



OXFAM INTERSECTIONALITY SERIES

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP OF WOMEN AND YOUTH IN NICARAGUA

DAMARIS RUIZ AND CAROLINA EGIO ARTAL



OXFAM

Foto: Susana Garcia

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FOREWORD

On March 23-24, 2015, representatives from Oxfam affiliates and partners assembled on the Simmons College campus in Boston, Massachusetts. In a rare opportunity, gender experts and development practitioners donned their student hats to deep-dive into the topic of Intersectionality, an area of academic thought and feminist theory that is evolving into an ever-growing body of development discourse. The event was co-sponsored by Oxfam America, Oxfam Novib, and Oxfam Intermon, in close partnership with the Center for Gender in Organizations at the Simmons School of Management.

Not just a learning space, the Symposium was also a conduit for the generation of knowledge. The centerpiece of discussions was a series of practice papers, authored by Oxfam staff and partners, which explore the issue of Gender and Intersectionality within the broader context of international development work. The intention is to share Oxfam's experience in Gender and Intersectionality with a wide audience in hopes of fostering thoughtful debate and discussion.

Oxfam America extends special thanks to all staff and partners who participated in the Symposium and who shared their expertise through these practice papers. We acknowledge the contribution of the advisory and planning committees, particularly of Sandra Sotelo Reyes (Intermon), Carmen Reinoso (Novib), Muthoni Muriu (Oxfam America), Patricia Deyton (CGO), Alivelu Ramisetty (Oxfam America), Maria Ezpeleta (Oxfam America), Eloisa Devietti (Oxfam America) and Lauren Walleiser (CGO). We also recognize the support of Caroline Sweetman and Liz Cooke (Oxfam Great Britain) who made possible the publication of a special virtual issue of *Gender & Development, Intersecting Inequalities*, (<http://explore.tandfonline.com/page/bes/cgde-vsi-intersectionality>). Finally, we thank Irene Munoz (Oxfam International) and Aileen Charleston (Oxfam America) for their collaboration on communications.

Intersectionality is a feminist theory and analytical tool for understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities. The experiences of marginalization and privilege are not only defined by gender, but by other identity factors, such as race, class, and sexual orientation, to name a few – all of which are determined, shaped by, and imbedded in social systems of power.

INTERSECTIONALITY PRACTICE PAPERS SERIES

- *Active Citizenship of Women and Youth in Nicaragua*, Damarius Ruiz and Carolina Egio Artal (Oxfam Intermon)
- *Building Gender-Sensitive Resilience through Women's Economic Empowerment: Lessons learned from pastoralist women in Ethiopia*, Imma Guixé (Oxfam Intermon)
- *Re-politicizing Intersectionality: How an intersectional perspective can help INGOs be better allies to women's rights movements*, Jenny Enarsson (Oxfam Great Britain)
- *Women's Economic Empowerment and Domestic Violence: Links and lessons for Practitioners working with intersectional approaches*, Mara Bolis (Oxfam America), Christine Hughes (Oxfam Canada), Rebecca Fries (Value for Women), and Stephanie Finigan (Prosperity Catalyst)
- *"Your struggle is my struggle": Integrating intersectionality in work with lesbian women, bisexual women and trans-women in Zimbabwe*, Sian Maseko (Oxfam Zimbabwe) and Sammantha Ndlovu (Sexual Rights Centre)

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INTRODUCTION

This text reviews the construction of intersectional strategies for active citizenship that have contributed to the Active Citizenship Program for Women and Youth (2011-2016) led by Oxfam in Nicaragua.

The document seeks to highlight the intersecting forms of violence and subordination that women and youth identities in Nicaragua face in different ways, and underscore how youth networks and feminist movements have been able to link parallel efforts to fight against discrimination and defend their rights.

Through the experience with youth networks in Chinandega and the Feminist Movement of Nicaragua (Corriente Feminista de Nicaragua), the text explores intersectionality as a way of understanding the continuum and linkages between identities, and shines a light on the opportunities to build common resistance against superimposed axes of oppression and discrimination.

FINDINGS

Historically, Nicaragua has enjoyed high levels of peoples' organizing and participation. Nonetheless, the imposition of a single model for participation in which there is only room for pro-government organizing expressions, an environment of non-compliance with broad legal instruments, and high levels of political polarization have weakened the effectiveness of participation exercised through civil society organizations.

For women in particular, this lack of democracy translates into an alarming reduction in their rights. In Nicaragua, in the period from 2009 to 2014, a total of 477 women were killed by men (Women's Network against Violence); 78% of women employees worked in the informal sector, and 74% of women over the age of 65 did not receive a pension of any kind (Fideg, 2013). Nicaragua is also one of the seven countries in the world that unequivocally penalizes abortion, and it tops the charts for teen pregnancy in Latin America, at 24% (UNFPA, 2013).

Nicaragua is a young country: 70% of the population is under the age of 30, and 33% of the inhabitants are between 18 and 30 years old. Nonetheless, youth face severe restrictions upon the exercise of their most basic rights, leading many of them to "opt to demonstrate their disenchantment and discontent by rejecting the system, retreating to private spaces, and seeking to emigrate from their seemingly uncertain, hostile, and closed surroundings" (Nicaragüita Youth Movement, 2008, p. 10).

