

WOMEN ORGANIZING

STRATEGIES FOR EMPOWERING POOR WOMEN

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WHY ORGANIZE WOMEN?

In organizing poor communities, why focus on women? Why should a community organization that is being developed give special attention to the participation and empowerment of women? Will this not lead to a separate women's organization that will only dilute and dissipate the efforts of the poor at self-organization and empowerment? And divide poor men and women, personally and politically?

Certainly these may be some of the valid reasons for the anxiety one might have about the topic "women organizing". But surely, most of us have noticed the relatively few women who are active and assume leading parts in existing community organizations. One must have observed how most poor women do not speak up during community meetings or how men's voices almost always ring louder than women's. One must have seen how most women stay in the kitchen or are engrossed in serving snacks, looking after children that mill around during meetings or, at most, read the minutes or give a financial report either as secretary or treasurer respectively. On other hand, most highly observant community organizers or facilitators believe that women can do more, need and want to do more for the development of their community.

The need to organize women must be illuminated under the light of both these concerns. Observations and deep reflections on the conditions of most existing community organizations, whether traditional or more progressive ones, reveal an unconscious male orientation as indicated by the evident visibility of male participation, leadership, decision-making and, more generally, as revealed by the organizations' processes or manner of conducting their affairs.

Women have less participation because of reproductive duties and burdens that literally tie them to the home. They are not elected into leadership positions or they inhibit themselves from such positions mainly because of social expectations and beliefs regarding women's primary role and responsibility to the family, their private rather than public life. They are to have no role or a limited role in public life and are to be under the guidance and protection of men, their husbands or fathers. An extension of these views is that men and most women believe that women are slow decision makers, i.e. women cannot make up their minds on time. They are more emotional and

will not be effective in handling conflicts that might be raised in the organization. Women are not comfortable with power.

Consequently, men and women have taken the little participation of women in organizations to be simply natural—a non-problem. If more women are required to be members of the organization, they will just sign up more women's names. More women will sit throughout long meetings discussing the community's economic problems, expecting relief from their poverty, even though relief from abuse from their husbands cries also for some urgency. Thus, community participation, in this manner, becomes for them yet another experience of submission and subordination, a troubling consistency of political and public life with their everyday, private lives at home and with their families.

To recognize and address the problem of women's empowerment in community organizations, community organizers must pose a critique and an alternative to the way that organizing has been usually practiced. This other way must examine community organizing approaches and processes and expose areas of disempowerment of women through processes of submission and subordination within the organization's policies, structure relationships and processes. Organizing women must be sensitive to the ways women empower themselves in their daily lives, acting and resisting male dominance over their lives.

ENGENDERING SOCIAL INVESTIGATION AND ITS PROCESSES

There are various ways by which community organizers can more effectively address women's active participation in organizations. A very important step in community organizing is Social Investigation (SI) or the process of gathering data to identify community conditions and investigate community problems. More often than not, SI questions are only about the economic and political situation of the people with a number of questions on possible social welfare issues of the community. Most likely, too, the latter sets of questions are referred to women respondents assuming, stereotypically, that these are women's concerns. Not surprisingly, there will be little sensitive probing about private, personal lives of people, such as family relations or problems concerning marital relationships.

The process of social investigation can be better oriented toward investigating more comprehensively conditions and problems in the community by desegregating data according to gender. This would reveal gender division of labor both in productive and reproductive work. The organizer, together with the rest of the community would

discover how labor is organized in the community very much according to gender resulting in divisions as constricting as class. Productive work is related to men's work, which has no value because it is not paid and even if it were, it would not even give status to women who engage in it. Reproductive work occupies more than eight hours of women's time and is the sole burden of unemployed women. Reproductive work ties women and girls to the home, leaving them with no time for other concerns, least of which are themselves. They have no exposure to life in the town or outside the boundary of their backyard fences. Their access to information is very limited. News of the wider world comes via their husbands or the radio.

Women's involvement in productive work, on the other hand, exposes them to discrimination. In agricultural production, women's contribution is seen as secondary to men's'. For every peso a man earns, a woman gets less than ten centavos. Her labor is only part of her husband's. Her earnings merely supplement her husband's income, thus, justifying lower pay. The logic goes that since she is not the main breadwinner, her pay represents the value of a mere contribution and not the result of her own labor.

In urban areas more than rural areas, the money a woman is given to manage is much less than her husband's for she is seen to take charge only of small expenditures for the upkeep of the house and its members. Her husband looks after larger charges such as purchase of equipment, credit requirements of the household or business deals. In rural areas, financial arrangements of wives and husband may be more egalitarian. Wives often are given the entire income from production and in turn give their husbands their spending money after accounting for household needs. Still, access to public life by men make their decisions on public matters seem more vital than those of their wives, whose mobility is constrained. Thus, economic and political decisions that require more information than women can normally access independently become naturally the prerogative of men.

