming and living together.

Socializing and enhancing the status of domestic knowledge

This socialization of domestic knowledge has considerable political and theoretical implications. The sharing of time and resources helps to ease burdens previously carried by individuals or at most within the family group alone, for it is precisely this division of tasks that constitutes the epicentre and

focal point of gender inequalities. Furthermore, although we are still a long way off, this socialization of domestic tasks offers an unprecedented chance to increase the status within the collective consciousness of these workaday tasks, and thus to denature the production/reproduction pairing (Nobre, 2005).

Opening out and creating bridges

Whether directly or indirectly, all these initiatives create bridges between spheres that are usually sealed off. These are initially bridges between the public and the private: this pairing is almost systematically broken down as many of the experiments centre on socializing family problems (childcare as well as food, budgeting, and conjugal violence). Bridges are also created between the rural and the urban, or between the outer- and the inner-city: the creation of sales and distribution circuits, and mobilization to create or improve public services such as transport that serves to boost enclosed and ghettoized zones that have been abandoned by private and public sectors alike. Regarding initiatives for migrant women, recognition of the cultural value of their native lands (for example food, via neighbourhood restaurants) creates a bridge between new location and original location; these are also bridges between so-called traditional and modern spheres. Although rarely is there a total break with local norms, certain norms, conversely, are almost systematically adapted or reappropriated, foreshadowing the beginnings of change; these patterns include access to paid employment and the public sphere, and spatial mobility. Every one of these initiatives are rooted in the local environment – their relevance results wholly from their local character and intimate knowledge of local needs – whilst also being motivated (at least in some cases) by a desire to drive social and institutional changes at the global level: they thus represent bridges between the local and the global.

Organizational innovations

The durability of these initiatives, on both the personal and collective level, depends on specific modes of organization. Whilst the dominant organizational model relies on a division of labour, a versatile approach where people take on multiple functions and responsibilities is often the only possible solution for these types of project. The approach that often prevails is global and individually integrating, mixing together the psychological, economic, social and cultural. In addition, personal constraints, notably the need to reconcile working on the project with family life, often call for a permanent rotation of tasks and responsibilities.

Box 2. Local initiatives by immigrant women in sensitive urban areas of France: social utility masked and curbed by multiple obstacles.

For almost three decades now French suburbs have been witness to a variety of economic activities initiated by groups of immigrant women in various areas of daily life: food, housing, literacy, education, human relations, public expression, and so on. An ongoing action research programme implemented by ADEL has highlighted the many knock-on effects of these initiatives. Not only do they encourage the social and professional emancipation of the women taking part, but they also breath new life into communities that are in crisis, from both the economic point of view, with job creation, and a social point of view: these initiatives are often platforms for an intercultural and intergenerational dialogue and exchange of thoughts and ideas. There is also the symbolic dimension of the role they play, notably by improving the neighbourhood's image via a clientele that is not confined to the neighbourhood and via media coverage of these innovative projects, and in the networks that they establish. To achieve all this, women invent very singular forms of organization, production and management: the intercultural approach and sharing of resources and knowledge enables them to handle the weight of traditional cultures; self-management, the versatility of tasks, and the collective responsibility for private tasks allows them to reconcile family, professional and activist life in new ways; and the economic only serves as a means to integration as well as individual and collective fulfilment. These initiatives are forums for production and consumption, speaking and listening, and various solidarity-based practices; these concern both local and far-off populations with, for example, the creation of development actions in the countries the women originally came from. Despite an evident added social value, these initiatives encounter a great many obstacles and, as things stand, are condemned to a live with a permanent lack of security. Several

factors are behind this situation: diverse areas of resistance due to the threefold discrimination women are subject to — poverty, immigrant origins, and the fact that their energy and higher education are sometimes very ‘unsettling’; the unsuitable nature of public policies that are based on the logic of procedure and not process, compartmentalizing the economic and the social, and favouring ‘integration’ to the detriment of local dynamics; and the unsuitability and inadequacy of resources: under-evaluation of the necessary human resources, unsuitability of status’, difficulty in finding a venue, and unsuitable funding, particularly for human resources.

