

# Perspectives

## ECONOMIC ALTERNATIVES FOR GENDER AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: VOICES AND VISIONS FROM LATIN AMERICA

Patricia Muñoz Cabrera

### Introduction

Women in Development Europe (WIDE) is a Europe-based network advocating for gender and social justice in trade and development policies in Europe and globally. WIDE's work on feminist alternatives to the neo-liberal economic model dates from the establishment of our network in 1985. More recently, WIDE has engaged in a process of documenting evidence on the role women are playing in the construction of alternatives to the neoliberal economic model at the macro and micro levels which resulted in a series of publications under the title 'Economic Alternatives for Gender Equality and Social Justice'. The first in the series is titled *In search of Economic Alternatives for Gender and Social Justice: Voices from India* (ed. Wichterich, 2010) and the second, on which this article is based, is titled *Economic Alternatives for Gender Equality and Social Justice: Voices and Visions from Latin America* (2011: see <http://www.wide-network.org>). The latter showcases in eight case studies the practical experiences of a diverse range of women's organisations in Latin America specifically: Asociación Lola mora (Argentina), Centro de Estudios de la Universidad central de Venezuela (REMTE Y CLACSO), Red Comuincacol (Colombia), Coalición Ecuador Decide/Centro de Estudios e investigaciones Mariátegui (Ecuador), Instituto de formación femenina integral - IFFI (Bolivia), REPEM (México), ADC (Perú), and IGTN (Guatemala).

This article begins with a macro-political analysis of current challenges affecting Latin America in the aftermath of multiple and interconnected crises (food, energy, climate, financial). The second section engages in a discussion on alternatives to neoliberalism being put forward by feminist and women activists and scholars. The third section maps the alternatives being implemented by women on the ground as documented by the eight case studies. It also draws linkages between experiences from the field and feminist rethinking of the current neoliberal economic model in Latin America.

## Mapping Alternatives in Latin America: Current Challenges

In spite of the evident failure of the current neoliberal model to release Latin America from the legacy of social inequalities informing its economies, the ideology of macroeconomic growth remains as pervasive as it was before the recent crises. Several studies demonstrate that the interlocking crises of the past four years have brought forth a new cycle of disciplinary policies which include improving the monitoring of financial markets (Katz, 2010; Gallagher 2008, 2010) and stabilising national economies through programmes that ensure macroeconomic efficiency, competitiveness and maximisation of profit in the short term. It is hoped that an improvement in the image and credibility of Latin American economies will attract greater flows of direct foreign investment to the region; these are desperately needed to sustain macroeconomic growth (Katz 2010). One major aspect of the policies adopted by governments is that there has been little or no concern for the social, political and environmental implications of the policy reforms undertaken.

The situation has been worsened by an overemphasis on boosting consumption power and liberalisation of key sectors such as extractive industries and agriculture. The latter has boosted speculation in the commodities market, thereby exacerbating the volatility of prices of basic grains (Wise et al, 2012; GRAIN, 2010). At the systemic level, one can note that the austerity measures are designed to mitigate the financial crisis rather than replace the dominant economic model. This is clearly the case with current anti-cyclical policies, which reflect governments' preoccupation with adjusting to the present crises rather than contemplating that they result from systemic failure.

Like a reflection of the global economic landscape, Latin America is currently affected by what has been called the 'financialisation' of its economies. This refers to the increasing levels of investment which are being directed towards speculation and short-term profit in financial markets (Harvey, 2008). Several analysts have drawn our attention to the fact that financialisation not only transforms the functioning of the economic system at the macro and micro level; it also perpetuates structural inequalities. In this sense, Palley refers to financialisation as 'a process whereby financial markets, financial institutions and financial elites gain greater influence over economic policy and economic outcomes' (2007). Others have criticised what they call a reordering of the economy affecting even so-called progressive governments (particularly in South America). Acosta (2009) contends that in Ecuador the official discourse promotes a sovereign economic model that respects the rights of people and nature, whereas in practice, the government has not moved away from the 'extractivist logic' which is 'predatory' in terms of human rights and the

environment. Ruiz (2011) suggests that this trend has also expanded to the rest of the continent when he criticises Colombia's strategy of opening up its mineral resources to foreign direct investment (FDI).