In this context, and convinced that oppression operates in the intersections, we believe that strategies to face this subordination should also look to intersectionality. The Active Citizenship Program for Women and Youth (2011-2016) led by Oxfam in Nicaragua has supported the articulation and promotion of the demands of youth networks and women's and feminist movements.

Some conceptual and methodological considerations

In this text, we are interested in shining a light on how common resistance is generated against superimposed axes of oppression, with an intersectional approach that uncovers the continuum and linkages among different identities. Even as we know that these struggles for recognition may compete with each other, we seek to highlight the aspects in which "singular liberation movements can engage with others developing alongside them" (Hardt and Negri, 2011, p. 342).

As a result, we understand the identity of social movements and activism as a dynamic force: "Identity politics is multi-dimensional, complex, and fluid, and it may be just one more aspect in the repertoire for collective action, rather than the result or reflection of internal or essentialist traits" (Gracia Trujillo, 2008, p. 240).

Moreover, we understand that identity is also body identity, and that "we identify ourselves in relation to gender within and through a determined body, an experience, and a given perception about ourselves as carnal beings; this body identity is also absolutely dynamic" (Esteban, 2013, p. 15). Given these considerations, when studying intersectional relationships, we believe that we must recognize and name the diversity of bodies and engage with that diversity on a material plane as well.

The concepts of intersectional awareness and intersectional policy developed by Crenshaw (2012) are emphasized in the text, following an Arendtian conception of policy as the space in which citizens gather for discourse and action (Arendt, 1997, p. 30), to the extent that "through intersectional awareness we may better identify and recognize the roots of the differences between people, and negotiate how these differences are expressed in building collective policy" (Crenshaw, in Platero, 2012, p. 120).

When does being young and feminist amplify the struggle against discrimination?

The youth networks of the Department of Chinandega, Nicaragua, connected with Oxfam's Active Citizenship Program, self-define as:

"...Spaces for reflection, activism, mobilization, and advocacy, which have been convened on several occasions since the year 2008 to exercise active citizenship in municipal, departmental, and at times national affairs, in order to ensure respect for youth rights" (Meza and Acuña, 2013, p. 14).

These are networks of youth and adolescents ages 15 to 30 that are able to mobilize around 500 people each. Each of these organizations

"...has represented a challenge to the conviction that youth are a passive social political subject, excluded from effective citizen participation. This conviction leaves them without the opportunity to advocate in the definition of public policy, and reaffirms to them that their time to act as political subjects will only come with adulthood" (Meza and Acuña, 2013, p. 17).

In this construction of new forms of citizenship, young people connect well with feminist struggles and demands, recognizing that the construction of the "citizen" subject has traditionally been undertaken through an operation of power that has withheld the true conditions of citizenship from women and non-adult men.

Recognizing that citizenship emerges as part of a patriarchal agreement helps us to understand that the concept of citizenship itself is pervaded with power relationships, and that exclusion is at the root of the power held in Nicaragua: "From this vision of power, young people are stigmatized as synonymous with trouble and irresponsibility. Their involvement has been discredited under the argument that their participation is minimal" (Díaz and Reyes, 2014, p. 63).

As a form of resistance, youth speak out and their activism challenges the private order to which they have been relegated by virtue of their "minority". Their networks thus take:

"...Public space for mobilization around ideas and actions that seek to improve the lives of youth through campaigns, marches, demonstrations, advocacy, participation in local management, etc., stimulating a transformation in the political system within each municipality" (Meza and Acuña, 2013, p. 51).

This is an extension into the public arena that is an even greater transgression for young women against gender mandates:

"...The involvement of women in these spaces is, for them, for the society in Chinandega, and for local authorities, a transgression that demands a change in the traditional conceptions of young women and the places that they have traditionally held" (Meza and Acuña, 2013, p. 80).

In this context of subordination, the youth networks of Chinandega have been able to integrate feminist doctrines on body citizenship within a component called personal growth. This component seeks to:

"Promote youth agency through topics that allow them to recognize their bodies as territories for citizenship, and as a space in which limitations of their rights can be recognized. This agency allows youth to mobilize in defense of their rights and territories that deserve to be freed from the bonds imposed by gender, religion, politics, and the media" (Meza and Acuña, 2013, p. 48).

This is a political proposal in the first person, which values lived experience and the seed of feminist ideas: that the personal is political, through our bodies and struggles in the flesh, and that revealing our own identities is part of personal and collective empowerment.

Intersectional alliances have allowed young women to lift the veil from the gender subordination within networks, expanding their resistance to the "intersectional disempowerment" that they suffer as women as well as youth. They have also witnessed changes in their relations with young men, who:

“...Find themselves increasingly questioned in their gendered social prerogatives (...) and are gaining awareness that it is only when they are capable of questioning their own exercise of power that they may act as coherent citizens whose demands vis-à-vis the public powers reflect the demands emerging from within their own spaces: democracy, inclusion in response to the particular needs of each sector, equality, and real, informal participation. All of this has made the networks into more democratic and equitable spaces” (Meza and Acuña, 2013, p. 80).

