Barrio Women
Between the Urban and the Feminist Movement

by
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The importance of struggles in the sphere of reproduction has been debated in terms of whether they are "able to develop a revolutionary class consciousness, that is, to elaborate an alternative societal project or be a subject of societal transformation" (Assies, 1990: 74). According to orthodox approaches, because organizations formed around collective consumption are heterogeneous in class composition and do not confront capital directly they have little possibility of giving rise to class consciousness or bringing about important social and political change. This argument rests on the assumption that the social position of subjects in the productive sphere mechanically determines their consciousness. The orthodox view focuses on production struggles and underestimates the residence-based political struggles in which women have historically played an important role. Rapid urbanization without infrastructure and services has resulted in struggles for collective consumption, and poor women have usually been at the forefront of such struggles; lack of services such as water, sewers, electricity, health centers, child care facilities, transport, and so on, affects women and men in different ways.

Other reasons have been suggested for considering struggles in the reproductive sphere less important than those in the productive one. Moser (1985: 2) argues that "production based struggles are more successful not only because they are production based but also because they are men's struggles and as such are valued (because what men do is valued) whereas consumption struggles in the private sphere because they are undertaken by women are

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invisibilized [sic] and have no value.” Furthermore, “residential-level struggle may also be inherently weaker than production based struggle because the conflict between gender and class is more openly manifest.”

The dichotomy between production and reproduction, public and private seems inadequate to explain women’s involvement in struggle in urban areas. Poor women combine domestic tasks and economic activities. They are responsible for childbearing, child care, and food supply and also work to bring incomes to their households. In many cases there is no clear separation between the point of reproduction and the point of production. Popular women’s organizations call into question the false dichotomies of the Western tradition and contribute to a deeper understanding of the everyday-life struggles that represent a mode of resistance to engendered forms of power. Moreover, urban struggle and social change may be seen as centered not only on class relationships but also on other contradictions related to gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion. The notion of pluriclassism as characteristic of social movements casts doubt on overdetermination by class and points to other factors in the determination of consciousness (Castells, 1983).

Feminist theory in particular has criticized the distinction between primary and secondary contradictions, the primacy of the class struggle, the separation of production and reproduction as autonomous spheres, and the assignment of more importance to productive than to reproductive work. In addition, it has reconceptualized power. The slogan “The personal is political” embodies a profound critique of traditional concepts associated with the public domain. By stressing that power relations permeate all aspects of life, feminism has contributed to the expansion of the settings in which politics takes place and broadened the concept of the political.

**NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION**

Although there is consensus that women play an important role in neighborhood mobilization (Castells, 1983), women’s participation is still overlooked in most studies of social movements. The new actor that emerges seems sexless. It is insufficient simply to be aware of women’s role; it is necessary to spell out the contribution of women not merely to domestic life but also to collective and political action (Jelin, 1990). The emergence of grass-roots women’s organizations in Latin America is linked to issues of human rights, democracy, citizenship, living conditions, provision of urban services, and so on, but above all poor women, through their organizations, are gaining experience in constructing collective identities and changing
everyday power relations and broad politics in that they question power both within the household and outside it.

Barrio women's participation in urban struggles has been explained in terms of their roles as wives and mothers. Women in low-income urban areas perform a triple role: reproductive, productive, and community-management (Moser, 1989). They usually become involved in urban struggles not just because they spend the most time in the neighborhood but because their gender-ascriptive role makes them responsible for providing for their families. Gender differences are crucial in understanding why and how women and men organize and participate in urban struggle. Women and men perform different roles, have distinct needs, social responsibilities, expectations, and power, and are socialized in different ways. Gender as a social construction explains the social relations between men and women, which are dialectic and vary with class, race, culture, age, religion, and so on, and it also explains their differential participation (Kaufman, 1991).

As Morgen (1988: 111) argues, however, "Women's involvement in community organizing cannot be explained by or reduced to their roles and responsibilities as wives, mothers, or daughters. Women's community-based political activism is a conscious and collective way of expressing and acting on their interests as women, as wives and mothers, as members of neighborhoods and communities, and as members of particular race, ethnic, and class groups." In other words, it seems important to link these various roles of women with social, economic, political, and cultural factors in understanding women's participation. Barrio women are engaged in mobilization at the community level that confronts class and gender contradictions and embodies different identities and needs. Class and gender thus converge and overlap in women's lives.

