

We Are Not Afraid

Celia Eccher is the chair of Red de Educacion Popular Entre de America Latina y el Caribe Mujeres (REPEM), a network of adult educators in Latin America and the Caribbean working on issues of gender and popular education as well as income generation. She is also Regional Coordinator for Latin America for a southern women's think tank, Development Alternatives for the New Era (DAWN).

REPEM is a network of feminists who are educators for women leaders in Latin America. Within the context of popular education and income-generating projects, these activists are part of a regionwide movement in Latin America that focuses on citizenship rights and responsibilities. Celita, as her friends call her, shares REPEM's experience in Latin America with Luz Maria Martinez of Isis International.

The concept of citizenship and democracy in Latin America goes beyond the western value of "one person, one vote." Democracy is not merely the right to vote but for citizens to hold their governments accountable and to be part of the governing system.

"There is consensus within the women's movement in Latin America on the issue of citizenship," says Celita. "This work has taken off because it's a way to strengthen our democracies. In Latin America we have gone through many dictatorships...many pains. The idea is that if more people are active participants in their societies they are also defenders of democracy. I think that from that angle it is not only the women's movement pushing it but other NGOs. There is citizenship from a human rights perspective, citizenship in relation to governments, culture, etc."

However, as feminists they sometimes take unpopular positions. For example, in the Andean mountains male anthropologists are calling for a "complementation of the Andean family." Celita points out that "complementation means the men can beat their wives and that is okay because it's cultural, it's part of the Quetchua family." Also, it includes women taking on most of the work load, tending to the goats and the farm, caring for the children, while the men sit at the bar and drink beer. After drinking they come home and beat their wives. Some feminists have begun to react strongly to this.

Yet most anthropologists don't see this as a problem. Any intervention is seen as related to race. "It's the white women, the urban women who are interfering," the critics say. In the past nonindigenous women were reluctant to speak out against patriarchal indigenous behavior for fear of being labeled prejudiced and "being against indigenous cultures."

In other countries in the region, women are also conducting some very effective and direct service campaigns that have an impact on society.

Celita was once invited to witness what she calls "the most successful campaign in Latin America," a campaign led by Herbert De Souza. This was a massive anti-hunger campaign launched in Brazil. The most powerful media outlet there is giving it five minutes a day on national television. "They have not resolved the hunger issue but they have made Brazilians aware that 33 million people in their country are starving," says Celita. The campaign entailed the collection of food by citizen's groups (labor, community, church

of Success'

groups), to be delivered by them to a group of poor people. But it was not a matter of just collecting and sending food. "The collecting group had to meet the hungry personally, face to face," she recounts.

Through other service programs set up by NGOs and women's groups, Brazilians were also exposed to other issues of poverty. "This

campaign did not solve the problems but it created a citizenship consciousness in many Brazilians to recognize the big economic gap in their country."

POPULAR EDUCATION AND GENDER

Gender is one of the key issues in REPEM's training program for popular education. This is tackled in the work they do with women in income-generating projects. They have a Latin American Workgroup made up of representatives, eight or nine women, from the more experienced NGOs in the region.

"Because there is not much written material, we are concentrating on developing a curriculum that merges these two areas [of gender and popular education]," Celita says. Thus, a nationwide project has been launched that involves a survey and bringing together women from outstanding income-generating projects to document their experiences.

"We have just finished the survey where women identify their successes and failures with their own income-generating projects. This was done in order to establish the criteria for selecting successful experiences. We are not afraid to talk of success. We feel it's very important to not always be talking of only problems. For us this is also a follow-up to the Beijing Platform for Action section on poverty elimination and income-generating alternatives."

The outcome confirmed many observations that the women educations had already made. It was found that women felt good about their projects. They like working in groups with other women and the money that they earn gives them a sense of self-esteem no matter how minimal it may be. They feel good about the



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Latin American women are creating new concepts of citizenship.

relationships they established on their own and with such institutions as banks and other offices. One major point had to do with working outside the home. This, they said, "gives us a sense of self-development," which they considered highly important. In order to identify these success cases, REPEM has put up a program that recognizes and awards women's outstanding experiences in income generation.

Since in many cases, the entire family is involved and the husband and sons also work, a project qualifies as long as the woman is in charge. The projects must incorporate gender and educational components. These were set as guidelines and disseminated throughout Latin America. The program is being carried out by REPEM with almost no funding. "The only money we raised was US\$1,000 for each experience to be documented. We find that in Latin America women are doing many great things but nothing is documented. So documenting these experiences is important," Celita proudly states. "Each country has done their own fundraising. They have gone to funding agencies, also to other organizations. For example, members of an association of women entrepreneurs in Mexico were asked to be part of a jury and donate prizes. In Bolivia, the women asked the government to shoulder the costs for the Bolivian winner to attend a trade fair in Amsterdam. In some cases the women accomplished incredible commitments from their home countries, even beyond our own expectations." "In the process," Celita goes on, "something else has occurred. This was something we had not thought about or planned. Within the process of raising funds, publicity and awareness for the contest has been generated! Women have been speaking to gov-



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A major point in the campaign is working outside the home.

ernment delegates, to media, businesses, all in the process of generating funds and support for the contest. An awareness has been developed. It was pre-lobbying in a sense, that was not part of our plans."

