

The Precarious Balance of “Scaling Up”: Women’s Organizations in the Americas

by

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Abstract

In the last two decades, spaces for feminist interventions and actions have proliferated across the state, international development arenas, and global policy networks. This expansion of locales for feminist politics, along with growing recognition of the achievements of women’s movements, has fostered the ability of some groups to secure formal institutional and financial support. While such support has broadened possibilities for cultural and political influence, pressures towards institutionalization and professionalization have precipitated numerous tensions for these evolving organizations. New power relations have emerged between activists affiliated with the state, non-profit organizations, and the “Aid Industry” and those activists located within local grassroots organizations. Particularly common in this process is the divergence of priorities and the creation of hierarchies between professionally credentialed staff and grassroots membership. Accommodation of donor mandates and demands for accountability further complicate the design and implementation of programs and strategies. We explore these tensions, focusing on shifting organizational practices, among women’s groups in Latin America and the United States.

Biographies

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Introduction

This paper originated over beers one evening, as Karen was asking Lisa about her research in Peru on NGOs and grassroots organizations. Lisa, happy to find a new audience for fieldwork stories, rambled on but found her account diverted by Karen's interjections of her own tales of activist days in the U.S. battered women's movement. "Hey, that's just what happened to our group" was her continual refrain.

When Karen was first hired to work at a battered women's program in the Northeast, there was a very small staff, primarily working-class women without professional degrees from the community, who, with the help of volunteers, coordinated a series of safe houses for battered women. Major grants from the non-profit, state, and private sectors put the organization on stable financial ground for the first time. This allowed the program to purchase a shelter, open a satellite office, increase its services, and triple the staff. However, this growth generated numerous tensions and conflicts around goals, internal processes and practices, and action strategies that ultimately transformed the workings of this group.

Acceptance of the grants required that the organization keep detailed financial records and "case" histories on "client's" progress, as well as submit regular evaluation reports documenting programmatic successes. The influx of funding also precipitated organizational changes. Specialization and hierarchies in terms of pay, status, and authority occurred as "credentialed" mental health professionals and social workers were hired to comply with the new funding requirements. In the name of efficiency, formalized communications and decision-making channels were created. The composition of the board of directors shifted to include well-placed persons in the community. In sum, a grassroots community based movement became a professional women's movement organization. The political decisions to choose growth and formalization through acceptance of mainstream funding transformed the goals, discourses, and strategies of the organization. Although this particular program's choices for mobilizing strategies and its trajectory of organizational change and growth were situationally specific, we believe that a wide spectrum of women's activist groups confront similar alternatives.

Our paper addresses the course, costs, and possibilities of professionalization in women's movements in the Americas or, as it is known in the non-profit lexicon, of "scaling up." We draw from two literatures that chronicle similar organizational tensions and dynamics but, for the most part, exist in "two parallel research universes" (Lewis 1999:1). Our surprise upon discovering the parallels in each other's experiences and observations redounds to a broader schism in approaches to the Third Sector: those that deal with the roles of NGOs in development and those that examine non-profit institutions and volunteerism in the US and Europe. As David Lewis (1999) recently observed, bridging the gap between these two universes can help transcend conceptual limitations imposed by the distinction between North and South and, further, permit researchers to keep pace with fresh linkages and novel articulations enacted in practice and policy.

Over the past decade, spaces for feminist interventions and actions have proliferated across the state, international development arenas, and global policy networks. At the same time that this expanding arena for feminist politics offers many new possibilities for social change organizing, these transformations have engendered tensions and challenges. In light of pressures to professionalize and institutionalize, fears of accommodation and co-optation of organizational agendas, a new “gender technocracy,” and new divisions and power imbalances within and among women’s activist groups have surfaced (Alvarez 1998; Reinelt 1995). Likewise, Basu (1995:16) observes that, as women’s movements have moved off the street into political institutions across the Americas, questions of how to best “work the state” are far from resolved.

