

Women, gender and feminism

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This is the only paper in this compendium that bears in its title the agents of the action. Perhaps because we are still at a stage in which we need to end women's invisibility in the economy in general, and even in solidarity-based economy. This title refers to those who are the other agents involved in solidarity-based economy experiences. They may vary depending on the origin of the groups - if they are groups self-organized for other reasons which decide to generate income, groups that take over failed enterprises, groups created by the action of a government body or advisory organization. We need to see who the involved people are and shed light on their experiences in society, which are marked by social class, ethnic and gender relations, attempting to understand how these relations reflect upon the alternatives they create.

We are used to consider them from the point of view of social class, both for their situation -worker, low income earner, poorly qualified-, and for their political options. We must expand this perspective to consider the social, gender and race relations.

There is a specific social relationship between men and women that organizes society as do class and race relations. We identify different social practices according to gender and not to biologically regulated behaviors. Social practices form a coherent (but not necessarily conscious) set of behaviors and attitudes that can be identified in daily life. Social practices are collective and the experiences -the "internalization" of such practices- are individual. There are margins of freedom for collective and individual actors and they increase as we explore further into the contradictions of the dominant social relations (Kergoat, 1997, p. 23).

The consideration of social relations in terms of their contradictions and the collective actors operating their transformation refers us to feminism as a theory and as an organized social movement that addresses a solidarity-based economy.

The visibility of speech-questioning practices

The issue of women in a solidarity-based economy started with the awareness of the invisibility, the marginalization and the unacknowledged importance of the role played by women. At some point in their existence, several groups of women at the grassroots level decided to find ways to generate income, at least to ensure the group's operation or to justify to their families or to themselves the afternoons they spent away from home to be with their fellow group members. Although no precise data is available, a first glance at the groups in the Solidarity-Based Opportunity Program of the Government of the city of São Paulo allows us to see a great involvement of women. Not to mention those groups that start with strong participation from women and as they begin generating income or handling greater resources from loans or donations, they become masculinized. In this sense, it is interesting to compare the experience of a group of black Oriashé women from the city of São Paulo, which as it gained importance it started turning into a white group. The group's collective awareness of their goal of empowering black women made them expand their strategies, opening a center in a neighborhood in the outskirts, diversifying activities.

Regarding the visibility of women, a noteworthy initiative is that of REPEM (Popular Education Network for Women of Latin America and the Caribbean), which has already promoted three contests of successful experiences formed by women, between 1998 and 2002. The winners participate in a gathering where they can share their experiences with women belonging to groups from other countries and have their group's story featured in a

publication, which opens new possibilities for contacts, financing sources and buyers (REPEM, 2002).

By giving visibility to the experiences of women positive references are created, the women are strengthened as individuals, and it helps consider the problems of the initiatives from the point of view of gender.

Another viewpoint could be a gender analysis of mixed experiences and of mainly male experiences. To see how they organize work, how management is done, how they articulate professional and domestic life and if there are any differences between the male and female approach. Another consideration is to be aware of the gendered representations of the solidarity-based economy. One of these is that the solidarity-based economy is very close to community work, that it is the territory of women, and as such it would be experienced by men in a negative way (this is not the case of the failed enterprises that become managed by their workers).

The identity of the working man is related to the formally remunerated job. Thus, his participation in the groups can be seen as temporary. While the dominant representation of the female identity, connected with the roles of mother, wife and homemaker puts women closer to groups gathering near the home, and operating under principles and values closer to their own. However, these representations are being challenged by the new generations of women that long for careers and permanence in remunerated jobs. When they are outside the job market they tend to introduce themselves as unemployed; unlike older women who, for the most of part, introduce themselves as housewives, even if they are involved in several activities in the informal market.

Finally, there are efforts of re-conceiving the economy and the solidarity-based economy from the standpoint of feminist economic theory. The movement *Mulheres e Economia Solidária* (Women and Solidarity-Based Economy), of the *Aliança por um Mundo Responsável, Plural e Solidário* (Alliance for a Responsible, Plural and Solidarity-Based World), has undertaken this task, gathering activists and researchers especially from France, Quebec and Brazil. In the work entitled "The role and place of women in the development of a solidarity-based economy", where the creation of the movement is set forth, they identify the following issues:

- Acknowledging the contribution of women to the generation of wealth and to the promotion of the well-being of societies, which implies abandoning a money-driven logic, the logic of maximizing profit and accumulation of capital.

