

Gender in Women's Development Organizations: From Participation to Empowerment

Betsy MacDonald

Thank you to the nine women I interviewed and all the other women whose lives inspired me to write this paper. Vão com Deus.

This is a report based on my experience in Roraima, northern Brazil, accompanying the work of the Pastoral da Criança (Pastoral of the Child). The Pastoral da Criança is a Catholic, faith-based organization in Brazil whose work centres on nutrition and prevention of illnesses among young children in the country's poorest areas. The majority of their volunteers and beneficiaries are poor women. I was based with a group of volunteers in the community of Sant'ana, in the capital city Boa Vista, with periodic trips to observe the organization's work in other parts of Roraima. I acted as a 'shadow' in the sense that I followed a number of volunteers, observing and reflecting upon their work while participating with them in the organization's activities. I also conducted interviews with nine mothers participating in the program as beneficiaries, as well as with two people who had worked with the Pastoral da Criança in other places.

In this report I will present my own reflections and findings from my internship, framing them in an analysis of gender and participation in women's organizations. I will refer to several relevant readings as well as my own notes from the field. The first section will look at some main issues around women and participation, drawing from past academic

works. Following this discussion I will give a description of the participation of women in the Pastoral da Criança in Roraima. Next, I will discuss gender and participation in the context of women's development organizations, with particular attention to the question: How does an organization's approach to gender influence the quality of women's participation? In this section I will use comparisons between the Pastoral da Criança and other women's development organizations to discuss conceptual framework, practical and strategic gender interests, and participatory approaches in the context of women's participation. Finally, I will reflect upon some of these themes and briefly discuss some possible approaches to facilitating women's participation in the Pastoral da Criança.

I. Women & Participation: Some Central Issues

Much academic work has been done on the role of gender in development, and the particular issues surrounding the participation (or non-participation) of women in development programs and projects. Studies have highlighted several barriers to women's participation and have produced analyses of measuring participation, the ways in which women

participate, and early attempts to 'integrate' women into the development process. Here I will discuss briefly some of these ideas, followed by and integrated into a discussion of the participation of women in the Pastoral da Criança in Roraima, northern Brazil.

'Participation': what does it mean?

Participation in development has been measured both in terms of quantity (how many people participate) and quality (the depth of people's engagement in the development process). There has been a tendency to measure women's participation in the quantitative sense; that is, by numbers of women participating in a given development project rather than by the nature of their involvement.¹ Women's participation has proven to be crucial to the development process; indeed, most agree (and it will be the underlying assumption of this paper) that true development cannot be achieved without women taking part in and shaping the goals of development.² It is therefore important to look at women's participation not only in terms of how many participate, but also at how deeply they are engaged in a given development intervention.

How do we participate?

The participation of women in development without question varies from place to place, as several factors such as poverty and culture influence the extent of women's participation. Also, as we will see, different development programs can be tailored either to actively engage women or exclude them.

Keeping in mind these differences, several barriers have been identified with regard to women's participation in the development process in the third world. While occurring at varying degrees, these barriers do provide some insight into

the continuing challenges of women who seek to participate meaningfully in development. These include but are not limited to: poverty, a lack of time due to paid and unpaid labour, "sexist cultural patterns", negative self-images, maternal altruism, and the restrictions of marriage.³

Another factor to consider when discussing women's participation is literacy, and the fact that women have a lower worldwide literacy rate than men. In fact, there are more than twice as many illiterate women than illiterate men in the world.⁴ During my internship with the Pastoral da Criança I encountered women, both volunteers and beneficiaries, who were illiterate and thus required different techniques to facilitate their participation. Women's participation in development has traditionally been defined in male terms.⁵ Resultantly, the capacities of women have not been valued as greatly as men's.⁶ This traditional model has also led to the assumption that women and men learn in similar ways, when in fact in many cases the contrary has been demonstrated.⁷ There are other differences that women bring into participatory development. For example, MYRDA has identified increased moral sensitivity and low competitiveness as assets that poor women bring to the development process.⁸

Because of these differences, it is necessary to develop participatory approaches that value women's strengths, ways of learning and forms of interaction with other people. For organizations made up mainly of women, meaningful participation also requires an analysis of gender in the organization's conceptual framework, support of strategic gender interests, and a participatory approach that allows women to take part in a way that is sustainable and empowering.

I will now turn to a summary of my observations of the participation of women in the Pastoral da Criança, followed by a

more detailed examination of the question of gender and participation in women's organizations.