Empirical evidence shows that the neoliberal model has gained momentum in Latin America, and it is precisely in the area of economic, social and cultural rights of millions of women and men workers where its disenfranchising impact is most noticeable. Macroeconomic policies and policymakers continue to ignore the fact that the current economic model is perpetuating social inequalities in a region that ranks among the most unequal in the world. Egan (2003) refers to a 'hegemonic transnational order' which is exacerbating social polarisation and competition. In this hegemonic order, public and private actors collaborate towards an accumulation of capital which is empowering multinational conglomerates, while foreign investors compete to gain control over sectors such as communications, energy, water, banking services, the extractive mining industry and agriculture (Gallagher, 2010; GRAIN, 2010).

Regrettably, governments continue to overlook the fact that foreign direct investment in agriculture and the mining sector has exacerbated social conflict, dispossession, and varied forms of violence against women. An evidence-based study conducted in Brazil by the World Rain Forest Movement (WRFM) shows that the situation is particularly critical in areas inhabited by indigenous and Afro-descendent men and women:

“These regions have seen the growth of poverty and unemployment; both have exacerbated violence and an exodus from rural areas. In terms of specific impacts on women, an increase in prostitution has been observed in areas where monoculture plantations are most prevalent” (2010).

This study corroborates the need to further expose the correlation of land-grabbing and extractive mining with economic and sexual violence against women. Moreover, the growing wave of violence generated by trends in FDI demands critical analysis of the impact of the current policies and practices of multinational enterprises and international financial institutions (IFIs) and urgent action from governments and multilateral institutions.

### **Building Alternatives in Latin America: Another Economy is Possible**

Building viable alternatives to global capitalism is a long process and not without dilemmas and contradictions. Taking this complexity into account, the

alternatives emerging in Latin America cover a wide range of issues which cannot be fully addressed in the limited space devoted to this paper. Generally speaking however, many of the proposals include elements of solidarity economy as alternatives to the neoliberal economic paradigm. One specific alternative that has gained momentum is the paradigm of food sovereignty, proposed by Via Campesina, which movements such as Movimento sem Terra (MST) in Brazil and the Network of Women Transforming Economy (REMTE), among others, have adhered. Another approach has been that of Matthei (2002), the Brazilian Women's organisation (AMB) and the Mercosur feminist network (AFM), which has recently begun to rethink the current economic and development models from a feminist standpoint that is anti-capitalist, anti-racist and anti-heterosexual (<http://www.articulacaodemulheres.org.br>).

At a governmental level, no economic models have emerged which can be fully considered alternatives to the current neoliberal capitalist model. However, one should acknowledge the work done by some governments to pass new policies and legislation that see the rights of workers, indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples as central to social and economic policymaking. Such is the case of Venezuela, where the very idea of the nation-state has been redefined. As a result, at the national level, the state has been repositioned as an overarching regulator of economic and financial activity. However, efforts by the Venezuelan government to reshape the national economy occur within a global arena of increased speculation and short-term investment in which the state also participates through its companies (De la Fuente et al, 2008).

Two other countries where paradigmatic changes have taken place are Bolivia and Ecuador. Even though these two governments have not escaped the logic of the extractivist model, the inclusion of nature as a subject entitled to rights – within the paradigm of *Buen Vivir/Vivir Bien* – in the new constitutions represents a significant step towards shifting the social and cultural mindset of the region.

In fact, the *Buen Vivir* paradigm represents a transformation without precedent in more than five centuries of history of the continent. *Buen Vivir* is rooted in indigenous epistemology and bears a strong relation with the emancipatory struggles fought by indigenous peoples since the Spanish conquest. At its core is the struggle against racist, cultural and economic hegemony and the disenfranchisement caused by capitalism-driven colonial power. Concretely, *Buen Vivir* redefines the nation-state as pluri-cultural and pluri-lingual with the primary task of promoting and regulating a social, cultural and economic model driven by equity, human dignity, and social and

environmental justice. In this paradigm, the issue of entitlements is a crucial one. This means that not only people but also nature are subjects entitled to rights. From this perspective, nature becomes a global, finite common, which means that we are all responsible for its protection and preservation.