Additionally, barrio women's participation has to be understood as a process in which practical gender interests (food, shelter, water, health care, and so on) and strategic gender interests (redefinition of gender relations) may converge (Molyneux, 1985). Practical and strategic gender interests have been translated into planning terms as needed (Moser, 1989: 1803). Implicit in this approach is the differentiation between women's practical needs, which reinforce the sexual division of labor, and their strategic needs, which must be identified to overcome their subordination. Barrio women's participation is affecting gender relations and reconceptualizing gender identity. This challenges the framework in which their participation is analyzed and calls into question the theoretical division between practical and strategic gender needs (Lind, 1992: 148; Rodriguez, 1993: 36).

Examining barrio women's participation in neighborhood organizations is important for two reasons. First, it is important to understand the nature,
content, forms, and meaning of their participation in the light of gender relations. Not doing so has frequently led to such erroneous conclusions as that women do not participate because they are apolitical, that their interests are not very political because they are immersed in domestic life, and that the way in which they participate is not very political. Second, such studies are few (Blondet, 1984, 1990; Sara-Lafose, 1984; Raczynski and Serrano, 1985; Feijo and Gagna, 1986; CESIP, 1988; Pires de Rio Caldeira, 1990; Jelin, 1990) and in Ecuador are just beginning (CEPALES, 1985; Moser, 1987; Camacho, 1990; Rodríguez, 1990; Lind, 1992). Two common biases must be avoided: on the one hand, the enthusiastic and romantic approaches that glorify popular organizations as micromodels of an ideal society in which democracy, solidarity, and antiauthoritarianism are dominant values and, on the other hand, the skeptical approaches that underestimate the potential of these organizations on the grounds that they reinforce traditional roles, are based on practical gender needs, and do not really challenge gender subordination.

WOMEN’S ORGANIZATION IN A PILOT HOUSING PROJECT

Solanda, one of the new settlements located in the south of Quito, was established in 1982 as a pilot housing project for low-income families sponsored by the government and several international agencies. It consists of almost 6,000 houses built with loans from the Ecuadorian Housing Bank on donated land, and like most new neighborhoods it initially lacked basic services and infrastructure. To tackle common problems such as water supply, electricity, transport, and high mortgage interest, the residents formed a neighborhood committee. In addition to the committee, some youth groups, sports clubs, and a market cooperative were organized.

In an effort to involve women in neighborhood activities and in building support for the committees the (male) leaders encouraged the formation of a women’s group. As one of these leaders explained, “The neighborhood committee promoted the women’s organization because they spent more time in the neighborhood, they suffered most from the problems. We expected that the neighborhood committee would lead the actions.” The women, however, wanted their own organization, and they felt strongly about it.

“Autonomy” for us is taking responsibility for ourselves, having our own organization, deciding without external intervention, and getting respect for our group from others. It’s better for the neighborhood when women and men organize, because working together we can achieve our goals, but they did not
want to understand this. They were like dictators; they wanted us to obey them and work with them. We agree to work for our neighborhood, but we do not want to obey.

Gender relations are decisive in understanding how women and men saw their organizations. For the men in the neighborhood it was normal for women to participate in male-dominated organizations such as the neighborhood committee or in women’s “auxiliaries” under their guidance. This was tantamount to an extension of men’s role in the domestic sphere; they were the heads of households, and therefore they should be the heads of all organizations. As Kaufman (1991: 14) has pointed out, “the uneven capacity of men and women to be participants and leaders in democratic and participatory institutions is not only a result of sexism and inequality in the narrow sense. It is also the result of the different values that men and women have internalized as they have created their gendered self-identities.” Solanda women began to question this “naturalness” and to demand autonomy and identity as a group. They wanted to participate in general activities and “coordinate” with others but also to be respected and treated as equals. This was viewed by the neighborhood committee as a threat: “They thought we wanted to compete with them, duplicate actions, and reduce the commitment to general goals.” The negative reaction of the neighborhood committee to an autonomous barrio women’s organization can be analyzed as an expression of patriarchal and paternalistic ideology—patriarchal in that the men tried to subordinate the women to their control within their organization and paternalistic in that they “allowed” and “encouraged” a women’s organization controlled by them.