REPEM also realized, according to Celita, that there needed to be a more interesting prize than saying that we would document and publish their experiences.

Now a meeting is being organized for all the winners, to be held in Venezuela. A large beer company foundation has agreed to host the women. Each country has to pay for the airfare of each of its winners. This meeting

will give the women the opportunity to travel outside their communities, and to exchange experiences with one another. "Actually going out and getting a passport, getting on a plane, meeting other women who do similar things as themselves, all that is very good for them. It gives them lots of status in their area of work."

The documented experiences will be part of a manual that will allow women to follow up more easily on their progress and identify potential problems.

LOBBYING AS A CITIZENSHIP TOOL

REPEM has developed a lobbying manual and training program for community leaders as part of its citizenship development orientation.

"Women should be directly involved in lobbying whether it be at the Commission on the Status of Women or for the Beijing 2000 Platform Review. It is important for them to go to their local government bodies and hold them accountable to the Platform for Action," Celita says.

She recounts: "If the mayor of their town says 'the agreements on what?' they can point to the Platform and say, 'this is what the Plat-

form says and our government signed on to it.' And when politicians ask them, 'well and what proposals do you have,' that is usually where most conversations end, but the women can then say, 'you know in Colombia, a country that is similar to this one, they are doing such and such a thing, and the government has created such and such mechanisms, this is what we are proposing.' Community women are not the usual women who are in lobbying initiatives on a large scale in Latin America, but through training and opportunity they gain confidence and go to their local institutions and ask for things that they need."

WOMEN POWER

Through income-generating projects the community educators bring women together not only to earn money but also to provide educational forums on a variety of issues.

Beyond helping the women generate income, the goal of REPEM is for them to take control of their lives and become aware of other issues affecting them as women.

"What is important is to listen to women and get tips from them as to what are the things that help them gain more confidence, remove the fear of going somewhere and speaking up or relating to people. What we have found is quite varied, but in general it's related to having a bit of money. For example, those women who have smaller enterprises, they go to the bank, they manage checks, this gives them a lot of confidence in dealing with institutions. Or that through their businesses they have met with other groups on issues that affect them. It's like providing women with stepping stones, opportunities where they can maximize themselves as leaders."

One story Celita relates was how a woman in one village in Uruguay learned that government clinics were supplied with IUDs. Many of the clinics were not informing women that these options existed and at no cost. "This woman went to her local clinic and asked for the head doctor. She asked him questions on the IUD," smiles Celita. "The doctor tried to put her off but she told him: 'wait a minute, I went to the government health department and

they told me that you are required to make them available.' She did not want an IUD for herself but she was there on behalf of the women in her community. She knew of many who would avail of that service."

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Celita says that she has learned through experience the power that women have when they know how to organise themselves. "Once they know how to organise themselves, it becomes a key that

they use. They will as easily organise a dance as they will found a parent association at the local school, or organise themselves into a group who will go to their local government offices and claim what is due them."

WOMEN AS ENTREPRENEURS

Celita and her network are aware of the critics that say routing women into income-generating projects only keeps them marginalised. To this she says, "We don't think ourselves that microcredits are very effective. But success is relative. If I don't have anything, I don't want an intellectual to come and say that US\$20 is not useful to me."

"For us the idea is to access credit in the real sense, not in little pieces. Women should be able to take on bigger businesses if they are capable of doing so. Credit is important but it has to develop to other levels of credit. That is why in [the REPEM-sponsored contest for women entrepreneurs] we have made it a point to target people who work in credit-related areas. In each country people in the public and private sphere that work on credit are sought out to be part of juries in order to begin sensitising them on issues of credit as they relate to women."

"I believe that if women, for example, do knitting and they do it well, they have an entrepreneurial spirit, and have the outlet for their product, then I don't care if it's seen as a traditional job. What is important is that they understand that there is a certain standard to being able to sell your work. To be able to sell they need to be able to knit by patterns, by size and with consistency. They also have to design in line with current fashion standards."

Another benefit from the training program is learning how to budget money. "I did not

know how to budget and was constantly in debt, but now I can manage my finances and I am out of debt," the women often say.

The potential entrepreneurs are also taught how to organise their time. The trainers have found that time management is a big problem. Celita explains this by saying, "Housework is circular. Housework is a constant circle. You fix the beds in the morning so they can be undone at night, you prepare food so it can be consumed, wash clothes so they may be dirtied. The most controlled domestic chore is cooking as eating times are pretty set, but washing clothes for instance, can be done early in the morning or late in the afternoon. If it rains you don't wash. Chores can be done at different times. Women do things automatically, they don't even know that concepts of time management exist. But for women entering into the economic market, they must break this cycle in order to survive."