This economic situation and relationship to men disempowers women. The latter also see their economic and social contribution as insignificant and they believe that because they are women, it is but natural to depend on men. Extending the situation further, society, in a way, imposes marriage on women, an imposition that some women call as social violence. They are meant to marry. And because this is so, they do not need to be educated or exposed to public life in a way that is necessary for men, who are to fulfill roles as providers and household heads. Many women are often so pressured, finding themselves in situations that they have no knowledge of or preparation for, that they risk making decisions that may permanently injure them for their entire life.

Women are perceived as the natural nurturers by virtue of biology. They are the ones that give birth and therefore child rearing is natural to them. As good mothers, they gain some status in society. Ironically, this ability does not render them suitable for other roles and capacities. They may raise very good and productive children. They may manage households very well, running them quite efficiently with the tight budget they must keep, they must keep the peace at home, managing conflicts among their kin, even enduring improprieties of their husbands. But they cannot lead organizations. They cannot participate critically in decision-making. They cannot control their emotions and handle conflicts. In short, they cannot be leaders of men.

If social investigation can include these sets of questions that will expose these gender conditions (i.e., gender division of labor, value of women's productive and reproductive work, multiple burdens of women, discrimination and stereotyping), it will unearth what has been referred to as women's oppression. Furthermore, other dimensions of the problem may reveal themselves under more sensitive probing and observation. Violence, both psychological and physical may be revealed to the sensitive community organizer. Incidence of wife beating, incest and rape may occur within households in the community. Years of drunkenness, drug use, and philandering of husbands may contribute to the deep feelings of powerlessness of most women. Stories on sexuality, pain and pleasure may open up the Pandora's box that hold ancient secrets suppressed to prop up a sex-gender system that ultimately exercises power and control over women.

But women are not mere victims. They struggle daily for some sense of self esteem, integration and survival. They find spaces of residence where they are and seek safety and respite from daily oppression. Yes, women are active, even revolutionary, agents of change. They may survive years of discrimination and abuse by quietly reorganizing their households, seeing to it that their children learn values and ways that do not turn them into oppressors or oppressed and being keen and sensitive observers of the potentials of a situation for avoiding harm and acquiring some breathing space. Imagine these potentials explode once women gain access to opportunities to raise their consciousness, know their rights, work for equality, and develop themselves more fully. It is therefore, not so surprising that this experience of personal empowerment often translates to a desire not only for personal growth but also for collective action or collective development.

Community organizers must not only know what questions to ask with regard to women's' oppression but must also know how to ask them in a way that does not further "victimize" the women. An organizer must integrate with the women and be sensitive to opportunities when these questions may be more appropriately asked. She must learn other skills, not simply interviewing skills but also peer counseling skills as she listens intently to women who unravel their stories and their lives to her.

Finally, social investigation of the overall economic and political condition of the community must not set aside or discount women's situation and concerns. Community organizing, as a political process biased for the gain and empowerment of the poor, is not traded off for gender and development. The strategy is to identify and relate the key elements of class and gender oppression with a more comprehensive guide for community action and community development.

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SUPPORT GROUP WORK AMONG WOMEN: COMMUNITY ORGANIZING STRATEGY FOR WOMEN POWER

Another step in the process of community organizing that may be made more adaptable to women's participation and empowerment is that of core group formation. A core group is composed of potential leaders of the community. These are people who show the most interest in community development, are credible development, are credible and have the time.

Obviously, many women will not pass these criteria. First, they are usually tied to family and household responsibilities. Time is available but not freely dispensed with by women. Women's interest to develop the community is strong specially if related to benefits family and children may reap for their future but this interest may not translate to active participation in the organization. Activities of the organization that require increased exposure to political and public life may not be initially inviting to women. They may see these involvements as conflicting with their family's interest and time. They may also find such public exposure as uncomfortable and difficult. Moreover, women who pioneer in some sort of personal rebellion against values and tradition for more personal choices and development, often are not seen to have the potential for community commitment but rather are affirmed as trouble makers or inappropriate role models of change.

Core group formation can be made more "women friendly" by initiating a support group process, which may continue throughout the organization's life. Essentially, this process is a community building process. The nature of the group is to act as support to

women, sharing their joys, tears and fears. It provides the shoulder to cry on, a sort of pain reliever as a celebratory group. It is safer place where women can be vulnerable and share and celebrate life stories of their "womanhood". These sessions are consciousness raising events that bring out views, values, beliefs and practices about women that can be analyzed. They may produce decisions and action points consensually arrived in a resolution to promote images or representations of women that free them to develop their full potentials rather than box them in by stereotypical social roles and expectations.