In this paper we would like to raise questions about these transformations and crosscurrents in women’s activism by exploring some of the dilemmas that accompany growth and formalization of grassroots women’s groups. While we contend that many activist groups face similar dilemmas over growth and legitimacy, we are conscious of the dangers of over-generalization, especially as we draw together examples from such vast spatial and social terrain. Women’s social movements are shaped by and, in turn, influence their own local, cultural, and national landscapes¹.

The growing complexity of venues, tones, and tactics have engendered, and are reinforced by, a series of contradictions that come to the fore in a consideration of quotidian operational practices of the women’s organizations. As we discuss these tensions, we wish to situate organizational practices in their broader political and national contexts. To this end we sketch a generalized and abbreviated summary of feminist organizing in the United States and Latin America.

A (Very) Little History

The United States has had a long history of women’s activism around a vast array of issues. Women’s activist groups historically have come in all shapes and sizes, including suffrage and racial uplift groups, settlement houses, women’s church auxiliaries, voluntary associations, women’s clubs, and labor groups. Contemporary forms and venues for activism continue to be kaleidoscopic in nature. A variety of local feminist service organizations including battered women’s programs, anti-rape groups, health clinics, literacy programs dot the landscape. Such service programs, informed by divergent political analyses, were started under a variety of different auspices. For example, some shelters, like Casa Myrna Vasquez in Boston, were based in ethnic neighborhoods, some emerged from consciousness raising groups, some in tandem with existing mental health treatment programs, others as part of the YWCA, and, still others, organized by battered women themselves. National mass-based membership organizations such as the National Organization of Women, National Abortion Rights Action League, the Women’s Equity Action League, and the Coalition of Labor Union Women as well as national coalitions of service providers like the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence further extend the realm of women’s organizing. Women’s bookstores, credit unions, legal groups, research institutes, presses, and art galleries have flourished as well. Women of all ethnic and class backgrounds have formed groups from which they have engaged around such issues as toxic waste dumping, deteriorating schools, welfare rights, and peace.

A facet of women’s community activism often neglected in conventional accounts of feminist organizing is neighborhood organizing by working-class and poor women. Grounded in the social networks of neighborhoods, this organizing has often drawn upon traditional constructions of gender roles as well as religious and cultural traditions to meet survival needs and improve the quality of life in their communities (Smith 1999; Sacks 1988; Haywoode 1991). For example, Cable (1993), in her

case study of organizing against toxic waste in a rural Kentucky community, noted that it was mothers and women at home who were available to attend the weekday hearings scheduled by state and federal officials. As a result, these women took over the everyday activities and assumed leadership roles. Participants, in many instances, legitimated their activism as advocacy for their children's and family's interests, and, in the process, end up challenging gender-based inequality, even though this was not an initial goal. In recognition of this neighborhood tradition, scholars have pointed out the need to expand the boundaries of what can be defined as feminist organizing by recognizing distinctive patterns of ethnic- and class-based activism (Gluck 1998; Pardo 1995).

Not only have women mobilized within their own ethnic and neighborhood groups but many women's organizations have attempted, with highly variable success, to organize across racial, ethnic, and class lines. In response to charges of defining issues from a narrow base of privilege, mainstream organizations have attempted to promote inclusion by encouraging participation by women of color. Failure to share voice and power with newcomers has been a common problem; for example, when women of color edited an issue of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, they accused the organization of marginalizing them and their concerns, and the subsequent divisions nearly destroyed the coalition. Differences extend to class-based perspectives in that many organizations have not explicitly addressed economic disparities between women and the ways that class positions affect the control women have over their lives (Spalter-Roth and Schreiber 1995). Smith (1995) chronicles the internal struggles over the difficulties of finding a common ground at the intersections of class, race, and gender differences within the Southeast Women's Employment Coalition, a multiracial working class women's organization that had been founded to address the economic disadvantages experienced by working class women. Other scholars have noted that women who are differently situated by race or class often have differing tactics, visions, and relationships to the organization and its work (Ostrander 1999).