Source: Hersent, 2001, 2002a, 2002b

Weaknesses and limits: work anchored in daily resistance

A hostile environment

Inequalities in terms of rights and resources are an initial obstacle: many of these initiatives fail due to a lack of resources, capital or simply in the wake of overly powerful local resistance. The inadequacy of legislation and public intervention mechanisms, which the initiatives need to survive and develop, is a recurrent problem: legal authorization and status, tax regimes, contract procedures, subsidy systems and programmes, etc. The gap between the projects and the procedures set up by public and para-public organizations as well as supporting NGOs is almost always in evidence. The requirement for short term results and sometimes even profitability, even for initiatives supposedly considered to be development projects, are naturally fairly incompatible with the learning curves and rate of development specific to each initiative. The rigid, standardized and formal character of the procedures leaves little room for innovation, creativity and pragmatism — whereas it is precisely these features that give the initiatives their strength. The compartmentalized and sector-based approach, characteristic of public intervention mechanisms, has trouble adapting to the cross-cutting nature of these projects. The women themselves, it has to be admitted, are sometimes their own worst enemies; fear of taking risks, underestimation of their own potential, lack of consultation and conflict are all factors that curb the scope of their actions. Support, both in terms of quality and intensity, is greatly lacking. We cannot stress the point too strongly that commitment and activism cannot compensate for certain technical and strategic deficiencies. And the project backers, regardless of the form they take, refuse to invest in this type of human capital, both on an individual and collective level.

Multiple challenges

Most of these initiatives appear to be real actions of resistance whose evolution and durability represent a daily challenge. The challenge is on a personal and family level: many of these women entrepreneurs end up giving up when they can no longer manage to reconcile the activity with their family life, something that requires them to juggle with their time as well as question their own value and representation systems. This daily challenge is also economic and financial. All these projects combine resources from various and insecure sources: once again, we are looking at a very fragile balance and uncertainty is a constant. In this quest for survival, some projects disappear whilst other gradually deviate from their original mission. In the absence of specific legal recognition, the demands of profitability end up vanquishing the quest for solidarity.

The risk of reinforcing inequalities

The ambivalence inherent in collective action also needs to be underlined. It is time to do away with the romantic, naïve and, above all, dangerous image of the celebrated community solidarity that inhabits the collective imagination. The people of the South, especially the poor and most especially the women, would — allegedly — prefer to operate as a group: this cliché has shown itself to be remarkably resistant and current theories of good governance are even giving it a new lease of life. It is true that the dynamism and diversity of collective action in many Southern countries and immigrant communities in the North are very appealing, if not fascinating, in the great contrast they provide with the hyper-individualism of northern societies. But collective action does not spring into life on command, it rests on a skilful compromise between individual and collective interests: altruism and compassion, when they exist, are subtly reconciled with the satisfaction of personal interests. In

certain countries, hierarchy and leadership usually form the rule rather than the exception. To condemn them is not tenable — hierarchy as a social institution cannot simply be brushed aside on the pretext that it does not conform to the Western democratic ideal — whereas leadership is inherent in all forms of collective action. However, the risk of reinforcing inequalities must not be overlooked. Leadership can easily be transformed into an instrument of oppression, and some of the initiatives described here, it has to be said, really only benefit a handful of women.

The risks of instrumentalization and loss of control

The success of the projects depends on collaboration with other initiatives and operation as a network. But the women have to be willing so to do. Difficulties encountered at the local level hardly encourage action on a wider scale. And the women also need to recognize the utility of wider scale action. The concerns of daily survival necessarily limit concern for questions of general interest. And when the desire to act on a wide scale does emerge, turning it into concrete form is, unsurprisingly, laborious and often in vain. Initiatives whose political influence is now established have spent ten, twenty or more years making their voices heard at the national and international levels. The instrumentalization of these projects operates as a gangrene, an evil that gnaws away at them from the inside, unbeknownst to all. In the name of so-called collective female dynamism, groups of women find themselves assigned

a great many responsibilities.