II. Participation of Women in the Pastoral da Criança in Roraima, Northern Brazil

The concept of the Pastoral da Criança (Children's Pastoral) arose from a 1982 discussion between Paulo Evaristo Arns, then archbishop of São Paulo, and Mr. James Grant, then director of UNICEF, in Geneva, Switzerland. A debate on world hunger led to the idea of starting an organization in Brazil to combat child mortality and malnutrition. In the following year, the CNBB (Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil – *National Conference of Bishops of Brazil*) commissioned Geraldo Majella Agnelo, then archbishop of Londrina, Paraná, and paediatrician and sanitarian Dr. Zilda Arns Neumann to create and develop the Pastoral da Criança. (Neumann continues to be the organization's director to this day.) The program was launched in 1983 in Florestópolis, a municipality in Paraná with an infant mortality rate of 127 deaths for every thousand children. Fourteen years later that rate had dropped to less than twenty deaths per thousand children.⁹ Today, the Pastoral da Criança works in numerous parts of Brazil where children are at risk of malnutrition, from the slums of large cities like Belo Horizonte to the country's impoverished northeast and the remote north, where I was based for my internship.

The Pastoral da Criança is a volunteer organization consisting mainly of poor women. Its activities include family visits, in which volunteers ask parents a series of questions on their children's health; weighing children to track their nutrition; and monthly meetings to evaluate and reflect upon the month's work. Volunteers also gather periodically

to make *multi-mixture*, a powder made of ground up leaves and seeds that is added to children's food to make it more nutritious. Most volunteers I encountered were Catholic women, though I did meet a few Protestant and male volunteers.

There are two main ways for women to participate in the Pastoral da Criança: as volunteers or as beneficiaries. During my internship I looked at the participation of both groups of women and interviewed nine of the latter group. Here I will describe in brief my observations on the participation of women in the Pastoral da Criança in Roraima.

Participation of women as volunteers

The Pastoral da Criança volunteers I accompanied were mostly low income women with some involvement in the church. Each volunteer or *leader* is responsible for a number of families (usually around five to ten) whom she visits on a monthly basis. Most visits are spread out so that the leader visits families on several days of the month. The leader carries around a notebook printed by the Pastoral da Criança where she records information on each child and pregnant woman in order to track their health. The information is gathered through a series of questions, usually to the mother, that vary depending on the age of the child. The main purpose of the questions is to see if the child is being given the proper conditions for individual development, taking into account not only nutrition but also the child's mental and emotional needs.

The leader's notebook is also used to record each child's weight when it is taken on Life Celebration Day or weighing day. The leader uses a graph to show mothers if their children are within the proper weight range for their age. If a child appears to be malnourished, the leader

makes suggestions to the mother on how to provide her child with better nutrition.

I discovered through my interviews that most leaders have close social ties to the women they accompany; their relationships are not limited to the Pastoral da Criança but extend into the spheres of church, neighborhood and friendship networks. Leaders act as informal sources of information on health and nutrition for women in their neighborhoods; as one woman told me:

I've known [my community leader] since I arrived here. If my girl is sick, I go to her house. If she has the flu, I go there and she gives me flu syrup. When she's sick I go to [my leader's] house and ask her which remedy I should give to her, and [she] shows me and I give it to my daughter.¹⁰

In some cases, the leader's advice substitutes for a visit to the doctor, which can be costly for women who do not have transportation. In this sense the leader plays an important role as a person who is trusted by the women she accompanies, and who provides them with continual guidance on the health care of their children.

Participation of women as beneficiaries

The women who I came to know as beneficiaries in the Pastoral da Criança defined themselves, and were defined by others, using various terms in relation to their place in the program. Sometimes they were described as participants; at other times as women who were *accompanied* by the Pastoral da Criança. I will refer generally to these women as beneficiaries, although the idea of these women as participants will be discussed as well.

Conversations with several women revealed to me that there is a range of participation of women as beneficiaries in the Pastoral da Criança. It might be useful to think of their participation in terms of a scale from low to high activity. At the low end, women bring their children to be weighed on Life Celebration Day and are recipients of monthly family visits. At the high end, women are engaged in these activities and also help out with various tasks associated with Pastoral da Criança events, such as cleaning the church and making snacks for Life Celebration Day, helping to make multi-mixture, and helping to make home remedies. It appeared to me that while some women's participation is mostly passive, for others it is more active. Of the nine women I interviewed, six would fall into the former category and three into the latter.