In Latin America, as well, over the past two decades, women have organized in multiple arenas and addressed a wide range of issues. Here we highlight two strands of activism that have given rise to organizational tensions. The first of these has to do with the explicit domestic basis of much of women's collective action. In the Southern Cone countries (e.g. Chile, Argentina, Uruguay), women organized and protested foremost as mothers whose children had been tortured, murdered, and disappeared. Indeed, under the socially conservative military governments, traditional respect for motherhood permitted one of the few available social apertures for public protest. In the 1980s, economic hardship associated with the debt crisis and structural adjustment impelled many working-class women to establish community kitchens and other collective social services, while publicly condemning the state's withdrawal from social programs. Participants framed this activism as that of mothers and wives unable to adequately care for their families (Craske 1999; Safa 1995). In such engagement, women, while contending with greater workloads, longer days and associated stresses, often discovered or acquired new personal skills and capabilities (Raczynski and Serrano 1992). Well-known examples of such collective endeavors come from metropolitan Lima in the mid-1980s. There, some 100,000 women from the poorest sections of the city distributed milk to a million children via 7,500 neighborhood programs (Barrig 1994:165). Their efforts both built on a history of neighborhood based activism toward improving infra-structural conditions, and responded to material and technical incentives offered by parishes, local governments, feminist and development organizations, each interested in shoring up their own bases of popular support (Blondet 1995).

The second tendency in women's activism reflects the work-life trajectories of middle-class feminists, many of whom not only found their educational and professional options constrained by

gender norms, but confronted sexism in more traditional class- and party-based political activism. Frequently, these women welded their progressive social concerns and professional skills, in such fields as law, communication, education and health, to support popular women's organizations (e.g., Blondet 1995; Safa 1995; Tarrés 1998). Typically such support became institutionalized in the form of development NGOs or Grassroots Support Organizations (GSOs). These groups are not membership-based organizations but, rather, are composed of professional, paid outsiders who provide technical and financial assistance to local-level stakeholders. NGOs of this sort have proliferated in Latin America over the past decade, and most rely heavily on funding from international donors.

The rising public profile of such groups, marked by their ability to access resources and influence policy, has led to what Sonia Alvarez (1998:306) terms the NGOization of Latin American feminisms. The influence of NGOs in such highly visible places as Beijing and other international gatherings, and their inclusion in development policy circles, raises questions of legitimacy in respect to the role of GSOs as professional organizations speaking for widespread women's interests. Although, as Alvarez notes, some staff members eschew portrayal of their group as the voice of the women's movement, in effect, the privileged position and connections of the sturdiest NGOs foster this status.

Legitimacy

More broadly, the legitimacy of NGOs as agents of progressive social change has come into question in the 1990s. Historically, Latin American NGOs, with their origins in leftist or church social justice activism, were oriented by *basismo*, an ideology suspicious of government, and thus generally maintained an oppositional stance toward the formal apparatus of the state (Lehmann 1990; Nickson 1995). With recent changes in the political and economic climate, this adversarial relationship has shifted toward one of increased dialogue and collaboration. Further, the ascendance of neoliberalism has led to reduced state commitment to development activities, and to an emphasis on private sector involvement in social arenas. Coupled with the influx of social emergency funds to mitigate impacts of structural adjustment, this trend has opened opportunities for existing, but increasingly professionalized, NGOs and many new ones to enter the development business by carrying out welfare-oriented programs rather than pursuing prior concerns with social justice issues (e.g. Gideon 1998; Gill 2000). The lure of new resources and the chance to influence policy have posed contradictions for some NGOs, cautious about complicity with neoliberal agendas (Bebbington and Thiele 1993).