Another important aspect of *Buen Vivir* is that it is dialogic; that is to say, it rejects the false oppositions inherent in capitalism (the economic versus the social; the productive versus the reproductive; the micro versus the macro). *Buen Vivir* is driven by the idea of redistributive justice: equity in the distribution of wealth and resources and equality of conditions, not only of opportunities. Within this paradigm, redistributive justice is fundamental to make labour and production contribute to the economic, social and cultural well-being of human subjects, the full enjoyment of their human rights and the well-being of nature. Just like any other complex paradigm, *Buen Vivir* presents some important challenges: one of them relates to the emphasis on women as reproducers of life. This idea creates controversy if we consider women's historical struggle to have the right to full enjoyment of their sexual and reproductive rights regardless of their roles as procreators.

At the geopolitical level, *Buen Vivir* is in line with holistic approaches to the interlocking crises affecting our planet. In this sense it echoes the paradigm of degrowth which has gained momentum in Europe. Both paradigms converge into an idea of economics for a finite planet, to put it in Jackson's terms (2010). These economic paradigms regard the environmental, financial and food crises as inextricably linked, and suggest that we are undergoing a systemic crisis which is a symptom of the collapse of a hegemonic worldview that continues to push for a predatory model of economic development as if the current crises had not happened.

Significantly, these two paradigms share a concern with the depletion of global ecosystems due to irresponsible overconsumption of resources and the ensuing generation of waste. They are also contributing to the weaving of transnational knowledges from the distinctive perspective of social movements and women's rights. This confirms the fact that although alternatives to hegemonic models take a long time before yielding concrete results at the macro level, the thinking and acting to transform unequal patterns of production and consumption has already begun.

### **Proposals from a Feminist and Women's Rights Perspective**

The first proposal echoes the ideas articulated in the *Buen Vivir* and degrowth paradigms. This proposal calls for a radical abandonment of the logics of profit

maximisation and capital accumulation imposed by the neoliberal model, summoning us to embrace a new economy, wherein the human activity of production and social reproduction benefits both individual and collective well-being, is based on values such as respect for nature, dialogue between cultures, and human dignity (Mejías Flores, 2010). As Irene León (2010) explains, the need is to envisage theoretical and political frameworks that redefine the economy on the basis of an idea of sustainability of human life and the planet's resources. This entails transformations in 'the productive matrix, in visions and policies relating to who shapes the economy and how it is put into practice, what and how to produce, what and how to consume; finally, how to reproduce life'.

A second key recommendation is to approach gender as endogenous to macroeconomics and to revamp the solidarity economy paradigm with the distinctive perspective of women's cultural, economic and social rights. In both cases, the gender blindness affecting economic policies and practices has been exposed (Azar et al, 2009; Sanchís, 2004). In both cases, the proposals redefine the spaces in which economics operates, demonstrating how macroeconomic policies interact with institutions and the microeconomic level: households, community, labour markets, the couple (as affected by unequal power relations). This first achievement has been referred to as a two-way relationship or the macro-meso-micro nexus (Azar et al, 2009; van Staeveren, 2010; Elson, 2009).

Third, women's works and activism have also exposed the 'omnipotent patriarchal system' inhering neo-classical economic theory, showing that this power system operates in global, national and local spaces; shapes the mindset of economic decision-makers, international financial institutions and public institutions; defines economic policies and practices at macro and micro level (Carrasco, 1999; León, 2005; Quintela, 2006; Palacios and Guevara, 2011); and makes women workers vulnerable to multiple forms of violence, which, in many cases, take place with impunity (Monárrez Fragoso, 2002; Muñoz Cabrera, 2010).

Fourth, they have demonstrated the primacy of the market over development agendas, exposing the pitfalls of neoliberal capitalism and its disenfranchising impact on the rights of women workers in the labour market. A major argument is that this model perpetuates unequal distribution of wealth and resources, discriminatory access to public goods, and privileges those agents of power who rule over the predominant division of labour (Espino, 2007; Azar et al, 2009).

A fifth gain is the reposition of social reproduction as a fundamental element of macroeconomic theory and in clear rejection of neo-classical economic theory which limits analysis to the productive, monetarist and mercantile aspects (Azar et al, 2009; Fariás and Nobre, 2002). The concrete proposal here is two-fold: to reconceptualise labour so as to dismantle the false opposition between the productive and the reproductive and which defines social reproduction as an essentially feminine endeavour; and to rethink the economy in order to ensure an equitable redistribution of productive assets and of the work involved in social reproduction. This proposal echoes that of European feminist economists who have incorporated social reproduction into economic thinking by means of three main parameters of inclusion: recognition, reduction and redistribution of the responsibilities involved in social reproduction (Elson, 2009 & 2010).