Women’s groups have become accepted and are often promoted in Latin American neighborhoods. There is a tradition of mothers’ groups set up by the church, the state, and national and international agencies. These organizations are usually regarded as “welfare groups”; women often seek to organize a mothers’ center because it is a way for them to receive outside help, food, second-hand clothing, medicine, and so on. During the past decade, however, the way in which barrio women organize has changed. Many have moved away from paternalistic and welfare-oriented practices to more creative alternative modes of organization. They are organizing to improve their living conditions and to demand infrastructure and services, especially in the new neighborhoods. Some of these organizations combine mobilization for services such as creches, health care centers, schools, and communal shops (often sponsored by nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], the church, or the government) with the learning of practical skills
and the examination of women's daily life. This consciousness-raising process is fundamental to the construction of gender identity. Some women participate in mixed groups while others, such as the Solanda women, seek to participate autonomously.

GENDER, DIFFERENT NEEDS, AND DIFFERENT WAYS

From the beginning, the objectives of the Solanda Women's Center were defined by the participants as (1) the amelioration of barrio living conditions, especially the provision of services such as water, creches, a primary school, and a market, and (2) the improvement of women's status, including the learning of practical skills and discussion of women's rights and other themes related to women's daily life. As a result of conflicts arising from their participation, they also began to talk about violence in the family and to ask for advice. The women were very enthusiastic about their success in having their group recognized as a women's organization and in overcoming their problems with the neighborhood committee. For the first time they had their own voice and could express their own desires and needs. The neighborhood committee was upset about the Women's Center and made an effort to discredit it by gossiping about the participants: "These women are lazy—they ought to be at home; this group is not good for women." However, the women began to develop solidarity and set up work groups to pursue their goals.

At this point a distinction can be made in connection with gender roles. The empirical data suggest that men are willing to engage in struggles "for housing needs" such as water, electricity, sewer service, and transport, and neighborhood committees usually begin their efforts with these problems. There are also "household needs," such as food, child care, schools, health, and markets, which are related to the engendered position of women within the sexual division of labor, and here women tend to be more concerned than men and are usually engaged as principal actors. Men are frequently less interested in these problems, though they will sometimes support women's initiatives. It is rare, for example, for a neighborhood committee to pursue the establishment of a creche or a nursery school; usually only women are engaged in such mobilizations. Data from many different neighborhoods in Quito as well as the literature from other parts of the world confirm this.

This suggests that there exists a tacit gender division at the neighborhood level. While men are particularly involved in housing needs, women are involved in a struggle for both housing and household needs associated with their reproductive role. It may also suggest that the way in which barrio
women perceive their needs at the local level is more integrated. A former leader of the neighborhood committee expressed it as follows: “They may think of things that we [men] do not think of. They are more open-minded.” Is it feasible, then, to integrate the action of women and men at the local level? What kinds of demands might be viable? What is the contribution of barrio women to an understanding of “human needs” and the incorporation of these needs into urban social movements?

The Women’s Center began by confronting the problems of water supply and education. The women knew that a building site was available for the school, so they started to inquire about it. The neighborhood committee, surprisingly, opposed the school on the grounds that it was not a real need at the moment. A leader of the Women’s Center said:

This was incredible! You won’t believe it! The neighborhood committee and some people in the community were opposed to the school because of the noise of the children and because supposedly it was better to maintain green areas. But for us the school was very important, because we did not want our children to go to schools outside Solanda. Our organization had to struggle against the neighborhood committee and the authorities as well. We put a fence around the land, but they came in the night and took it away. We were very annoyed. We were very firm about the school. We went to the municipality to ask for the legal documents on the land, but the authorities did not help us; they were always too busy. We went back many times. We felt that they did not respect us because we were women and poor. One of our group cried because she felt so disrespected. One day we threatened the authorities that we would denounce them in the media, and immediately they considered our petition. They gave us the legal documents and said, “Please go away, we do not want to see you again.”