However, concurrent with these openings in the NGO world has been the economic displacement of many professionals and academics, who have lost public sector jobs or seen their real salaries plummet thanks to the same set of economic policy prescriptions. Within this context, many NGOs have assumed a mediating role between their social constituency and the state, and emphasize their institutional effectiveness and capacity-building skills rather than empowerment and mobilization roles (Pearce 1997:268). This tendency is manifest in the evolution of NGOs that are essentially consulting groups, subcontractors charged with implementing programs designed by the state or Northern donors (Gideon 1998). Certainly, strong practical arguments can be made in support of moves toward professional institutionalization, but such shifts compel a rethinking of the identity and role of NGOs, whose claims to legitimacy as key players in strengthening civil society were founded on their commitments to popular social change movements. The professionalization of NGOs has, however, enhanced their legitimacy in the eyes of donors who increasingly view them as the entities best equipped to fill in the social service gap left by neoliberal public sector shrinkage (Jelin 1998) and, as Craske (1999) observes, to promote self-help projects consonant with World Bank and IMF agendas. In

tracing this trend, it is critical to emphasize the sheer number and heterogeneity of NGOs: while some embrace a professionalizing model, others seek to incorporate it into their own visions for social change, or to resist it altogether. Nonetheless, the tendency for NGOs to become the officially sanctioned link to the poor further complicates their overall status as social change agents. As Jelin (1998:411-12) notes, “While assuming the role of representing the voiceless, they become spokespersons--at times authorized voices; at times, self-appointed--of victims . . . representing these victims vis-à-vis the power structure. At times, these processes are part of the democratizing movement; at other times, they reproduce patriarchal, populist, or authoritarian forms of relationship between subordinate and powerful sectors of society.”

Changing Organizational Practices

NGOs following a professionalizing course confront novel operational demands. Many of these occur in the formalization of the group itself, a gradual uneven process, expressed in numerous ways as the organization strives to develop administrative capacities. Care must be taken with external face and self-promotion, with greater attention to normative demeanor within institutional practices and sensitivity to external expectations. Formalization has implied sharp changes in the group’s internal organization. For example, in Chile, the fluid ad hoc style that characterized activist groups struggling against the dictatorship, has given way to much more rigid and hierarchical structures of decision making, and defined areas of responsibility as these groups acquired formal legal status as NGOs. Changes in funding and mission have propelled this shift. NGOs currently receive a large share of their financial support via the state through the Social Development Fund (FOSIS), and consequently concentrate on social programs that reflect neo-liberal priorities rather than earlier political convictions. This has, in turn, redefined the relationship between NGO worker and activist to that of professional and client (Taylor 1998).

Within the U.S., we find many examples of groups that, upon acceptance of money from state and local governments and foundations, have undergone subsequent reconfigurations of member, staff, and volunteer relations that exacerbate existing differences and create new divisions. While this influx of money fosters security and stability, it has tended to generate organizational specialization that takes the form of inequalities in pay, authority, and the division of labor. In one feminist health clinic, for example, the pay differences ranged from \$8 dollars an hour for health workers to \$23 dollars a hour for supervisors and \$41 dollars for the director (Thomas, 1999). Riger (1994) observes that as material rewards become available within an organization, conflict and competition can increase, intensifying extant divisions based on class and ethnic differences. Furthermore, differences in roles among organization members construct different constituencies or stakeholders within the organization, and these groups often clash in ways that mimic power inequalities in the larger social order. Morgen (1995:242) likewise notes that hegemonic power relations are replicated in work cultures of women’s organizations resulting in what Gloria Anzaldúa calls “*entregueras*, a kind of civil war among intimates, an in-class, in-race, in-house fighting.”

These dynamics relate directly to the sort of institutional facelift involved in formalization. Dealing with broader publics requires individuals with certain capacities, typically consonant with privileged class background and higher levels of education. Thus middle-class, often professionally credentialed, women tend to move into such high profile positions as director, president, or designated spokesperson. In this regard, María Luisa Tarrés (1998) offers some striking data on the staff composition of Mexican feminist NGOs (which, it should be said, do have a deeper legacy of

professionalism than NGOs elsewhere in Latin America). In her survey of 97 NGOs, she found a very high educational level among their members, compared to the rest of Mexican society: 81 percent had B.A. degrees, 4 percent a graduate degree, and 12 percent the equivalent of a high school degree (1998:142). In Chile, where donor aid is increasingly channeled through state agencies, the survival of an NGO often depends on its staff having special expertise and such skills as proposal preparation. Groups closest to the grassroots, typically led by working class women, may lose their bids to take on projects because members lack the required credentials. Schild (1998:106) recounts the case of an umbrella organization composed of experienced activists from the poor neighborhoods of Santiago that found its proposal for a women's leadership training school rejected for lack of professional qualification. Later, the same activists were invited to teach the handicrafts component of a similar program; funding rules restricted the role of leadership trainer to only credentialed individuals.