Women's groups that are class homogenous may come together, collectively agreeing on the requirements of commitment to the group. Sessions together may revolve around rearing, relationship with husbands and in-laws, health, household chores, and livelihood and community development concerns. Creative ways of holding sessions may be identified such as discussing stories of a favorite radio soap drama and identifying women's issues found in these stories. Writing journals or scripts for dramatization may also interest many women. Going picnicking together in a river nearby may bring out discussions of women and the environment. Marking a remarkable event by coming together to just sing, dance, compose and recite poetry, or pray may release untapped talents and energy that could release positive feelings and resources that could contribute to the group's sustainability.

The support group may also be a peer –counseling group for women to discuss intimate issues of domestic violence, rape, and incest. The processes of support group formation that allows for individual space for personal disarmament and self-disclosure are very facilitative in drawing out the capacities of women for self-empowerment. Finding a sensitive and listening group as well as being able to identify with other women's own experiences and collectively processing feelings of submission and subordination bring out women's suppressed self-esteem and confidence. Sessions on the theme of "women's rights are human rights" and the rights of women to be free from violence can raise women's awareness and lead them to identify community-based strategies to act on problems of violence against women in the communities.

The relationship of the support group to the core group may be likened to the relationship between sisters. Both groups nourish and sustain the other. Their growth runs parallel, both complementing one another but not fully dependent on each other. They have their own strengths and weaknesses without necessarily affecting the other. The support group's life might surpass the core groups. Core group formation strategies and support groups work. Are creative ways of combining class and gender processes appropriate to the culture of poverty which also contain seeds of the liberation of the poor.

Not all who participate in support activities may be interested in core group work. Yet, the support group is not another community organization. Certainly, participation in support group work will significantly enhance core group business. But not all core group members can sustain consistent support group participation. The main concern of core group business is the life of the community organization while that of the support group is the process of community building. However the objectives and principles of both should not run counter to the other. Relationship should be nurtured. Disagreements should be managed and decisions collectively agreed upon.

THE POWER OF WOMEN IN ORGANIZATIONS

There are other processes in community organizing that can similarly be engendered. The challenge now is for us to take on or simply content with token efforts at women's participation. Tokenism merely results in diminished efficacy of any community organization, and it directly affects its sustainability. The further development of community organizing practice into a more total or comprehensive strategy for change hinges on a critical review of many of its underlying assumptions or givens. The focus on women's' empowerment leads community organizers to reexamine concepts of power, class and gender.

Power constructs men and women and their relationship into dominance, submission and resistance. Class power has been the more exposed identity of power in society. The state and the dominant social structures and systems embodied in social institutions are the more coherent sites of social power. Many experiments on social change are premised on power relations governed by class and class power. Revolutions are recognized essentially as power shifts from central sources to their periphery. Such shifts are more defined by the economic and political turnovers and takeovers that result from revolutions against the status quo. However, power of men over women in all societies has led to inequalities and oppressions that also have seriously constrained the attainment of the goals of development. The evaluation of development visions and strategies has led women to even question development goals. In discussions on women and development, women have found that non-prioritization of problems that affect them personally or privately, such as violence and reproductive health, do not enable them to fully participate in and gain from development interventions. Issues of power that are intricately woven into issues concerning people's private lives have made women cry out that " the personal is political".

Power manifested through macro structures of society such as the state and other major social institutions have been the continuing concern and study of most

development workers and intellectuals. The women's movement now also places the identification of power in its more microenvironment context as a significant factor in determining the goal and direction of development. Family, a social institution, is being bared as a central site of power relations. The range of emotions and feelings that are nurtured and destroyed within family life brings out inner strength or deadly traumas to both girls and boys. Psychological maturity and survival at an early age contribute to the development of girls and boys into men and women who take note of their own and each other's woundedness and reach out to be healed or be psychologically strengthened. For, do not internal health, power and psychological maturity strengthen, sustain and stabilize politics and organizations?

Understanding the psychological and cultural dimensions of power relations does not automatically lead to a discounting of the powerful forces of class and state power. For poor Third World women, their struggles against poverty were waged against elite domination of society and the undemocratic rule of the state. However, not to examine other power forces will delay the processes toward women's emancipation and empowerment. Many a revolutionary project has been waged with strong participation of women. The promise of liberation for women after success has been virtually lost as the winning forces rebuild life again at the sacrifice of women's causes and concerns.