- Acknowledging that "without a minimum of trust, civility and reciprocity, acquired in the relationships with family and friends, no economic exchange can really be possible. The economic means build their wealth extracting these 'particular goods' which are 'social links' as if they were a priceless inexhaustible resource. The ignorance of this fundamental role of the non-monetary economy in development makes women's work in society invisible and devalues a great deal of it."

Considering the value of the monetary activities undertaken by women solves nothing if, at the same time, they do not have access to paid work, which is the privileged means of obtaining a minimum of autonomy.

The struggle for professional equality and the right to initiative is not enough if it is not accompanied by a better division of the domestic work between men and women. In addition, neo-liberalism is criticized for valorizing capital returns over remuneration of labor and increasing the division between the social and the economic. "This capital-work, social-economic divisions also correspond to a gender division. We know that capital owners and bankers are mostly men and that women are over-represented in social professions, that the

neo-liberal speech disqualifies them by considering them superfluous and unproductive" (Aliança por um mundo responsável e solidário, 1999, p.2).

The visibility of women's work, of the sphere of reproduction, of the conditions for the involvement of women in the labor market, and the above criticism of the capitalist economy and its neo-liberal tendency, are all viewpoints shared by the economic feminist theory.

All these issues are on its agenda, which goes one step further and proposes a rupture with the hegemonic economy, posing the challenge of abandoning the market as the center around which all economic and social activities are organized, and replacing it with the sphere of reproduction (Carrasco, 1999, p. 48).

Current importance of the debate between feminism and solidarity-based economy

The meanings of a gender approach to the solidarity-based economy span from the consideration of the position of women in society, to the contribution of feminist thought in the construction of another economic paradigm.

Women represent 70% of the world's poor population and own 1% of all property according to UN data (Women's World March, 2002, p. 250). In Brazil, according to PNAD/IBGE (National Research by Domicile Samples/Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) information for 2001, women earned 69.6% of the average income earned by men, and had higher rates of unemployment than men due to a growth in the female economically active population in excess of the job offer for women. Women were concentrated in occupations that are undervalued precisely because they are regarded as "female occupations"; 23% of women from the economic active population are domestic workers. They are a minority in senior management positions and a majority among victims of sexual harassment. In factories they perform duties controlled by immediate bosses and subjected to a Taylorist rhythm. In domestic jobs or as housewives they perform multiple tasks simultaneously at an unhealthy rhythm and suffer from isolation.

Alternative experiences of income generation arise for women as a possibility to access the property of the means of production through collective property, and to access remuneration; and mainly as an opportunity to experience a different working relationship, based on companionship and democratic management.

In addition, the economy can be strengthened by feminist criticism of capitalist economy, which uses gender and race/ethnic inequalities to further its own means by securing the grounds for its operation. We have discussed the economic role of the family and the sexual division of labor as a matrix for the organization of labor in private enterprises. Apart from describing the processes whereby the working class is formed with white workers, some authors call attention to the connections of capital with white masculinity, looking for its origins in the initial stages of capitalist accumulation (Mathaei, 2002, p.62).

Limits, problems and challenges

The debate over women and gender in the solidarity-based economy is still small compared to the contribution of women to innovative practices. There is a lack of systematization of these practices from different points of view. The abovementioned REPEN initiative is pioneer, and therefore based upon the vision of enterprising women that need training to act as conventional enterprises. So, it has little in common with progressive sectors that propose structural transformations of the economy by the strengthening of the solidarity-based

economies that co-exist with the hegemonic capitalist economy. This is a moment of challenge in an open field of possibilities yet to be explored.

I would like to propose three issues for the debate agenda between feminist and solidarity-based economy, without intending to cover all topics.

Sexual division of labor and the expansion of the concept of work

A solidarity-based economy attempts to end the social division of labor: the separation between the owner of the means of production and the person that sells his or her work force, with collective property, between intellectual and manual work, with democratic management and innovative practices of labor organization.

The debate focuses on the discussion of the challenges posed to the international division of labor by the people's right to their own economic, cultural, social and human development, and the challenge posed by fair trade to the current terms of exchange. Therefore, the sexual division of labor is not seen as a matter of concern.

The first sexual division of labor is between production, which is men's work, and reproduction, a women's task and territory. Therefore, in both fields the sexual division of labor is reproduced. Factories organize work creating female functions and sectors associated with the skills acquired by women in their process of gender socialization; through tasks that require patience and control of body movements. Tasks timed in the line of production. Tasks aimed at women that earn less wages than men, while being often more qualified than them.