Reinterpreting Marxist theory, some feminists have highlighted the importance of equality and social equity in the construction of models that can supersede neoliberal capitalism. In their re-interpretation, solidarity economy is located in sharp contrast to the individualist capitalist economic model (Farias and Nobre, 2002) and promotes economic activity rooted in the culture, knowledge and production patterns of those who produce the goods (Sanchís, 2004). The call has also been made to work towards deconstructing the fundamental tenets of neoliberal capitalism from a transdisciplinary feminist analysis of the economy; this in order to critically examine the sociological, historical, cultural and political implications of economic policies, in particular, those policies that insist on the cultural myth of the heterosexual nuclear family. It is argued that the global challenges we are facing today are too complex to be fully comprehended by macroeconomic analysis. Hence, the need to assess the wellbeing of society by incorporating all the human activities that contribute to its pursuit, not only economic activity (Quintela, 2006).

One cannot speak of alternatives to neoliberal capitalism in Latin America without referring to the proposals put forward by indigenous and Afro-descendent women. From their perspective, a fundamental issue is to reshape the cultural mindset in a way that racist ideologies at work in daily life, in public policies and in society as a whole can be dismantled. Another key goal is to transform a consumerist, highly individualistic culture into a culture of care at two levels: care and protection of the human rights of people and the rights of nature (Tauli-Corpuz, 2005; Chancosa, 2010). It is argued that this transformation is an indispensable step towards a new logic of accumulation. In this new logic, women's human rights as individual subjects are understood as complementary with their collective rights as people. For indigenous women

in particular, *Buen Vivir* is especially important for two reasons: first, it has provided them with an opportunity to validate their discredited knowledges; and second, it has permitted them to occupy social and political space locally, nationally and internationally.

Even though much remains to be done, we can argue that feminist analysis has been highly beneficial to women in Latin America. In the first place, it has demonstrated that women have been incorporated into the labour market in conditions of structural subordination. Second, it has shown that because of the patriarchal segmentation of labour markets, women are highly invisible as productive agents and hyper-visible as being primarily responsible for social reproduction and as providers of cheap labour. In extreme cases, and because of their constructed inferiority, they are perceived as expendable subjects, as evidenced in the impunity surrounding violations of the human rights of indigenous, black and lesbian women.

### **Proposals Emerging from the Latin American Experiences**

Echoing many of the proposals discussed in the previous sections, the eight experiences contained in WIDE's publication take us on a journey through alternatives to the neoliberal economic model currently being designed and implemented by grassroots women in alliance with researchers, members of national parliaments, activists and other women and men committed to social justice and gender justice. Their struggle bears witness to the transformative power of women on the ground: the ultimate goal is to construct a society based on the principles of redistributive justice and a life free from the manifold forms of violence generated by the current neoliberal economic model.

The methodological and strategic approaches used by these women reflect their power to transform oppression and discrimination into opportunities for individual and organisational collective empowerment. Undoubtedly, these experiences follow the proposals put forward by feminist academics and activists who have stated that there can be no social justice or *Buen Vivir* without gender justice, and that this can only be achieved through equal distribution of wealth, resources and the work involved in social reproduction.

The case studies show varying degrees of criticism, a fact that reflects the complex heterogeneity of the region, the power asymmetries defining economic, political, social and cultural relations, and the different degrees of liberalisation of their economies. Responses to the dominant economic model also vary: some women construct alternatives of economic emancipation from



within the model, others adopt hybrid models, and others, such as the Guatemalan experience, propose an alternative that is anti-systemic in that it rejects the current pattern of capital accumulation engrained in the development model implemented by the State.

Altogether, the eight good practice models demonstrate that social, political and economic empowerment continues to be a key issue for grassroots women; along with agency, they pave the way to enforcing legislation so that economic policies and practices do not hamper women's human rights. The key issue is to exert various levels of social, economic and cultural influence so that women can effectively intervene and transform the very structures of local markets and the mindset of those power agents shaping economic policymaking.