Box 3. Instrumentalization of female collective action: the microfinance example

Under the pretext of striving for empowerment — in the most basic of senses, deeply individualistic and not an instrument for real political change —, in some places many credit and savings groups have been turned into managers of local infrastructures or local common property, in others they have become tools for local economic development. The inadequacy of resources — women are often enjoined to contribute on a more or less unpaid basis, the price they pay for their ‘emancipation’ — and the hypocrisy of the partners — delegation of responsibilities rarely goes hand in hand with the effective delegation of power — make their legitimacy genuinely problematic. More generally, relations with the public authorities are often characterized by conflict and lack of balance. Many of them are reduced to the role of technical bodies for sub-contracting certain public services that the state cannot or can no longer provide, without adequate financial and human resources being made available. The projects’ political dimension, on the other hand, in the sense of their power to influence public policies and institutions in general, is denied, or even explicitly opposed. The simple fact that these are feminine initiatives is perceived as a challenge to the established order, and thus they are considered to be dangerous and uncontrollable. They therefore have to constantly strive to achieve recognition of their true value whilst avoiding the pitfalls of loss of control and instrumentalization.

Source: Hofmann & Marius-Gnanou, 2005; Guérin & Palier, 2005

Project impacts: improving self-esteem and social justice

The weak points described above do not preclude a variety of positive effects, both on the personal and family levels, and in the collective and general interest. On the personal level, one of the primary effects is probably the creation of self-confidence and self-esteem: to feel capable of taking the initiative and have the right to make one’s voice heard. Difficult to evaluate and even more difficult to put a figure on, this aspect is nonetheless decisive: in many areas, it is undoubtedly women’s lack of awareness of their own capabilities and their rights that impede the road to equality. Access to a paid activity (directly or thanks to other services such as financial services and childcare), and simply the fact of belonging to a recognized collective, contribute to improving their status within the family. Most services meet specific needs, springing from the well-being of daily life, often family-based rather than personal. The impact of the local community is often inherent to the actual content of the initiatives, as we have seen above. As for the impact on the general interest, it can sometimes be explicit — in the case of environmental protection projects — but more often it is indirect and measured in terms of social justice, which is why these initiatives deserve our attention. In the final

analysis, many of these initiatives do no more nor less than compensate for the incomplete nature, or absence, of basic economic, social and political rights: they therefore have a real role to play in terms of social justice, and thus contribute to the general interest. This role can seem imperceptible when needs are so great, but we should imagine what local life would be life without these actions. They are often based on behind the scenes work waging a never-ending campaign, sometimes even involving harassment, on the public authorities in order to guarantee a minimum of collective assets or refuse inequalities that are considered to be too abject; they also target local populations, men as well as many women, to encourage the evolution of representative systems that are resistant to change.

Box 4. The right to food security: self-managed people's canteens in Peru.

Launched in the late 70s by groups of women activists, the self-managed Peruvian people's canteens today play a decisive role in terms of food security and healthcare for the destitute. Officially recognized and part of the Glass of Milk programme since 1984, these canteens now bring together almost a million women in Lima and reach around 4 million people. Public funds officially represent 65% of the production costs of these services, but women's contribution is largely underestimated. Fighting against this exploitation of feminine solidarity, and increasing the standing of the women managers' role is one of the major current goals for the Peruvian people's canteens. Beyond the city and the country, the collective kitchen project is behind one of the most significant women's popular movements, probably one of the most advanced in Latin America. These groups of women are closely allied to the self-managed urban community system at Villa El Salvador, in the Lima suburbs, where over the last two decades various community movements have succeeded in becoming full partners in managing the city, supported by many NGOs, particularly Christian activists inspired by the theology of liberation.

Sources: Angulo, 2003; Favreau and Fréchette, 1999

STRATEGIES, ALLIANCES AND PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE

Expressing needs that are unidentified or overlooked by the market as well as the public authorities, proposing realistic modes of action adapted to local realities, and rethinking the relationships between family, market, public authorities and civil society: these are the ways in which these initiatives, whilst remaining very fragile, offer previously unheard of opportunities for social justice and real access to rights. Many of them have enabled the survival and sometimes the emancipation of a great number of women. Some of them have already proved their capacity to drive genuine societal transformations, whilst other have been instrumentalized and lost their initial vision. Condemning or despising them equates to adhering to the status quo. Instead we should question the necessary conditions for the expression of their transforming potential.