The active participants were women who spoke enthusiastically and in detail about their experience with the Pastoral da Criança. One of these women, I discovered, participates both as a beneficiary and as a volunteer. She explained to me the educational value of her involvement in the Pastoral da Criança: ... I've learned many things through the Pastoral da Criança; I've learned to make home remedies for myself and for my children. I've learned to make multi-mixture and homemade serum; everything I've learned from the Pastoral da Criança. ... [I receive most of my information on health] from the Pastoral da Criança. Not from the TV or the Health Ministry, because it's difficult to watch TV. ... Through the Pastoral da Criança I've learned many things.¹¹

I spoke with another woman who, besides participating as a beneficiary in the Pastoral da Criança, also coordinates the pastoral organization for catechism in her community. She described to me how the

various pastoral organizations work together in a mutually beneficial way:

I help out [with Pastoral da Criança activities]. That's how we work in the organization, everybody together. We find bonds of friendship... I think that today the most valuable thing in life is unity. We join hands and unite so that we can do something of worth. It isn't like this because I participate in this community, but because the Sant'ana community always works like this: all the pastoral organizations help each other... When there's an event, everyone comes out and works together. This is what enriches us in the community, this unity...¹²

This woman has a lengthy history of volunteer experience and work with the government. Yet she also finds value in participating as a beneficiary in the Pastoral da Criança. This, along with other observations, suggests to me that there is little, if any, social division between the Pastoral da Criança's volunteers and its beneficiaries. Indeed, the two roles can overlap, as the first case demonstrates.

The more passive participants did not speak of the Pastoral da Criança with the same zeal, although they did express an appreciation for the program and spoke of the important impact it has had on their lives.

III. Approaches to Gender in Women's Organizations: from Participation to Empowerment

I will now turn to a more critical discussion of the ways in which an organization's approach to gender can influence the quality of women's participation in development. My experience with the Pastoral da Criança indicated to me that, while women were participating in various

activities as volunteers and beneficiaries, their participation was of a more nominal nature and certainly not a transformative one.¹³ With the strong influence of liberation theology in the Brazilian Catholic church,¹⁴ it surprised me that these women were not engaged in a deeper process of challenging their subordination based on gender, class and race. There are several reasons why this may have been the case, including social, cultural and economic factors. One important dimension, which will underlie the following discussion, is the role of the organization (in this case, the Pastoral da Criança) in shaping women's participation through its approach to gender. This includes the organization's conceptual framework and analysis (if any) of gender, the way in which it addresses practical and strategic gender interests, and the presence or absence of a participatory approach that engages and empowers women. I will refer to my experience with the Pastoral da Criança as well as examples from other women's development organizations to illustrate this discussion.

Conceptual framework and addressing gender

In order to address gender in the first place, it is necessary to examine gender and the implications it has for everyone involved in a given development intervention. For development organizations working mainly with women, this should include an analysis of gender that can be translated into their work in specific areas. If an organization is using a participatory approach, there may arise a tension between progressive gender goals and the concerns of local people, with the possible risk of tacitly reinforcing the status quo.¹⁵ However, it is possible to employ an analysis of gender that facilitates

participation in a way that values both local ideas and a feminist agenda.¹⁶

There has been a tendency to think of gender only in terms of “women’s interests”, which may hide differences between women and obscure unequal gender relations.¹⁷ When gender relations *are* addressed, they are usually limited to male-female heterosexual relationships, with little attention paid to other female-male relationships (for example, between mothers and sons) or the gender aspects of relations between members of the same sex.¹⁸ Whether or not these issues are addressed can have a significant impact on the success of a given intervention.¹⁹

The Pastoral da Criança is one of several Catholic pastoral organizations in Brazil that addresses a variety of social issues, including health, education, human rights, the issues of specific social groups such as youth and the elderly, and, in the case of the Pastoral da Criança, the health of young children. Its conceptual framework is strongly influenced by faith and the teachings of the Catholic Church:

The mission of the Pastoral da Criança is the mission of Jesus himself, which is also the mission of the Church and of all Christians: to evangelize.²⁰

The organization also states a lack of distinction of its beneficiaries on the basis of various social categories:

The Pastoral da Criança has as its objective the vital development of children, supporting them, on their part and on that of families and communities, without distinction of race, color, profession, nationality, sex, religious or political creed...”²¹

While the Pastoral da Criança is not a women’s organization by name, ninety per cent of its volunteers are poor

women,²² and, from what I observed in Roraima, almost all of their direct beneficiaries are women and their children. Their mission statement does not include any specific thoughts on gender, but rather includes ‘sex’ as one of several categories on the basis of which the organization claims not to discriminate.