Moreover, the case studies offer valuable insights into a vision of development which has been defined from the specificity of women engaged in a daily struggle to transform themselves as well as their environment. For instance, the Guatemalan case study raises two fundamental issues: food sovereignty and the right to water from the perspective of indigenous women, and in conformity with United Nations (UN) and other international protocols and conventions. It highlights the key role of indigenous women farmers in sustainable agriculture, showing their power to negotiate spaces for political, cultural and economic change despite the conditions of structural vulnerability affecting their lives and livelihoods. A striking feature of the Guatemalan experience is women's power for social transformation. Confronted with the threat of agribusiness, land-grabbing and extractive activities of big companies, they respond with development strategies that are sustainable in the short and the long term. We see how elderly rural Mayan women validate their accumulated knowledge of resilient food systems, improve their livelihoods and those of their communities, and contribute to shifting the political and cultural mindset: the good results achieved through agroecology has caught the attention of the local authorities and men producers, who are requesting training from these women in order to improve their techniques of organic agriculture. As agents of political transformation, they have joined forces with others to question local authorities for the alienating development model being imposed upon them and to claim their right to water as a human right.

The Argentinian case study stresses women's crucial role in agricultural markets inspired by food sovereignty and solidarity economy. It tells us that these food markets designed as a strategy for the impoverishment of farmers resulting from the neo-liberal policies of the 1990s. Today, these markets have improved the livelihoods of thousands of women and men

farmers and their families, have revalorised local markets and are contributing to the preservation of healthy consumption patterns.

Importantly, these markets promote women's participation (eighty percent of those who are trading during market hours are women) and the production chain is controlled by 'family production units'. Members are organised as non-profitable associations and there are no intermediaries: the relationship between producer and consumer is direct and the prices are fair. This market model also promotes agroecology and protection of the environment. It also strengthens the social fabric of the community; and leaders use their bargaining power in their relations with local authorities. This bargaining often deals with models of local development which are appropriate to the context and culture of those who produce and trade in food markets. To these important gains one should add changes in gender relations among young women, specifically in terms of the sexual division of labour in the household, violence against women, and sexual and reproductive health.

Another gain is an increase in women's participation in mixed organisations working in solidarity economy. However, despite the achievements, important challenges remain. For example, greater involvement from local authorities is needed so that these food markets do not end up as marginal palliatives to a structural problem. Another big challenge is changing the cultural mindset in a sustainable way. The patriarchal myth of the male breadwinner continues to relegate women producers to a secondary economic role or simply to the domestic space. There is also a great imbalance in leadership positions within the organisations, since most of their top leaders are men. Critically aware of these challenges, women are implementing strategies of awareness-raising in order to shift the mindset of their male peers. At the broader level, this struggle reaffirms women's capacity to struggle against patriarchy from within, to assume gender equity as endogenous to solidarity economy and to envision creative options to the capitalist-driven agribusiness which is impoverishing them.

From Ecuador and Mexico the authors present two cases of ecotourism led by indigenous women entrepreneurs. These experiences show different levels of development, and both highlight the significance of solidarity economy in ecotourism businesses led by indigenous women. With Guatemala, these experiences share a vision of economic development based on the accumulated knowledges, culture and values of indigenous women and a strong concern with *Buen Vivir*. To women, production and biodiversity conservation are inseparable. The case study from Ecuador documents the case of twenty-two

Kichwa women who decided to create a small ecotourism business as an alternative way to economic and cultural empowerment. The women have gradually managed to develop a micro-model of socioeconomic entrepreneurship which has broken their isolation, has made them more assertive, has enabled them to occupy public spaces and generate income for themselves and other community members.

The experience from Mexico is perhaps one of the most effective experiences of ecotourism led by indigenous women entrepreneurs in the region. This business project was born out of the desire of a group of Nahua women to set up an organisation through which they could empower themselves politically, socially and economically; this without losing sight of the necessary dialogue with indigenous cooperatives and the national indigenous movement to which they belong and identify with. Even though the struggle against racism and class discrimination united Nahua men and women farmers, they had problems making their voices heard within indigenous cooperatives and were confronted with the incapacity of male leaders to assume women as capable leaders.