In many countries the need for changes in legislation is naturally enough a priority. This condition is necessary, but not sufficient. Everywhere, and no country escapes this rule, work on legislation and regulations must go hand in hand with measures aiming at the effective application of rights. And everywhere we can see that political power remains a male prerogative, and economic and social progress, regardless of its scope, has hardly any effect on this monopoly. How can we move from theoretical, abstract and formal rights to concrete rights? The majority of Amartya Sen's work addresses this issue and his answer is unambiguous: linking economic and political actions is the only possible solution, for at least two reasons. Political action via discussion and dialogue is the only way of identifying needs overlooked by the market and state, and is the only way of changing social norms whose inertia, as we have frequently underlined, explains the ineffective nature of many legislative measures. There has been significant normative progress, now accepted and legitimized, at least officially, by international institutions. However, there is no getting away from the total absence of application and execution. Participation, currently the favoured term for all development aid policies, remains a largely top-down process, driven from above and closed off from any form of spontaneity. It is therefore vital that the decision-makers, regardless of their level of intervention, understand that the exercise of a social justice worthy of the name depends on creativity and innovation, and therefore

agree to support them as well as stimulate and encourage them. Full recognition of the right to individual and collective initiative calls for, concretely:

- flexible support procedures, open to creativity and innovation and truly capable of encouraging active participation;
- developing women's technical skills, notably in the fields of analysis, constructing problems, advocacy and lobbying;
- developing appropriate accompaniment mechanisms;
- recognizing the social utility of these initiatives and providing them with financial support taking into account their social utility;
- investing in the democratization of access to information and of training;
- investing in improving the standing of these initiatives and attracting media coverage;
- and more generally helping women to appropriate modes of communication and of disseminating information.

Promoting new ideas on wealth indicators

Alternative and innovative analyses of wealth and productivity already exist, initiated in particular by ecological feminism (Sabourin et *alii*. 2000). They reflect on alternative yardsticks for measuring money and propose taking into account all the hidden costs, both positive (socialization, caring for others, construction and maintenance of social networks, sharing information, etc.) and negative (stress, violence, pollution of different sorts, market inefficiency resulting from monopolies and political alliances, etc.). We can but plead in favour of wider media coverage of and communication on these modes of analysis, their systematized empirical application and their adaptation to a variety of socio-cultural and political environments. This is the only way to give value to the multi-functional nature of human activities, especially female activities, and thus to combat their supposed inferiority by demonstrating their social productivity. It is also the only way to acknowledge the social utility of the initiatives described in this report, which also presupposes contextualized indicators that are capable of reflecting the impact of prevailing discrimination in the situations studied — promoting female spatial mobility does not have the same social utility in a European or North American capital city as it has in certain countries of North Africa. Finally, this is the only way to progressively raise awareness amongst decision-makers and the public— both men and women — of the blind alley represented by a materialistic and individualist conception of wealth, and of the overriding necessity to focus on objectives relating to well-being and personal fulfilment.

Forging alliances

It is vital that support is given to coalitions between women's movements and other bodies from the alternative globalization and social and solidarity-based economy movements. The various forums (local social forums, continent-wide social forums, Globalize Solidarity meetings, World March of Women) offer opportunities to achieve this. Several ties have already been established as a direct result of the work of the Women and Economy Workshop. In January 2005 in Porto Alegre, a seminar examining notions of wealth and gender equality in the economy was co-organized by the Workgroup on Solidarity Socio-Economy (WSSE), the Réseau Intercontinental de Promotion de l'Economie Sociale et Solidaire (RIPESS) and the World March of Women (WMW). Various workshops on these issues are also scheduled for the November 2005 Globalize Solidarity meeting in Dakar. The most important issue is to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. Until now, neither the mutual, cooperative nor associations movements have ever properly addressed the issue of sexual inequality. It is therefore most urgent that the social movements of today that are fighting for a fairer world take this issue wholly on-board, not simply as an additional category but as a truly cross-cutting factor.

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