The approaches to the sexual division of labor are divided into two main theories: social link and social relationship. (Hirata, 2002: p.279). Social link theories are based on the assumption that complementation and specialization are possible, that there are common goals, and that roles can be harmonized. They support a traditional family model, making women responsible for its correct functioning, or a model of harmonization between professional and family life, which in practice focuses on women. It is them who end up "choosing" precarious part-time jobs that make it easier to handle the difficult task of managing their time, made even harder in times of scarce availability of public care services for children, the elderly and the sick. Or even the idea of partnership, which considers that men and women are on equal standing, while the statistic data insists on denying it.

In contrast, the concept of the sexual division of labor in terms of social relationships looks at the relationships of power of men over women, expressed in the hierarchical principle that male work is always superior to female work. Cooking, as part of the domestic daily tasks does not enjoy great social recognition. The cook from "a Cooperativa do Sabor" (Taste Cooperative), a restaurant in the city of São Paulo, managed by its workers, mostly women, was the key figure in running the business, determining what to buy, the menu, and the rhythm of work. The same function assumes different values if done in a private space rather than a public one, if it is aimed at domestic or market consumption, if done by men or women. In sewing cooperatives, when a man becomes involved, he is often assigned to cutting, which is considered hard work. Thus, according to popular belief a "good cut" is what gives a garment its quality. It would be very interesting to research and compare the division of tasks between men and women in cooperatives of a particular sector, with the organization of the same kind of work in a private enterprise.

To think in terms of social relationships makes us question the concept of work, expanding it to domestic work, unpaid work and informal work. This expansion makes us rethink the notions of full employment, qualification, and even emancipated work, because there is no

emancipated work for women without the division of domestic tasks among all who live in the same space.

Production and reproduction

Capitalism was built based on the premise that there are workers free to sell their work force. For those workers to be liberated from the daily tasks of reproduction (eating, cleaning, conservation), so that every year new workers may appear in the labor market like fungus sprouting from the earth, one or more women must perform the caretaking tasks. The cost of reproducing the workforce in capitalism has been paid by women in their families.

The solidarity-based economy is also increasingly paying that price and this has contradictory meanings. Many women engaged in alternative forms of income generation mention, as one of the virtues of these experiences, how they have more flexibility to deal with family issues. Different groups of women say that they are capable of understanding and assimilating the absences or decrease in the rhythm of work of a fellow woman worker that must take care of some family problem, in general a relative that is ill.

These stories prove that the groups will develop other successful measures, not exclusively based on income and work productivity, and that they are based on reciprocity and solidarity values. Humanizing relationships, they integrate the different stages and aspects of a person's life: family and work.

There are risks because these experiences take place within a society dominated by a capitalist and patriarchal economy. Is it possible to secure positions in the market and achieve competitive prices with humanized working relationships? If the group decides that small economic results are compensated by the qualities of the working relationships, does this have to do with the fact that the group is formed by women, whose income is considered secondary or auxiliary (even if they support their families on their own)? Would the counterpart to this be that men are totally relieved of their domestic responsibilities, submerged in their jobs, working overtime, and the complete exoneration of the capitalist enterprises? Does this mean that the solidarity-based economy is paying for the greater share of reproduction?

These issues are related to proximity services, to the solidarity-based economy assuming social services that the State no longer provides. Here there are new ambiguities. There are countless examples of women acting as health agents, as promoters of food security, as babysitters, and who are hired under precarious contracts and working conditions. Activities that are extremely important for society are devalued and supported at the expense of the overworking of women, whose responsibilities have increased while the State has decreased its own.

Among all these contradictions there is, nonetheless, a consensus: it is best for reproduction to be assumed by solidarity-based economy groups, which are larger social spaces than the family.

Denaturalization of the capitalistic and patriarchal economy

More than considering solidarity-based economy as functional to capitalism because it assumes stages of production (through outsourcing) and reproduction, by reducing costs, what we propose is to think in terms of contradictions between one system and the other.

In this sense, one of the contributions of solidarity-based economy is, through experiences, to denaturalize the techniques and organization of capitalist labor as a synonym for efficiency, asking ourselves whom is this so-called efficiency intended for, capital or society?

The awareness of the meanings and contributions of the solidarity-based economy, involving consumer groups, establishing relationships between groups that produce different goods and services, denaturalizes daily choices about what we eat, dress or whom we buy a product from.

Why not then denaturalize the "efficiency" of the sexual division of labor in the maintenance of the capitalist economy, the "choices" made by women and men, the organization of labor, consumption and power within the families?

If our proposal is to radicalize democracy, to establish new ways of distributing wealth and to lay the foundations for a solidarity-based economy and society, we should regard women as agents in these processes and seek to further discussion with feminist thought and movements. The solidarity-based economy is a privileged ground to exercise new practices and gather experiences of equality and autonomy for women.

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