The experience from Colombia documents three examples of women's organisations inspired by a vision of community entrepreneurship that breaks with normative models of micro-entrepreneurship. It explains that the main objective is to enhance the organisational and bargaining power of women miners, women farmers and other women living in conditions of acute social exclusion in urban and rural areas. Many of these women are girls and elderly migrants, factory workers, seasonal workers, indigenous and Afro-descendent women who have survived the violence generated by armed conflict, land dispossession, forced displacement, poverty-led migration and exploitation in labour markets. Through their activities, these women claim their right to produce according to models that do not harm human beings or nature. With this goal in mind, they are struggling to empower themselves, reconstruct the social fabric of their communities, and defend local models of socioeconomic development which can offer an alternative to the growing individualism brought forth by consumerist capitalism.

The Venezuelan experience presents a model of microfinance which seeks to empower women economically, politically and culturally. This model is implemented by Banmujer, a public microfinance bank led by women and inspired by a national project of socialist popular economy. Their goal is to use microfinance as a means to transform the power relations subordinating women and denying their enjoyment of their fundamental rights. The political

framework defining this model assumes women as ‘subjects entitled to rights’ and ‘gender equity’ as a normative principle in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of financial instruments, development policies and programmes.

The case study clarifies that what distinguishes this microfinance model from the poverty-alleviation programmes implemented by the World Bank and other international organisations; namely the degree of ownership of the activities carried out by women. Women decide the projects they want to submit on the basis of their own priorities and culture of production. The main idea fuelling Banmujer’s microfinance model is to help women out of the poverty circle through what they call ‘the economy of the small’. This means facilitating financial resources to satisfy individual and collective needs, improve the livelihoods of men and women living in popular areas, energise local development and contribute to equity in women’s and men’s social and productive power. In short, micro-credit is assumed as a solidarity tool through which social transformation can be achieved at three levels: in women’s livelihoods, in the economic sphere and the cultural mindset. To achieve this, Banmujer has developed an intersectional vision of public microfinance which assumes that women’s exclusion and poverty are the result of the interaction of gender, class and ethnic discrimination.

The study from Peru presents the struggle for organisational strengthening and leadership of women workers in the informal economy. It highlights the increasing feminisation of poverty in the informal market. The already precarious condition of many women in poor households is worsened by the inconsistent behaviour of local authorities who deliver little, if anything at all. This case study emphasises the transforming power of networking as a means to enhance the political influence of women in the informal economy (agency). It shows how transformative models of advocacy work can be an effective means to convince local authorities of the urgency to enforce the labour rights of these women. The advocacy and lobbying strategy proposed is highly relevant to the realities of women workers on the ground, and it has helped them to enhance their assertiveness and knowledge of issues that are central to their political agenda. Moreover, they have successfully raised awareness among members of parliament (some have even taken their demands to parliament), union workers and political decision-makers. Thanks to their sustained lobbying, their case has become known among the general public.

The Bolivian case study documents the experience of Ricomida, a women-led chain of food distribution set up in 2006 in poor areas of

Cochabamba. This income-generating project promotes economic justice for women through three main strategies: gender, interculturalism and political influence. The idea driving this project is solidarity economy, and the goal is to provide an alternative to women who would otherwise be forced into taking poorly paid, highly risky temporary jobs. Ricomida promotes individual and collective profit-making, the possibility for women to work near their family, and family and community access to nutritious food. A revolving fund ensures access to credit to improve service delivery and the quality of meals offered to the public. Ricomida offers low-income community members the possibility of accessing good-quality meals at affordable prices. The feminist organisation that accompanies this initiative follows the model of ‘feminist critical economy’ whose main features are: eradication of the economic invisibility of women in neoclassical economic thought; conceptual redefinition of labour and deconstruction of the androcentric world vision that locates men as the only subject and agent of economic, social and cultural change; and rejection of the false opposition between production and reproduction. On a broader level, the Ricomida project stresses the importance of urban spaces in transforming patterns of food consumption, especially if one considers the devastating impact of junk food in our eating culture.

In line with our discussion on alternatives, a relevant question at this stage is, what do these case studies offer in terms of proposals for alternative economic and development paradigms in the region and globally? We turn to these proposals in the next section.