Accountability

The rise of professionalism in NGOs is closely linked to the technical demands placed on these organizations in the name of donor (bilateral, multilateral or large Northern NGOs) accountability. This preoccupation emerged in the early 1990s as the initial global glow associated with NGOs as agile innovators who could reach the poor faded, and concerns about their use of funds became prevalent. What did NGOs have to show for the millions invested by donors? What exactly were they doing with all that money? Donors began to tighten their assistance mandates, demanding that aid recipients demonstrate the tangible outcomes of their programs. Coping with these new demands requires expertise in proposal presentation and the intricacies of international aid flows. To obtain funds, GSOs typically are required to submit elaborate work-plans, with detailed time-lines and indicators for measuring achievements, and provide regular reports. Additionally, donors periodically evaluate program success, which requires further staff time.

Leaving aside the troublesome issue of what exactly constitutes success, the need to report to donors in a timely fashion to ensure continuity of financial flows places a large paperwork burden on field staff. Large GSOs typically maintain or try to maintain a diversified portfolio, with an array of donors providing funds for different projects or for specific components of overall programs. Such support increasingly arrives in short project cycles, its availability frequently subject to the sentiments of the European and North American general public, the caprices of Northern politicians (for example, reproductive health programs supported by USAID), as well as sundry bureaucratic obstacles--the fax from Madrid didn't arrive, etc. Attentiveness to donor priorities assumes enormous importance for project continuity, not to mention payment of staff salaries, especially for newer, smaller GSOs.

Although these paperwork and financial complexities may be much on the minds of NGO staff, they usually remain well behind the administrative scenes. Consequently, stakeholders may perceive the results of operational overload--project delays--as inefficiency, lack of commitment, or malfeasance on the part of their supporting institution. This tension can be particularly pronounced in rural areas where difficult logistics constrain communication. In one case, in southern Peru, the elected officers of a Peasant Women's Federation were continually frustrated and angered by infrequent contact with their urban-based supporting NGO. The need for both NGO staff and grassroots activists to travel long distances for meetings--four-to-nine hour bus rides--as well as the NGO leadership's limited familiarity with local conditions and personalities contributed to an atmosphere of mutual distrust (Markowitz 1999).

NGO staff must not only tailor their projects to meet donor agendas but revise data collection norms and procedures. NGO professionals working with state agencies in Chile complain that agency emphases on “outcomes” and “products” override their own “process” based approach to social programs (Schild 1998:105). In the U.S., many organizations receiving external money from the state have been under pressure to abstract, objectify, and quantify their work. A variety of new computer technologies for assessing the cost effectiveness of organization and its interventions results in an overload on staff and a situation in which workers often spend more time with paper than people. Furthermore, this move to document-based practice mandates that groups conceive and describe their work in ways and categories devised by external sources. The repercussions for noncompliance can be harsh, as in the case of one rape crisis center that lost its funding as a result of their resistance to specific protocols for record-keeping and data collection requirements (Matthews 1995). However, it is important to point out that groups do resist many of the imperatives that come with accepting support: for example, through creative paperwork, staffers in the shelter where Karen worked were able to circumvent a stipulation limiting women’s stays to only thirty days.