During all this time we were outside, meeting with the municipality, the provincial council, the parliament, and we learned a lot about these institutions. As a consequence, we had many problems at home; our husbands were very angry, first because people in the neighborhood were talking about us and second because they said that we were neglecting our duties—children, cleaning, and everything. This was not true. We did our housework early in the morning; we did not want to have problems in the family. Many of our colleagues experienced problems, including violent assaults. We started to ask ourselves why men have the right to participate, to go out, and women do not.

During this step in our organization process we learned a lot. We got the school. It was great! We were very happy that our sacrifices were recompensed. We were proud. The community recognized our work and started to respect us. The neighborhood committee, however, was angry about it. We wanted to participate in the neighborhood committee anyway, but they were bad people. One of us was elected by the community as a member of the committee, but the men tried to sabotage her participation. All the meetings were scheduled very late in the evening, for example. In the end we dropped out of the committee and continued to work as the Women’s Center alone. We struggled for water supply, a market, creches. Many people started to ask us about
everything in the neighborhood, because we knew what was going on. The neighborhood committee has many problems; its leaders change frequently, and at the moment it has no head. In the course of this process we transformed ourselves. We became insistent [tercas].

The experience of the Solanda Women’s Center illustrates various aspects of women’s participation at the neighborhood level. More than the possible material effects of women’s participation it is important to analyze the personal effects and group learning processes and how these contribute to establishing new identities. The Women’s Center experience also illustrates the dynamic in which class and gender needs converge. In struggling against poverty these women have learned to confront gender subordination; they have begun to negotiate and even change power relations and have developed a critical view of the world in which they participate. This is not, however, a mechanical process. As Jelin (1990: 188) has pointed out, it is important “to ask whether the conditions under which women leave their traditional role rooted in daily life to enter the public domain constitute a significant departure with regard to social changes in women’s subordination, helping to form gender identities that put in doubt the current system of domination.”

The Solanda Women’s Center was influenced by external agents. The conditions for the development of a women’s group were stimulated by middle-class feminist women as part of an NGO working in Quito’s popular neighborhoods. Its experience raises some questions about the relationship between NGOs and grass-roots organizations and such sensitive issues as the role of NGOs in meeting gender needs, similarities and differences among women, power, and representation.

**STRUGGLING WOMEN: LEARNING TO SPEAK**

In the barrio women’s organizations, according to Barrig (1989: 138), women “recover the ability to speak, which is very significant because silence is one of the most evident forms of women’s oppression.” I would argue that although women learn to speak and discover the power of speech, they do not recover the right to speak because they never had it in the first place. As María put it, “I lacked self-confidence; I was a nervous person. When I talked to my husband I never looked at his eyes. I was afraid to speak in public. Now I realize how timid I was. In the Women’s Center I learned to speak, to look people straight in the eye. All my fears disappeared.” Sofía said, “In the women’s group I learned how to manage relationships, I learned from the others because in our group all of us have similar problems.” And Rosa said, “I’m participating in a women’s organization for the first time. I never did
that before. I used to be a conformist—I used to think that I was unable to take responsibility, I felt incapable of it. Now I’m like a different person; I’ve changed. Now I realize that there are many injustices. I don’t want to be a conformist, I want to do something to change things.”

Learning to speak is a dynamic process. One cannot say that women learn first to talk among themselves and then to speak in the public arena. Nonetheless, participant observation in Solanda suggests that the different experiences reinforce each other. Barrio women are able to speak at home without fear when they are able to speak to institutions and in mixed groups—when they feel self-confident. Some women were afraid of their husbands/partners and were in a panic when they had to contradict them. After their experiences in confronting the neighborhood committee, the authorities, and the politicians they began to ask themselves, “Why can I speak without fear to these people and not to my own husband?” The collective experience of participation has many effects on women’s lives. Some of them will never be the same again. Personal growth, self-confidence, changes in relationships in the family, neighborhood, and community contribute to shaping their gender identity.