### **Transforming from Below: Solidarity Economy from the Perspective of Grassroots Women**

In the first instance, the eight case studies compel us to rethink the economy from the complexity of women’s everyday existence. In this sense, they expose the fissures of the capitalist system from below, unveiling the logics of domination at work in local spaces and their interconnection with power structures at the macro level. They also validate the experiential knowledge of women who have been key contributors to socioeconomic development but who nevertheless remain invisible subjects in macroeconomic analysis. At the local level, they document innovative examples of micro-models of solidarity economy which are designed according to women’s contextual realities. These models aim to fulfil the practical, productive and strategic needs of women, emphasising the importance of rights-based development models. Moreover, they stress the need to achieve a culture of violence-eradication, in particular the forms of violence against women generated by the neoliberal economic model. In the

same way, the experiences highlight the added value of holistic visions of development, suggesting that rooted integral approaches are more appropriate for they take stock of the multidimensional nature of economic development, the power relations affecting economic policies and practices, and the complex heterogeneity of women and men on the ground.

The micro-models highlighted women's leadership in local production, promote hybrid modes of trading goods/produce, and foster socio-productive models that promote cooperativism and production for local markets. These are all strategic options that ensure food security for many households in the region and strengthen the capacity of small-scale producers and entrepreneurs to counteract the multiple crises affecting their livelihoods. These initiatives deserve serious and sustained support from governments and donor agencies.

### **Food Sovereignty from a Grassroots Women's Rights Perspective**

Echoing the critique made by feminist and women activists and scholars, the case studies suggest that it is urgent to rethink the current agricultural model from the lens of food sovereignty. The different development modalities proposed are bound by one important tenet: women's rights to produce and trade in accordance with their own priorities, culture, and contextual realities. A fundamental issue here is that economic activities must be enshrined in an idea of development with dignity and solidarity. To grassroots women, the human rights dimension of economic policies is a key issue, which continues to be overlooked by macroeconomic theory. Consequently, they stress the need to lobby governments so that they comply with commitments made in the framework of women's social, cultural and economic rights (for instance, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women – CEDAW – and Beijing) and with conventions protecting the rights of indigenous and Afro-descendent women as people.

The case studies emphasise the complex heterogeneity of women informing the reality of local development, providing insights into how we can enrich gender analysis by incorporating intersecting variables such as race/ethnicity, social class, age, gender and sexual identity. In this specific sense, the case studies expose the pitfalls of orthodox economic analysis which has failed to engage in analysis of the overlapping hegemonies at work in the neoliberal economic model: class, patriarchal and racial hegemonies collaborate under a common banner. This common banner is profit maximisation at the lowest possible cost regardless of its human consequences. The case studies suggest that these overlapping hegemonies affect women in distinctive ways. For instance, because of their constructed inferiority, black and indigenous women

pay a heavy price. Clearly, grassroots women's grounded interpretation of the intersections of power affecting the economy permits a more complex reading of women's trajectories towards empowerment and agency.

From this angle, the case studies suggest that economic analysis and development models that do not include a concern with intersectional gender justice are doomed to be flawed. The major risk would be to privilege women of a specific social group in detriment of others who are less visible or socially constructed as doubly or triply inferior.

### **Decolonising and 'depatriarchalising' the Nation-state: The Need to Shift the Cultural Mindset of Latin America**

Another proposal emerging from the eight case studies is the fact that participatory processes of economic transformation are also political and cultural. It is not enough to transform the economy; systemic transformation requires deconstructing the dominant mindset. In this sense, the studies reposition the key role of the state as regulator of the economy and as the one that must ensure the equal distribution of wealth and resources. Parallel to this, they propose to decolonise and depatriarchalise society and the state, meaning to put an end to gender blindness, racism and the heteronormative, patriarchal culture-shaping policymaking. This is an important political project in many countries, and it is women who have led the struggle.

In this respect, they confirm the feminist critique that social and cultural aspects are inextricable from the economic models at work in a given context and that the divide between the social, the economic, the ethical and the ecological is not only ideological but also contributes to allowing human rights abuses by multinational enterprises to go unpunished. One specific proposal here is not to dissociate production and reproduction: they are two humps of the same camel. In line with feminist criticism, it is suggested that policymakers should refrain from assuming women to be altruistic providers of care in public spaces and quintessential providers of care in private ones (Molyneux, 2007). The experiences reject a purely economic approach to the issue of care, stressing the need to include an ethic of caring for people and nature in economic thinking.

### **Towards a New Pattern of Accumulation: An Economy of *Buen Vivir***

Overtly or tacitly, the case studies situate women's experiences with the economy in a conceptual and value frame that recalls the paradigm of *Buen Vivir*. The idea of economic development proposed is inseparable from value structures that are beneficial for society as a whole. To borrow from the Venezuelan

experience, economics and the economy should be at the service of ‘the highest possible sum of happiness for everyone and nature’. In this way, the experiences redefine the economy as a human exercise affected by power relations and where the struggle to acknowledge and respect the limited nature of our planet’s resources is central.

