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Males and Females in Social Solidarity Economy

Voices from Latin America

By Ana Inés Heras

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Gender relationships have been a contested terrain over time in Latin America. As it has been documented elsewhere (Heras 2012), societies in Latin America are oriented by patriarchy. The participation of males in household domestic chores or in what has been seen as traditionally feminine tasks still waits to be a reality. Conversely, males are still predominant in decision-making roles regarding political participation and economic resources, and they tend to do better in access to economic resources (PNUD, 2011). It is true that much has been gained for women over the decades, in particular if we compare current public policy measures or legislative frameworks with those of the past two centuries in regards to securing women's rights. Yet, gender inequality is still at place. Differences can be seen in what women earn (for the same qualified job), in whether or not females can access political participation, how domestic chores and responsibilities are distributed, and how women and men are perceived as not equally capable for specific tasks.



Textile. Men work too. Photo Courtesy Ana Heras, 2011

It is still true that everyday practices, at work, school, home and other social spheres tend to be organized by male hierarchy that, in turn is viewed as normal. Normal, in gender relations, means that men and women are not equal. Women are still at a disadvantage when compared to males.

In this context, groups that orient their practice by the principles of *otra economía and otra sociedad* seem to be at a privileged position to transform gender inequality, at least within their organizations. The power to implement a different organization altogether lies in their hands. It is worth analyzing social-economy and self-managed workers' processes in regards to their contribution to gender equality in Latin America.

Is there any news that these projects are putting forward? The answer is mixed: while some patterns seem to remain unchallenged, others are starting to move forward.

[Caracciolo Basco y Foti \(2010\)](#) reviewed several different experiences in light of gender relations. They found that these kinds of experiences seem to be making a difference when some key issues are taken into account.

Some of these are:

- When gender relations are considered simultaneously in all spheres of everyday life, that is, workplace, household, and community, opportunities for change for both women and men arise. Social-solidarity economy endeavors are specially suited for carrying out this framework since their perspective is relational and integral, and therefore, there seems to be a natural match between carrying out social change and carrying out change that benefits men and women equally.
- Public policy initiatives that are conceived as integral (i.e. health, education and work) do have a greater impact on gender equality.
- Getting to know what others do, and how they do it, seems to make a difference in as much as it is portrayed as achievable. Social-solidarity economy organizations that network with others have a chance to implement other organizations' learning experiences.
- Fostering equal gender relations, while specifically supporting women in their equal participation in all spheres over time, make a difference in favor of equal gender relations in that they tend to be more stable and supportable.
- Social-economy groups that network with other organizations in more complex relations tend to benefit women in the long run because other ways of doing things are brought to focus. It is important for groups that are concerned with equal gender relations to not become isolated.

These findings have been compiled by conducting research on rural and urban settings where traditional gender relations tended to follow a patriarchal pattern (north-west and north-east Argentinean regions and other urban and semi-urban regions of the Province of Buenos Aires).

[Partenio](#) (2013), on the other hand, has shown mixed results in cooperatives and recovered enterprises in Argentina during the last decade. In general terms it seems that the process of recovering a factory usually involves men and women equally, and yet, this situation does not necessarily translate into a more equal organization within the workplace once it starts to be self-managed by their workers. She points that the literature has considered workers' processes mostly in regards to class issues and class identity (developing a collective bias in order to recover their work site and as a result of the process); she advocates for research that can uncover gender relation issues in these situations. Some of those issues are, for example, whether self-managed workers' enterprises critically examine the value that is placed on specific roles because of the fact that are associated with females, and mostly performed by females. In as much as these practices remain unchallenged, patriarchal patterns are not examined nor contested.



Woman at work. Photo Courtesy Ana Heras, 2010

Another issue that needs to be re-examined is whether —and if in any way, how— gender relations are changed within the household when women and men participate of cooperatives and/or of processes of recovering their workplace. Partenio points out that, in these processes, there seems to be an invisible continuity between patriarchal practices, both at the household and at work. Some roles at work, for example, are considered to be *male oriented* and thus more valued; she also shows that when these continuities are exposed and examined, some changes start to take place. Following this line of thought, additionally, Partenio has argued that when gender issues are brought to light, also on-the-job education can be examined: she has found that implementing training for women on work traditionally seen as male-oriented has proven key. She has also found that there are cooperatives where females are

voted into their Directive Boards in a significant proportion, and it is in these types of configurations when what is considered to be traditional male or female work is brought to light, examined and changed upon.

In my own research work (Heras, op. cit.) I have been documenting some practices carried out by cooperatives and self-managed groups that put the focus on gender equality.



Escaramujo: day care at work. Photo Courtesy Ana Heras, 2011

Among what has been identified as innovative practices are: day care provided and supported collectively at the community level (for elders) or at the work place (for children); on-the job training for women and men, equally, on trades that have been historically associated with virility; promoting associative groups (e.g., small communal banks) where there is one man by six women; supporting processes of female leadership (e.g., women on cooperatives boards) over time.

Reference

Heras Monner Sans, Ana Inés (2012). Education and Fatherhood in Argentina. In *Promising Practices for Fathers' Involvement in Children's Education*, 131-147. Information Age Publishing, EUA.

Ana Inés Heras earned her MA and PhD in education (1995) with a Fulbright scholarship at UCSB. She also studied history and physical education at the undergraduate level in Argentina. She currently studies participants' collective learning processes at autonomous, self-managed organizations in contemporary Argentina, focusing on how diversity is understood in such processes.