An ongoing concern is how to mobilise community resources, how the women in income-generating projects can receive basic but diverse educational opportunities. For example, REPEM training programs are all viewed from a feminist and popular angle. They also have to know about enterprises, capital development, and whom to consult in different situations.

It can be a problem, Celita says, when women get very enthusiastic about promoting the work of other women without taking into consideration the cornerstones that are necessary for a business to survive in an economic market. "Even if you are aware of the key areas you may still run into problems. There is no concrete data as to the percentage of failure of small enterprises. Also a distinction has to be made between micro-enterprises and charity projects."

The Argentinians call their income-generating groups *empredimiento de mujeres* (women's undertaking). Not necessarily engaged in business, these are collectives of women who come together to work and purchase goods from each other. "If these groups are provided with training and educational opportunities, women will grow. If the work is done well, the women become quite autonomous and some even gain enough skills to start their own business. But

of course this is not true for all."

"We are realistic enough to understand that this is not a solution to poverty, nor will it resolve the feminization of poverty. But we are also clear that these women do not have anything and for them these opportunities mean something. It's interesting to debate whether this kind of assistance feeds into the World Bank agenda, etc. But in the meantime, women die of hunger."

"Women engage in income-generating projects because they need income. But we don't believe that this should be the end-all. We must contribute to women's knowledge, how to budget, how to follow economic trends,

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what is happening to the dollar, for them to know what is happening in many arenas that also affect them. One time an

Uruguayan woman told me, 'I used to think, why should I care what happens in Brazil? I could not understand why you would be speaking on the value of the dollar, political economy.' But then Brazil suffered a serious devaluation. The women in this particular group had been working on a project for exportation to Brazil. Because of the devaluation the order was canceled. This created havoc for the women, who had been working for two months to meet the order and were to be paid in full once everything was completed and shipped. The order never left Uruguay. 'Then I understood why I should care about the economic-political dynamics of Brazil, Argentina, or the dollar,' said this woman."

Celita explains that women's groups engaged in exporting products are still not very common. But REPEM wants to work with them, to be able to generate the ability of women to grow and expand into international markets. "We don't want to limit our vision to keeping women in very small income-generating projects who are homebound, but to keep their capabilities in mind and to look for other alternatives. Women do not have many alternatives."

WOMEN'S GROWTH AND CULTURE

But for women to grow outside the home domain is not always easy. As they gain confidence, money and knowledge, this may put them at odds with their families. How women

handle the cultural obstacles, Celita says, varies from country to country within the Latin American region.

"In some countries women leaders have become so involved that they lose touch with their husbands and children causing major havoc situations in their families. In other countries, this has not happened. My experience in Uruguay has been great. I have seen that the first group of leaders we trained were quite involved in their communities, in the schools, their children. Their daughters became teachers, or entered other professions that gave access to education and careers. However, I have observed, and this is only an observation, while the women grow, the men are left behind. You can see it in their manner of dress, their speech. The women and her children become more sophisticated but not the men."

Marital conflict is not uncommon when women begin to assert their independence.

"Some husbands are supportive. They join their wives in the projects as this is the only source of income for the family. But others are threatened. They refuse to let their wives go outside the home and work. Because of these conflicts many women have abandoned their income-generating projects. Other women have hung on and have resolved their problems. Other women in the family also exert pressure...the mothers, aunts, grandmothers, mothers-in-law all gang up on the working woman. 'How could you abandon your children? You are going to a training seminar that is so far away and you will not be here for the children. How could you do that?'"

Celita says that it sometimes happens that young women begin working and then refuse to marry: "They don't like the men that are available in their villages."

Once women make the decision to stick it out with their own income-generating projects

they exercise autonomy and make decisions based on their own cultural analysis. Celita recounts the two following stories of how women faced with similar situations took different approaches and experienced different outcomes.

In the south of Chile, a group working with the indigenous Mapuche on a pottery project, secured a large order from abroad. This meant that they had to work for six months straight

to fill the order. The women would have to install a large potter's wheel. The women discussed it. Should they incorporate this technology? They concluded that this would mean bringing in men to manage the wheel and eventually the men would appropriate the technology and leave the women out. They decided not to take the order despite the loss of a profitable order, because of the risk of losing their future.

A similar situation arose in Uruguay but with a different outcome. "We were forced to install a knitting mill as we could not compete with the Chinese market in handmade knitting. Installing a mill meant

having to attend workshops on how to operate it, and we would have to work at a site outside the home. For many of the women this change was upsetting. Many of them left. The others were determined that they would not be homebound in working for income. Those who chose to stick it out are very happy. They claim that finally they had been able to separate housework from paid work. But in the beginning it was awful! The women were being pressured by their mothers, aunts, husbands. Some would arrive at the job site crying. It was a difficult decision to work outside the home eight hours a day. However, those who did decide to work outside say they will never go back to doing their income work within the home. ☺

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