Here again, they follow the anti-systemic critique engrained in the degrowth and *Buen Vivir* paradigms: economic activities, agricultural production, food chains and any business activity involving an effect on nature must be consistent with the idea that nature’s resources are finite and that ensuring the well-being of people and nature is the responsibility of men and women (Gudynas, 2011; Ramírez, 2010). The issues raised situate the debate on economic alternatives in the framework of broad and intertwined social aspirations: economic, social, gender and environmental justice.

To governments and international institutions, women recommend working towards the consolidation of a long-term development model. This model must reflect national priorities and break with the logic of agribusiness led monoculture and unfettered extractivism – both are threatening the daily existence of women, their families, their communities. Some policy recommendations pointing in this direction include a new approach to the relationship between capital and labour. This involves ensuring that men and women workers are the primary beneficiaries of their work and guarantee their right to invest their surplus in the social well-being of their families and communities. Other recommendations include the following:

- Production and social reproduction are inseparable: policy reforms and cultural change are needed in order to achieve an equal redistribution of the rights and responsibilities associated with social reproduction. The main argument is that only then will progress have been made in terms of equal levels of emancipation for men and women.
- Economic models should be enshrined in a two-fold ethic of care (caring for human life and nature). Models should also be informed by women’s accumulated knowledge of sustainable solutions to the current food and climate crises.
- Economic models should enforce the human rights of women workers and reject financial speculation on natural resources. Concrete policy



proposals here are: ensure that policies promote production patterns that are based upon local and national development agendas; ensure that economic activity on the ground guarantees the self-sufficiency of women and their communities; ensure that it corrects gender-unjust relations between men and women (mindset shifting); ensure it preserves biodiversity and seeds which are fundamental to the right to adequate food and water of future generations; ensure it protects women's right to develop endogenous models of production and redistribution, and their right to productive assets (land tenure being a crucial asset).

### **Moving on: Challenges Ahead**

Like other alternatives reflecting the complexity of Latin American social reality, those put forward in the eight studies are not free from dilemmas. All experiences raise the issue (without resolving it) of how to value women's contribution to the care economy away from the monetary logic driving the current neoliberal economic model. The cases of Colombia, Peru and Bolivia raise the important question of how to incorporate, with justice and equity, women workers of the informal economy in a labour market that is structurally segmented due to gender and racial prejudice. The experience from Venezuela raises two major questions: can an alternative model of microfinance really exist outside global capitalism? And, how can we negotiate the tension between a state's efforts to empower excluded women and its participation in speculative global financial markets, oil markets in particular?

The case study from Bolivia leaves us with the question of how to preserve a national culture of healthy food consumption at a time when global food trends tend to homogenise our eating cultures. The Guatemalan experience poses two major questions: why are so many people enduring food insecurity and hunger in countries with sufficient resources? And, how can national governments develop economic models which promote food sovereignty, social justice and the rights of nature in a global context of unfettered trade and financial speculation? Finally, the experiences from Ecuador and Mexico leave us with the question of how resilient innovative micro-models can be when the mainstream tourism industry views environmental protection as unprofitable. The Colombian case study raises the issue of how to construct strategic alliances with trade unions in countries where unionism not only has been demonised but is also affected by a patriarchal bias against women workers, let alone women union leaders.

Throughout the eight experiences, grassroots women insist on the necessity to advance in the construction of holistic models which consider their economic, social, cultural, sexual and reproductive rights. These experiences also raise important challenges to economic analysis in general and feminist economic thinking in particular. A first challenge is to pursue work on interpretative frameworks that bring the experiential knowledges of grassroots women to the forefront of mainstream economic theory. Second, analysis should move beyond gender-based discrimination to include intersectionality. The experiences show that even though gender continues to be a primary vector of oppression, it is not enough to fully explain the complexity of women's subordinated status in economics and the economy. Clearly the challenges are great but so is women's power to transform social conflict into opportunities for gender and social justice. The experiences show that women are designing and implementing alternatives for sustainable economic development in local spaces and that these deserve serious consideration by national and international policymakers.

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