It is thus imperative that political gains translate into personal gains, that these create more equality among men and women, in the public and private spheres; build structures and processes that facilitate the development of their full potentials, and provide access to a range of choices or options regarding men's and women's roles and preferences. These can be operationalized also at the local or community level. Again, such a strategy covers concerns of class and gender relations that contribute to more comprehensive and sustainable gains for poor women and men.

Because of their active participation in community organizations, women's gains must be ensured, protected and consolidated. When power is taken to mean the power to work with and not to dominate, women's ways of dealing with power can be most appropriately tapped. To use women's power to build communities means to work personally and politically in community organizations of the poor, making sure that organizational goals, principles, policies, processes and programs work not only for the benefit of the whole community but also that development and empowerment are individually internalized as visions of the full potential of each woman and man. Political organizational strength and consolidation must mean as well the commitment to personal change especially a standpoint from women on women's issue and concerns.

There are more areas by which community organizing can be woman –focused. Leadership development must examine for “leadership” has always been a role most unwanted by many women. Again, it must be redefined and re-approached in a way that accommodates women’s views and women’s ways. Education and training or the capacity –building process must be changed. There are many planning tools available now, a product of the advocacy of the women’s movement. Gender planning tools have been developed to serve more the agenda of project development and implementation, focusing on project appraisal, project monitoring and evaluation. But there has also been a very significant contribution to the development of gender impact indicators that includes simple indicators on woman’s participation and women’s social welfare gains, to more complex measurement of sustainable development and women’s empowerment.

In ending, this is not so imagined tale of a strong woman named *Nanay* may lead us to dig deeper into ourselves and recognize realities we have not seen before emerge. For many years *Nanay* has quietly guided her family to survive the harsh life that she then thought destiny had dealt her. Together with *Tatay*, she filled with dreams that her family would one day defeat life’s demons and be soothed by life’s sweetness. *Tatay* soon despaired from trying and waiting. Depressed and drunk for days, death soon took him. Widowed and with needy, wide-eyed babies, *Nanay* had no time for grief nor despair. She had to head her household when she earlier thought she was simply guiding it. She cared for, taught, cooked, cleaned and earned for her family, all in the same number of hours in a day that everyone had. She did not rest, did not look after herself even once the entire time. She still had no time to be troubled nor tired.

In their endless want, *Nanay* and her brood were further shocked to one day receive orders of eviction and subsequent demolition of their erstwhile home from the city government. In this so rude an awakening, she realized that she could not find safety for her family if she could not secure her community. She discovered the truth to the saying that “ what one loses one gains back” so many times more. She remembered feeling a mass of strength coming from deep below her navel that pushed up and made her own choice boom so loudly and commandingly to her neighbors that they should be alert and organized to defend their homes, their rights. She said no human being, neither woman nor man, is destined for oppression. *Nanay* could not believe what she heard herself say. It must be her power, the power to lead.

Many ore months and years followed. More consciously, she began to learn leadership by copying other male leaders. She honed her skills by following community organizers and trainers. She became a remarkable community leader and organizer to boot. She was a woman alone, amongst the men.

Now, *Nanay* looks back and sees the many that followed her but could not stand beside her to lead with her. It has been many, many years since her first experience at leading and she worries that there will be no one to take up the position when she leaves. She wants another woman to replace her. She also observes that women who joined the organization she pioneered in establishing were attending meetings but were passive and listless. They could neither concentrate nor sustain their participation. What could be the problem? Lack of time? She thought of teaching time management skills to women. But this did not entirely work to produce active women. Perhaps, it was fear. A fear of involvement? A fear of leadership?

Nanay knows that women fear leadership the same way she did when she had a husband and growing children. But was it simply fear that was the problem? Fear of what, *Nanay* wondered. Faced with a problem that had no name, she was able to meet Diwata, an active member of a women's organization called Kalayaan, during an NGO forum on Urban Land Reform. Diwata invited *Nanay* to join her in sessions among other women from other poor communities that unraveled lives of women and told tales of their struggles and empowerment. After several "sisterhood-bonding" sessions, *Nanay* began to discover the name of the problem.

Taking back news of what she learned to her community, she was able to attract a number of women to join her in Diwata sessions. The changes she saw in herself and in these women convinced her that her search for other women to stand beside her in leading the organization was over. They formed their own support group in the community. Several months later, the core group for a community organization that would build and develop their community was established. They named their organization *Walang Takot, Inc.* (No Fear Inc.), not because they had no fear but because they knew they had fear. They knew that by accepting this, they could begin to live with fear, confront and overcome it. They knew men had fear too, but were able to get rid of it. Now, they felt power and knew they had power.

This not so made-up tale is not ended but it is known. And in knowing, one gains power—the power to be and the power to act.