Further, donor agendas often have the effect of curtailing or limiting certain kinds of political strategies. Donor aid to Latin America supports small entrepreneur training rather than marches demanding nationalization of major industries, although success with the latter may ultimately do much more to reduce domestic economic inequalities. Analogously, U.S. antiviolence service groups today are less likely to demonstrate at the courthouse and more likely to conduct sensitivity training for the police. One reason programs emphasize service over advocacy is that the former can be measured within the vocabularies and categories of funding agencies. Also, as many anti-violence activists have sought to become “experts” on abuse to win support for shelters and changes in domestic violence law, they have adopted therapeutic vocabularies in which they construct battered women as suffering from a set of psychological problems like low self-esteem. The narrow focus on helping individual women through personal transformation, however, operates to exclude structural and materialist understandings of the gendered dimensions of violence (Kendrick 1998). Service delivery is not necessarily a conscious rejection of advocacy or adversarial politics on the part of the organization, but is instead an adaptation to the *realpolitik* of funding possibilities. Nonetheless, fundability does not necessarily promote the best politics, or the most effective or desirable means to address stakeholder interests.

Discussion and Conclusions

This overview of scaling-up in women’s organizations in the Americas began as an attempt to address some of the conceptual limitations posed by the gap between two literatures concerned with the Third Sector. Our discussion of the problematics and possibilities in contemporary women’s organizing has emphasized the operational practices that have accompanied growth and professionalization, particularly in response to increasing demands for donor accountability.

In surveying the similar tensions at play in these parallel non-profit universes of the United States and Latin America, we have been struck by the differences in the immediate interests between the organizations’ staffs and stakeholders. Staff members, more likely to hold academic degrees and credentials, take on the work for a combination of professional reasons and political convictions while stakeholders typically participate to improve the quality of life for their families and neighbors. Staff of women’s organizations frequently confront economic imperatives in their daily lives different from those facing the rank and file membership. Their ability to secure a decent salary and find satisfaction at work

is based on the maintenance of their place of employment, which in turn requires securing continuity of funding and the attendant negotiations and compromises over programs and direction.

This characterization is not meant to portray NGO directors or social service professionals as sell-outs and opportunists, but rather suggests that their willingness to work within externally imposed parameters has been naturalized both by professional and organizational pressures and survival needs and, currently, by neoliberal hegemonic discourses which have had the effect of containing the range of possible responses to inequality and oppression. This broadly hewed distinction between staff and stakeholder, reflecting life situations structured by and replicating class differences, intrigued us, and also corresponded to the observations and experiences of individuals present when we initially presented this material.

Stimulated by questions and comments from the audience and panelists, we have endeavored to explore further issues of class positionality and interest, a theme that has received limited attention in both the NGO and non-profit literatures. In reviewing accounts of women's organizations, however, we find ourselves precariously close to reading agency off of structure, and, thereby, advancing a dichotomous class analysis to explain widespread patterns. While, certainly, attention to people's working lives, and consequently their class position(s), may clarify some aspects of organizational processes, we worry that broad reductionist swathes ultimately conceal complexity and change. A dichotomous model tends to foreclose understanding and appreciation of the complex dilemmas activists regularly confront, and the extent to which they reflect upon and struggle with the kinds of institutional dynamics and politics sketched in this paper. We do not want to imply an inevitable tendency toward an "iron law of professionalization" that erases the strategic trade-offs that activists must make, and thus eclipses the abounding agency within agencies as staff members disrupt, reinvent, and redirect external mandates and notions of professionalization. Nor do we want to promote rigid categories of difference and identity that deny the existence of mobile and destabilized positionalities among women staff and stakeholders. The myriad forms of contemporary women's organizations and ways of "working the state," are still new, multiple, and evolving. As one Andean farmer with a wait-and-see attitude toward a fledgling grassroots group remarked to Lisa, "Todavía, es muy wawita" (It's still very much a baby), or as a women activist involved in a rural feminist service organization in Appalachia said to Karen, "We're really just pioneering in this thing; that's what keeps me going."

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Notes

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1. Narayan (1997) illustrates this point with an example pertinent to the battered women's movement, noting that creating battered women's shelters has not been a priority for Indian feminists. Some western feminists have suggested that the lack of shelters indicated that the women's movement in India was less "developed." In the Indian context, however, organizing around shelters for battered women was not feasible and instead dowry-murder was a more effective issue. Western feminists, Narayan concludes, need to be more "contextually self-conscious" to understand why "similar problems might sometimes not permit similar answers" (1997:95).