This is quite different from the worldview of the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), a women’s microfinance organization based in India. With roots in the trade union movement in India, SEWA works to empower women by promoting financial self-reliance and collective action.²³ It is an organization that works with poor women and has an explicitly *political* commitment to challenging gender inequity. As Kalima Rose describes the activist outlook of SEWA:

It is an especially feminine philosophy which adheres to non-violence, to arbitration and reconciliation, and most importantly [sic], to a quiet, fiercely determined resistance to exploitation.²⁴

While the Pastoral da Criança implicitly claims blindness to gender, SEWA takes a more head-on approach to challenging the status quo of gender relations in the lives of their members. If the Pastoral da Criança were to adopt a more critical analysis of gender in their conceptual framework, I believe it would assist the organization in addressing gender-related issues such as poverty and unemployment among its participants. As Andrea Cornwall argues, such an analysis is crucial in any attempt to include and engage women in development interventions.²⁵

A critical analysis of gender is important, although it is not all that is needed to employ a gender-sensitive approach to development that engages

women in an empowering way.²⁶ It is also necessary to take a look at if and how such an analysis translates into actions that either facilitate or impede the participation of women. This can be explored partly through a discussion of practical and strategic gender interests, and the question of whether meaningful participation can take place if only one or the other is being addressed.

Practical and strategic gender interests

When one speaks of 'gender interests', it is helpful to make the distinction between practical interests and strategic ones. Practical gender interests generally include the material needs of women, such as financial security, "without changing existing power relations."²⁷ Strategic gender interests are "...those derived from an analysis of women's subordination."²⁸ These two sets of interests are often interconnected, as Nanci Lee explains with an example of capacity building for women in SEWA.²⁹

To address practical gender interests is to help women better their material conditions; to address strategic gender interests is to help women challenge oppressive gender relations and social structures. Indeed, it is necessary to support both sets of interests in order to facilitate women's participation at a level that contributes to their empowerment. One way of doing this is, in addition to providing services that help women achieve sustainable living conditions, creating a milieu that facilitates the coming together of women to discuss issues that affect their lives. As Nanci Lee explains in the case of SEWA Bank:

In addition to the forum SEWA Bank provides, members frequently take the initiative to create their own discussion spaces. Constructing a context where members are willing

and able to do this requires appropriate strategies such as group forums, capacity building, participation in decision-making, and a systematic process for fostering courage among members.³⁰

In interviewing nine beneficiaries of the Pastoral da Criança, I discovered that some of their most empowering experiences with the Pastoral da Criança had to do with the knowledge they received and were able to share with other women in their neighborhoods and families. It seemed that the more opportunities they had to share knowledge with other women, the higher their self-esteem with regard to knowledge around health issues. This has also been the case of women participating in SEWA Bank:

Not all women are initially comfortable discussing difficult issues, so the introduction to collective activity often takes the form of a discussion group with peers. According to a study on the impact of the financial education, members of such groups, especially their leaders, reported benefits that included an increased feeling of confidence and security, and a greater role in household financial planning.³¹

Training is another vehicle for increasing women's participation and creating opportunities for empowerment. As in SEWA,

Training is an integral part of organizing women, formalizing their skills, and involving them in shaping their occupations, incomes, and social policies. SEWA conducts standard training sessions for a broad section of women, and also specific training programmes for specialized skills.³²

While not explicitly stating it, the Pastoral da Criança does seem to be

addressing a number of practical gender interests through its work. By educating poor and oftentimes single women on alternative medicine, the program is helping them keep health costs to a minimum. The health accompaniment provided by monthly weighing day and family visits save women costly trips to the hospital for their children. The Pastoral da Criança's income generation activities, while not currently in place in Roraima, do help women in some parts of Brazil to achieve greater financial security.³³

Where the approach of the Pastoral da Criança appears to fall short, in the sense of facilitating meaningful participation, is in its lack of attention to the strategic gender interests of its participants. Its provision of material assistance to women is not matched by a political commitment to challenging gender-based subordination. This is readily observable in the organization's activities in Roraima. While there do exist capacity building activities for leaders, they occur at the beginning and do not continue on a regular basis. Women do have an opportunity to come together monthly to weigh their children and interact with one another in a festive atmosphere, though the activity is planned and guided by the community's Pastoral da Criança coordinator. Resultantly, volunteers are not engaged in a dynamic process of learning and reflecting upon their work, and beneficiaries participate within a range from passive to active but not in a way that would be considered transformative.