The women of the Solanda Women’s Center called themselves a popular women’s organization, the “struggling women of Solanda.” Their identity as barrio women meant that they intervened in the public sphere as a group, not as isolated individuals. In the process of establishing their autonomy they discovered their identity as individuals and as a collective. They confronted sexism and male power within the neighborhood committee and changed the stereotype of passive and resigned women into one of active subjects. In the course of their confrontations with the committee they created a new image of barrio women and earned the respect of the neighborhood.

The identity-oriented paradigm of the new-social-movements literature tends to emphasize their cultural dimension, ignoring the importance of power in their constitution. According to Evers (1985), for example, “the new element within the new social movements consists precisely in creating bits of social practice in which power is not central.” The cultural dimension is of course very important, but popular organizations are not exempt from conflicts over power. Power conflicts occur both within groups and between them and outsiders. Differences between new and old members, young and mature women, owners and renters may promote conflict. The Women’s Center was crosscut by such tensions. Arguments between founders and new members arose when each group attempted to control some of its material benefits. Tensions also existed between the group and external agents—other organizations, institutions, the state, the NGOs, the political parties, the church, and so on—and conflicts at the two levels were interrelated. It is
within these power relations that new identities emerge, as Salman (1990: 133) has pointed out: “Would it not be more plausible to assume that the new identities must and will develop, intertwined with power relations and within the given structures of instrumentalist political parties? Should, therefore, interaction with the surrounding society not be incorporated in conceptualizations about the identity the movements aim at?”

Autonomy does not mean isolation; on the contrary, as the women themselves said, “Autonomy is getting respect for the group from others.” They learned that autonomy was a conquest; they fought for and earned it in the course of conflictive relations with the neighborhood committee, the state, the NGOs, and the political parties. The marginalization of women’s organizations is a risk, especially in groups like the Solanda Women’s Center, which male-dominated organizations try to ignore if they cannot use them. After their first negative experience with the neighborhood committee, some women were discouraged from maintaining any connection with it. The Women’s Center developed a learning experience with the state, the NGOs, and the political parties with regard to the modes of confrontation and/or negotiation appropriate to each. Some problems arose within the group as a result of different perceptions, but it maintained its unity. At the same time, links between popular women’s organizations in Ecuador are weak.7 The women’s movement is young, and it cannot appropriately articulate different women’s perspectives. Untangled “knots” interfere with its consolidation and expansion (see Rodríguez, 1992).

The Solanda Women’s Center emphasized “popular” as one of its primary characteristics. The women’s experience in dealing with the local authorities, the private sector, politicians, the NGOs, and the church was very important to them in defining themselves. When they said, “We felt that they did not respect us because we were women and poor,” they paralleled “poor” and “popular.” This can be seen as reflecting a general sense of exclusion. At the same time, however, they identified themselves with their neighborhood: “Solanda is a popular neighborhood. We lack services, we need many things; we are different from the northern neighborhoods.” Their shared experience of confrontation with the state and its representatives was unsuccessful at first, but in the end they exerted pressure, asserted themselves, and even threatened the authorities in order to be heard. They began to understand how power relations affected their lives and to explore how they could deal with them: “In the beginning we were worried; we used to walk quietly, speak quietly. It was as if we were always asking a favor. Later on we learned that we had rights. It was very important. We changed our way of asking for things. Now we are more confident; we ask, we speak without fear. . . . When the Ecuadorian Housing Bank wanted to increase the interest on our loans,
we participated in a demonstration; we went to the bank authorities, but they did not want to receive us. They said, ‘OK, where are the leaders? Only men can enter the office.’ But we protested, and one of our group was able to go in along with the men.”

When barrio women began to occupy the public arena, they were not only straining the limits of domestic life but also breaking the rules and changing the patterns of their relationships with others: men, authorities, institutions, and the state. This process can be called empowerment. Barrio women were struggling to overcome their lack of power. Through their experience in the women’s group they learned to recognize different forms of power and how they affected their personal and family lives. “For these women, empowerment begins when they change their ideas about the causes of their powerlessness, when they recognise the systemic forces that oppress them, and when they act to change the conditions of their lives” (Morgen and Bookman, 1988: 4).