María José Díaz, a youth and feminist activist from the organization ASODEL, a program partner, reports that feminist/youth alliances contribute important opportunities in the face of the democratic closure and deficit in Nicaragua. She highlights that the "feminist movement is the only organically solid movement with clear and forceful proposals", but that "it is the young men and women who are the ones driving the issues at different levels... that is, the feminist movement must grow organically, and the youth groups represent a powerful opportunity to grow in ideas, actions, and mobilizations toward the state".

María José also values the youth groups' advocacy strategies toward municipal authorities, given that "these dialogues open the door to integrating campaigns to denounce the state-driven, physical and symbolic violence that women experience" (2015).

How do the feminist movements in Nicaragua see themselves in alliances and networks with youth activist groups?

La Corriente is a feminist network created in 1994, a founding member of the Feminist Movement of Nicaragua, and an Oxfam program partner. Each year, *La Corriente* organizes training series with youth from different territories, and leads annual National Youth Gatherings, with the most recent event held in 2014.

María Teresa Blandón, the Director of *La Corriente*, believes that intersectional awareness is a distinctive element in these actions:

“We are one of the feminist organizations that works the hardest to ensure the participation of different youth bodies. One problem is that we still tend to refer to youth as a homogeneous group, but that is far from the truth. In the context of this project funded by Oxfam, we have been able to attract different bodies to the spaces that we have developed with youth.”

“In the training series, one of the benefits that the participants have recognized and discussed is that the youth and their different bodies are all present there, and the opportunity to recognize other young people with other identities has been part of the greater learning process.”

She adds:

“Some of the greatest wealth of the gatherings, in addition to their feminist lens, lies in the approach of putting these topics at the center of the debate. The bodies that facilitate these gatherings and the bodies invited to participate are each expressions of this intersectionality and diversity. The workshop participants include a significant proportion of lesbians, indigenous people, and rural youth from the Pacific and coastal zones.”

Despite this diversity, it is not easy to work with an intersectional alliance approach. The *La Corriente Feminista* movement explains that certain tensions have emerged as the feminist movement in Nicaragua has found itself forced to take up a defensive position against government harassment and threats. María Teresa reports:

“Some people are afraid. Some people could say: ‘My alliance with the feminists puts my own political agenda at risk.’ This has happened with the LGBTI groups, who feel that they could make progress toward legal recognition of civil unions, or even a law on gender identity.”

“So many of them have said: ‘We had better be careful’. The same thing has happened with certain rural and Afro-descendants’ organizations. These groups opt to avoid engaging with feminist organizations, regarding them as too confrontational. If we speak out publicly against the government, our advocacy with the government will not be very effective” (2015).

Other tensions are linked to highly polarized and dichotomous views that have been particularly pervasive in this generational debate:

“...Some people are much more interested in finding the distance between us rather than the points in common between young feminism and adult feminism. Nonetheless, there is also a school that is more open to dialogue, which has helped more of the foundational knowledge and legacy of feminism feed into the processes led by younger women” (2015).

The activist from ASODEL shares a clear example of this. An additional tension can be identified in the work with young men, discussed by the representative from *La Corriente Feminista*, who warned:

“Some donor agencies are in large part responsible for this, especially those who have focused on youth groups. This focus is positive, but in doing so they have turned a blind eye to the existence of women’s and feminist movements that have made important efforts to blaze a trail for work with youth” (2015).

With respect to the political opportunities from the intersection between youth activism and feminism, La Corriente Feminista seeks to build greater legitimacy for the feminist movement in society, and expand their mobilization capacity in order to avoid the risk of isolation of feminist organizations or networks in a context that is hostile to feminist demands. La Corriente also sees the value in facilitating work with men – young men – who are interested in building new models of masculinity.

In terms of alliances, new youth collectives have been created and supported, investments have been made in new leadership concepts that question the reproduction of authoritarian, sexist, and homophobic practice, and relationships have been built among feminist, youth, environmental, and LGBTBI activists.

These alliances with youth activism in Nicaragua have been able to transform elements of the social mindset by sharing arguments and strengthening influence in families and reference communities, amplifying critical voices against religious fundamentalist views exercised among the youth population, and in the increasingly youth-focused media, and enhancing the use of social media for activism in favor of equality and women's rights.

María Teresa relates that the intersectional view of feminism:

“...Has helped us to learn from these bodies, but has also served to enrich feminism with these views and avoid an overly partial and fragmented analysis. It is important for the legitimacy of feminism itself, as a movement that sets its sights on the patriarchy and with equal intensity seeks to deal with racism, neoliberalism, homophobia, lesbophobia and transphobia.”

In paradigmatic terms, María Teresa adds:

“The most relevant pieces of the dialogue and alliances between feminist and youth organizations have been the promotion of more transcendent changes in the field of social traditions and conceptions around the body, sexuality, identity, and gender, to deconstruct the hierarchies of power.”

For La Corriente, this intersectional action provides important feedback for feminism, with new approaches and challenges for feminist agendas, and approaches that are more inclusive and expressive of diversity (2015).

NOTES

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