These are not the only factors influencing women's participation in the Pastoral da Criança and in other women's development organizations, but they are significant in that they have a direct impact on the level of empowerment of both volunteers and beneficiaries. Another element of facilitating women's participation is the presence or absence of

a participatory approach that engages and empowers women. This, I suggest, also contributes significantly to the success of women's organizations in empowering their members. It is to this dimension that I now turn.

Participatory approaches to gender and women's participation in development

As Andrea Cornwall explains, designing and carrying out a participatory approach that is sensitive to gender is a complex task. A model such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) can be restrictive for feminist development practitioners who, when confronted with the approach's requirement of relativism towards local ideas and concerns, are challenged in bringing certain gender goals to fruition.³⁴ Still, there is much common ground shared by feminist and participatory researchers, including a shared political goal of social transformation, a concern for listening to different voices, and attention to the relationship between practitioner and beneficiary or participant.³⁵ The task, it seems, is to tailor an approach that addresses specific gender concerns in a way that gives women the opportunity to share ideas and concerns in a comfortable environment, making decisions and taking actions to improve their individual and collective realities.

A participatory approach that is sensitive to gender requires a number of measures. These include, but are not limited to: examining reasons for non-participation and addressing them; acknowledging and working with differences between women; and giving women a positive forum for voicing concerns and developing strategies. I will discuss these participatory measures with reference to the Pastoral da Criança and its

approach to women's participation in Roraima.

With some participatory approaches there arises the dilemma of 'imposing' participation on those, in this case women, who do not seem to want to participate.³⁶ However, just because women do not appear interested in participating in a specific intervention does not mean that they would not like to improve their social conditions in some way. Moreover, many women in poorer regions of the world are illiterate and may not be aware of their rights; a crucial element in taking action to challenge oppressive social relationships and structures.³⁷ There needs to be research on why women are not participating, and what can be done to facilitate their participation according to their own interests and concerns.

I observed this need in the work of the Pastoral da Criança in Roraima. When asked about the participation of beneficiary mothers in the program, several volunteers responded that the women didn't appear interested in the program; some cited a culture of dependency as the cause, while others offered no explanation. Whatever the contributing factors may have been, it was clear that the women were benefiting from the program in the practical sense and had several strategic gender interests that could potentially be addressed through a more engaged level of participation. For example, it could prove quite useful to have forums for single mothers to discuss strategies for income generation, an economic factor that is directly related to the health of their children. While women may choose not to participate (or to participate passively) in the Pastoral da Criança for several reasons, I was given no indication that this was for lack of desire for social transformation. The majority of women with whom I spoke seemed aware of the social, economic and even political roots of their difficulties, and with further

education on their rights could no doubt effect significant positive change, given adequate opportunities to discuss problems and plan actions.

Recognizing and working with differences among women is another step towards a more engaged and effective participation. Opening up participation to all members of a group (e.g. all poor women, in the case of the Pastoral da Criança) does not necessarily mean that all will participate equally or with the same enthusiasm. It is necessary to look at the differences within the group to be able to engage all members in meaningful participation. As Cornwall purports,

To make a difference, participatory development must engage with questions of difference: to effectively tackle poverty, it must go beyond the 'poor' as a generic category, and engage with the diversity of women's and men's experiences of poverty and powerlessness.³⁸

The need to address differences between women was prevalent in my observations of the work of the Pastoral da Criança in Roraima. In particular, the question of religion and culture emerged time and time again as an issue of recognizing and responding to differences among poor women in Roraima. While the Pastoral da Criança is Catholic in its roots and organization, its approach to outreach is stated in its literature to be ecumenical. Yet, the majority of women who participate in the program are practicing or non-practicing Catholics, even with the state's growing number of Evangelical communities. With Roraima's high unemployment rate and from the conditions I observed, there is little evidence that poverty discriminates according to religious denomination in this region. As there is no Evangelical organization in Brazil parallel to the

Pastoral da Criança, this means that many disadvantaged families are not benefiting from the type of service the program provides.