Many problems arose within the women’s households, and in facing them women adopted different strategies. Some dropped out of the Women’s Center in order to avoid conflict with their husbands or partners or began to disguise their participation. Others negotiated with their families, asking why women were not free to go to meetings. Some even broke off their relationships. In any event, women began questioning their oppression as women, espousing new ideas even if they could not immediately alter their family relations. This is a common experience, as Vargas (1991: 29) points out: “We realise we cannot fight all battles at once. We negotiate, use traditional forms of arguing to preserve the most highly-valued goals, for instance, relegating for the time being the need of substantial change in the sexual division of labour within the home, because we know this is one of the most difficult things to change in societies like ours.”

Because family problems were very common, they started to discuss these—to share their experiences and support each other. Violence against women emerged as an important topic. They decided to call attention to their experiences through theater aimed at sensitizing the community, their husbands, and other women. In their first play, “The Brooms,” they used brooms as a symbol of their domestic oppression and transformed them into a symbol of their liberation. This was one of their first major efforts to educate the community about constraints on women’s participation and machismo and above all to raise their own consciousness about their oppression as women. Women’s confrontation of the “naturalness” of their oppression seems to be connected with the collective experience of articulating and sharing their personal problems and learning that other women are in similar situations. This changes their minds and helps them to rediscover their world. A gender
identity emerges from this confrontation between their own lives and those of others.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR URBAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT**

Barrio women embody a dual identity as class and gender. They participate and mobilize in the neighborhood as members of their communities and housewives, mothers, and daughters, but because of gender differences they participate in a different way from men. The content, nature, forms, and meaning of their participation are different. These differences embrace conflictive relations, and clashes between class and gender develop. Urban social movements have not incorporated the gender dimension into their understanding of urban problems, and therefore women’s interests and needs usually remain invisible. It is assumed that women and men have similar needs, expectations, and responsibilities. The inability of traditional class-based or male-based organizations to address gender needs is an obstacle to the more democratic and pluralist construction of social movements.

It is a commonplace that the leadership of urban social movements tends to become dominated by men. Women are welcome to participate in male-dominated structures only in a subordinate role. Moreover, because these structures function clientelistically, control over local organizations becomes crucial. In some cases, as in Solanda, barrio women’s organizations and other recent community-based groups begin to question traditional leadership structures. The risk of being marginalized with regard to decision making in the neighborhood is real. Barrio women are marginalized already. Many women’s groups, operating outside the general dynamic of the neighborhood, have no such problem; they represent no threat to anyone. There is, however, a problem for new types of organizations such as the Women’s Center when they begin to question the leadership and the procedures and to claim a share of the power and participation in decision making. Here women have to deal with male authoritarianism, and sometimes their groups are marginalized and they become discouraged from participating.

At the same time, whereas barrio women have problems in common with other women’s groups associated with the subordination of women in society, they differ from these groups in many ways. The Solanda women called themselves a popular organization in order to distinguish themselves from middle-class women’s organizations. They had different agendas, priorities, leaders, and discourses from middle-class feminists and even refused to be identified as feminists. It is obvious, however, that barrio women’s organiza-
tions have enormous potential for embodying feminist demands, and in practice many of them are fighting gender subordination. They are struggling to improve their living conditions and change their power relations within and outside the household, and in so doing they are questioning the assumption that feminism is only the domain of the middle classes.

Middle-class feminist groups are sometimes trapped in a sisterhood ideology that hinders recognition of differences and conflicts among women. Narrow-minded feminism denies the importance of struggles for practical gender needs and devalues organization around these issues. It seems important for feminists to broaden their concept of the women's movement and feminist practice. "Progressive and feminist women's organizations have often failed to recognize the value women place on their roles as wives, mothers and homemakers and have thus lost opportunities for engaging with popular consciousness in a critical and creative way" (Bell, Hassim, and Todes, 1989).

Barrio women possess enormous potential for contributing to cultural and social transformation. They need to strengthen their organizational capacity and empower themselves as individuals and as groups by acquiring resources, skills, leadership, and a capacity for dialogue and for building coalitions. These processes, as we have seen, are highly complex.