When I asked Pastoral da Criança volunteers why there were not more Evangelical women participating in the program, they usually placed the onus on the women themselves. They did not want to participate, I heard, because they were wary of the intentions of a Catholic organization, and feared being associated with the Catholic Church in their Evangelical communities. One volunteer with whom I spoke, an Evangelical woman with two daughters and experience as a leader with the Pastoral da Criança, told me that few people in her church were aware of the program's activities. She became involved because she had been asked to do so by the then-current Pastoral da Criança community coordinator. While this woman found herself participating through a personal contact, most women from her church and similar ones, it appeared, were not participating for various reasons.

The role of the Pastoral da Criança in addressing this question of religious differences between women has, I maintain, much room for growth. Instead of concluding that Evangelical women do not *want* to participate, it may prove much more useful to look at *why* they are not participating, and what can be done to make the program more appealing to families from non-Catholic backgrounds. This could include increasing awareness of the Pastoral da Criança in Evangelical churches, encouraging dialogue between poor women of various denominations, and creating a friendly space for activities in which women feel comfortable regardless of their religious orientation. Overall, it would require an extra effort to educate and include women who, while in need of the program's services, might be more

reluctant to participate than women who share the organization's religious worldview. This would include taking into account possible cultural barriers to the participation of Evangelical women, such as stricter gender roles, and how they can be addressed to further facilitate participation.

Finally, and perhaps most important, in order to foster participation it is vital to provide women with a forum in which they can comfortably and in an engaged manner, share their concerns and discuss strategic plans for action in the context of development. This is another area of the Pastoral da Criança where I observed room for enhancement. Such a forum can be created by providing an appropriate space for discussion and facilitating activities to increase confidence and self-esteem.

It is important, I believe, for a participatory approach that is sensitive to gender to include the provision of safe, relaxed and inspiring spaces for women to share experiences, express their ideas and concerns and develop strategic approaches to their own development issues. Andrea Cornwall explains how time is an important factor in providing such spaces. As she writes,

One barrier to women's participation is time—to sit and talk, analyse, come to meetings. Holding sessions at times that women suggest as convenient, or when women are less engaged in productive work, at least allows the option to participate. Spreading discussions over several sessions may also enable women to take part.³⁹

Time was a constant concern for the women whose participation I observed and *did not* observe with the Pastoral da Criança in Roraima. Some women did not have time to come to regular activities such

as Life Celebration Day because of various time commitments. I encountered many single mothers whose primary concern was looking after their children. Other women are involved in the informal economy and are managing small businesses from their homes; a few are lucky to have jobs in the formal sector. Either way, it is difficult to find a time that accommodates the different responsibilities of women participating in the program.

Finding an appropriate location is another key dimension of providing a forum that cultivates women's participation and empowerment. This includes a consideration of the "gendered nature of institutional spaces" in order to ensure a comfortable environment for women.⁴⁰ Indeed, this is a relevant concern for women participating in the Pastoral da Criança in Roraima. Most of the program's activities take place in a Catholic church setting: Life Celebration Day usually takes place in the church itself, and when I went to help make multi-mixture the activity also took place at the church. It is not uncommon for there to be church representatives such as priests and nuns present at activities, as I observed at the sensitivity training session I attended.

It is necessary to consider, I believe, the participatory advantages and disadvantages of holding Pastoral da Criança activities in such a milieu. While it may encourage and facilitate the participation of women who are active Catholics, there is the possibility of alienating women of an Evangelical, non-practicing Catholic or other religious background. Moreover, and more pertinent to Cornwall's concern, one must consider the dynamic of authority that exists within the framework of an institution such as the Catholic Church and the way it may influence the nature and extent of women's participation. Church representatives tend to be well educated

and possess strong leadership qualities. While the presence of church representatives at Pastoral da Criança activities may be a source of guidance and insight, there is a possibility that it may shift confidence and agency from the program's women, who tend to be poor, undereducated and sometimes illiterate. For women to be able to grow as leaders and decision-makers, I believe that it is important to allow them sufficient space to exercise confidence and be supported by peers; the presence of authority figures might be a barrier to this.

A final dimension of facilitating women's participation is promoting activities that help women build confidence and self-esteem. We have already touched on the notion of quantitative versus qualitative participation; it is useful once more to return to this concept. Evidence has shown that simply increasing numbers is not sufficient to engage women in meaningful participation; there is also a need for measures "to increase women's confidence and awareness of their rights, in order for them to be more assertive in joining [decision-making] committees and speaking out."⁴¹ Lee explains the delicacy of such attempts at group facilitation:

At best, group forums and leadership can encourage members to strengthen their capacity and participation—in essence, to become political. At worst, leadership can be a crutch, enabling members to defer to their representatives rather than acting or learning themselves. Perhaps worse still, groups can support a coercive process of maintaining the status quo.⁴²

To prevent these negative outcomes and to effect positive change, Lee continues, it is a central goal to promote a *culture of courage* in which women feel empowered to "challenge existing systems

and structures.”⁴³ This requires the presence of positive role models for women and mutual sharing across different groups; such is the strategy of SEWA Bank.⁴⁴

For women participating in the Pastoral da Criança in Roraima, there also appears a need for activities that, through mutual support and sharing of ideas, provide opportunities to build self-esteem and awareness of women’s rights and capacities as agents of change. The Pastoral da Criança could play an important role in facilitating such activities, as an organization that is concerned with such women’s issues as poverty and family violence. Existing social networks of church, family and neighborhood could be used as channels for enabling women to come together and discuss issues that are important to their lives, and develop collective strategies for positive social change.

Conclusion: Towards a More Meaningful Participation?

In this paper I have discussed the participation of women in the Pastoral da Criança in Roraima, with special focus on the question of how an organization’s approach to gender can influence the quality of women’s participation. In June and July of 2005, I was fortunate to experience first-hand the participation of a

group of women in a Brazilian development organization. As I took part in activities with these women, the main theme that emerged was *engagement*. In what ways do women become engaged as participants in the Pastoral da Criança? What factors contribute to a lack of engagement? This led me to consider a number of issues and arrive at certain key findings.

One issue that emerged around women’s participation was the role of the organization in analyzing the gendered aspects of participants’ lives. A recurring theme in the literature I explored was the need for an analysis of gender that can be translated into practice and a definition of gender that goes beyond ‘women’s interests’. It appears crucial to support women’s strategic gender interests by fostering an environment for women to discuss their own development issues. In a participatory approach, an organization can further facilitate women’s empowerment through examining and addressing reasons for non-participation, acknowledging and working with differences, and providing women with a positive forum for sharing concerns and developing plans for action. Finally, activities that increase women’s confidence and self-esteem have been demonstrated to be both the means and the end result of women’s engaged participation.

Sources

Burdick, John. *Legacies of Liberation: The Progressive Catholic Church in Brazil*. Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2004.

Cornwall, Andrea. “Making a Difference? Gender and Participatory Development.” *IDS Discussion Paper* 378. Institute of Development Studies (2000), 1-

39. <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/bookshop/dp/dp378.pdf>

Global Network of Religions for Children. Brazil’s official indication to the Nobel Peace Prize of the year 2001 < <http://www.gnrc.ne.jp/Nobel-nomination.html>

Karl, Marlee. *Women and Empowerment: Participation and Decision Making*. London: United

Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service, 1995).

Lee, Nanci. "A Gold Thread: Building Assets and Courage in SEWA's Microfinance Members." *Critical Half* 2.1 (2000): 20-

26. <http://www.womenforwomen.org/Downloads/Crithalf12-04.pdf>

Mosse, Julia Cleves. *Half the World, Half a Chance: An Introduction to Gender and Development*. Oxford: Oxfam, 1993.

Rose, Kalima. *Where Women Are Leaders*. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1992.

Pastoral da Criança (Official Website) <http://www.pastoraldacrianca.org.br>. (Portuguese)

_____. *Ações Complementares* (Complementary Actions) http://www.pastoraldacrianca.org.br/htmltonuke.php?filnavn=acoes/acoes_complementares.html.

_____. *Histórico* (History) <http://www.pastoraldacrianca.org.br/htmltonuke.php?filnavn=historico/historico.html>.

_____. *Missão* (Mission) <http://www.pastoraldacrianca.org.br/htmltonuke.php?filnavn=missao/missao.html>.

Society for Participatory Research in Asia. *Participatory Training for Women*. New Delhi: Aman Printers, 1989.

The translated quotes from women participating in the Pastoral da Criança were taken from nine interviews, conducted in Roraima between May 31 and June 18, 2005.

Endnotes

1. Marlee Karl, *Women and Empowerment: Participation and Decision Making* (London: United

Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service, 1995), 1.