CONCLUSIONS

The case of Solanda produces more questions than conclusions. Urban social movements bring together not "people" in a neutral sense but women and men with different identities, rules, needs, beliefs, hopes, fears, and wishes. The neighborhood if not necessarily a place in which objectives, demands, and modes of participation coincide. On the contrary, differences connected with class, gender, age, region, and religion may create conflicts and tensions. What, then, are the possibilities for urban social movements to express this social diversity—to deal with the specific contradictions connected with these differences? Is it possible to envisage a democratization of social movements that recognizes the plurality of social subjects and the diversity of interests and needs? Is it possible to develop a holistic view of change in which culture, ideology, daily life, and gender relations can be confronted?

In the process of participation barrio women's daily lives have been affected. We have seen how the constraints of being housewives, mothers, and daughters become potential forces for transforming their subordination, how gender identity emerges from collective participation, how powerless
women are changing everyday power relations and politics now that they have learned to recognize and question power within the household and outside it. These soundless processes are perhaps not changing the world, but they certainly have changed their world. As to the possible long-term effects of these changes, we can only conjecture that they have the potential for introducing new values into daily life. Because gender is relational, this cannot be a one-sided process; rather, it involves interaction with men. Women's community involvement goes some way toward empowering women to interact with men with greater skill and self-confidence, encouraging changes in men as well. Identity, as we have seen, is built through complex processes. It emerges from the various experiences of confrontation in everyday life. Barrio women have developed their consciousness in domestic and public spheres not in isolation but as a collective, not by lamenting their oppression as a gender but by confronting class and gender relations. 

The Solanda Women's Center cannot be evaluated in terms of its achievement of explicit objectives alone. Social organizations are dynamic, and changes may come to light during its evolution. Perhaps by examining them more closely we can capture the richness of these processes. These barrio women's politicization suggests that mobilization around practical gender needs may develop both class and gender consciousness, calling into question the practical-strategic dichotomy. However, it is not a mechanical product but a process in which various factors converge. The role of external agents is crucial in this process. The prospects for survival of barrio women's organizations lie in their own forces—strengthening their groups, establishing networks among themselves, developing the ability to establish links with or confront other movements, the political parties, the state, institutions, and the church, and preserving their space and their autonomy. Male-dominated urban social movements may become able to recognize barrio women as equal actors rather than merely as "help" for general struggles and to form meaningful and more equal coalitions with them. At the same time, the women's movement needs to be revitalized with different approaches, practices, and experiences. As feminists we have not sufficiently explored the possibilities for linking class, gender, ethnicity, race, and religion, and therefore what is clear in theory is confused in practice. What the barrio women are doing is making their own history, but they are doing this in a context that includes the state, the political parties, the NGOs, the church, the international agencies, and the impact of feminist ideas generated outside of their immediate understanding. What their struggles are doing, however, is transforming these feminist ideas and practice in the direction of a feminism capable of embracing the thinking, experience, and desires of all women.
NOTES

1. The reduction of the reproduction of labor power to collective consumption has been criticized because it excludes aspects of daily life that are particularly important for women (see Little, Peake, and Richardson, 1988).
2. The distinction between “sex” and “gender” is important in understanding the social relations between women and men. “Sex” refers to the physical characteristics of males and females; “gender” is a social construction. “Sex” is a biological term and “gender” a psychological and cultural one (see Oakley, 1972).
3. The Ecuadorian Women’s Center for Promotion and Action (CEPAM), an NGO working in popular urban areas in Quito and Guayaquil since 1983, has offered support and advice to the Solanda Women’s Center from its inception.
4. Organizations recognized by the Ministry of Social Welfare are entitled to enter into contracts with the state, NGOs, or international agencies.
5. In Peru, for example, there is massive participation of barrio women in soup kitchens and milk programs. Similar experiences are reported for Chile, Brazil, and Colombia.
6. Amadres cuidadoras movement handles a government program at the neighborhood level.
7. Recently popular women’s organizations in the south of Quito have begun working together on particular projects, but they remain dispersed.
8. In the past there was a clear division between the north and the south of the city, the north being identified as a rich area with full services and infrastructure.

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