2. Karl, 1.

3. Julia Cleves Mosse, *Half the World, Half a Chance: An Introduction to Gender and Development* (Oxford: Oxfam, 1993), 178-179.

4. Karl, 139.

5. Society for Participatory Research in Asia, *Participatory Training for Women* (New Delhi: Aman Printers, 1989), 1.

6. Society for Participatory Research: 1.

7. Society for Participatory Research: 3.

8. Society for Participatory Research: 45.

9. Pastoral da Criança (Official Website). *Histórico* (History) <http://www.pastoraldacrianca.org.br/htmltonuke.php?filnavn=historico/historico.html>. (Portuguese)

10. Interview with a Pastoral da Criança participant, conducted between May 31 and June 18, 2005.

11. Interview with a Pastoral da Criança participant, conducted between May 31 and June 18, 2005.

12. Interview with a Pastoral da Criança participant, conducted between May 31 and June 18, 2005.

13. See White, cited in Andrea Cornwall, "Making a Difference? Gender and Participatory Development." *IDS Discussion Paper* 378 (Institute of Development Studies, 2000), 9.

14. While it has been suggested by some that liberation theology has been on the decline in Brazil, others argue that activism based on liberationist values is alive and well in the country. A proponent of the latter argument is John Burdick, who in his book *Legacies of Liberation: The Progressive Catholic Church in Brazil* (Burlington, Vt.:

Ashgate, 2004) asserts that the struggle for racial and gender equality in Brazil is still influenced significantly by liberationist teachings.

15. Cornwall, 13-15.

16. Cornwall.

17. Cornwall, 10.

18. P. Peters, "The use and abuse of the concept of 'female-headed households' in research on agrarian transformation and policy," in D. Fahy Bryceson, ed., *Women Wielding the Hoe: lessons from rural Africa for feminist theory and development* (Oxford: Berg, 1993). 93-108. Cited in Cornwall, 10.

19. Cornwall, 10.

20. Translated from Pastoral da Criança (Official Website): *Missão* (Mission) <<http://www.pastoraldacrianca.org.br/htmltonuke.php?filnavn=missao/missao.html>>. (Portuguese)

21. Translated from Pastoral da Criança (Official Website): *Missão* (Mission) <<http://www.pastoraldacrianca.org.br/htmltonuke.php?filnavn=missao/missao.html>>. (Portuguese)

22. Global Network of Religions for Children: Brazil's official indication to the Nobel Peace Prize of the year 2001 <<http://www.gnrc.ne.jp/Nobel-nomination.html>>.

23. Lee, 21.

24. Kalima Rose, *Where Women Are Leaders* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1992), 32. See both Lee and Rose for more detailed descriptions of the history and activities of SEWA.

25. Cornwall, 9-10.

26. A. M. Goetz, "From feminist knowledge to data for development: the bureaucratic management of information on women in development," *IDS Bulletin* 25.2 (1994): 27-36. Cited in Cornwall, 26.

27. Linda Mayoux, *Empowering Inquiry: A New Approach to Investigation* (Wyse Development Limited, 2003). Cited in Nanci Lee, "A Gold Thread: Building Assets and Courage in SEWA's Microfinance Members," *Critical Half*. 2.1 (2000), 21.

28. Mosse, 166.

29. Lee explains how capacity building that helps women develop their reasoning skills can aid the women not only in developing their financial project but also in better understanding their financial options. See Lee, 24.

30. Lee, 23.

31. Lee, 23.

32. Rose, 274.

33. In addition to its 'basic' programs such as Life Celebration Day and monthly visits, the Pastoral da Criança also offers a group of 'complementary' programs, one of which focuses on income generation. The projects offered in this category include initiatives such as gardens, bakeries, livestock raising, and other small businesses. In 2001, 42 income generation projects were approved by the Pastoral da Criança and 309 persons were trained to carry out the projects across Brazil. See Pastoral da Criança (Official Website): *Ações Complementares* (Complementary Actions)

<http://www.pastoraldacrianca.org.br/htmltonuke.php?filnavn=acoes/acoes_complementares.html>. (Portuguese)

34. Cornwall, 7.

35. Cornwall, 7.

36. Cornwall, 15.

37. Cornwall, 12.

38. Cornwall, 5.

39. Cornwall, 18.

40. Cornwall, 18.

41. Cornwall, 12.

42. Lee, 24.

43. Lee, 24.

44. Lee, 24.