Introduction

On May 10th and 11th, 2006 the seminar “Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World. The UNRISD Report and the Future Agenda for Latin America” was held in Buenos Aires. It was jointly organized by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Instituto de Desarrollo Económico y Social (IDES).

The objective of the seminar was to launch the Spanish version of the UNRISD report “Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World”, and discuss the achievements, challenges and pending issues ten years after the Beijing Conference. Participants included prestigious specialists from different countries in the region working in the academic world, civil society organizations and international agencies.

The seminar was organized in five sessions, four of which corresponded to the chapters of the report: 1) Macroeconomics, well-being and gender equality; 2) Women, work and social policy; 3) Women in politics and public life; 4) Gender, armed conflict and the search for peace. The fifth session aimed at reflecting on the lessons learned from the report and thinking about the future agenda.

Four speakers participated in each session, each of whom provided his/her vision on the report, identifying specific matters for the Latin American region as well as the critical and “missing” issues 1.

This report gathers the main points of the speakers’ presentations and plenary debates, highlighting their agreements and disagreements as well as the challenges, issues and strategies considered a priority for the future agenda.

The UNRISD report

The report focuses its analysis on the economic and political reforms of the ‘90s that had important implications –both negative and positive- on gender relations

1 The program of the seminar is annexed to this report.
and women's wellbeing, and presents solid arguments for putting gender equality at the centre of the development agenda.

Participants had a very positive opinion of the report. They considered it a useful and necessary summary that gathers and compares global evidence, links gender equality to social equality, and development to wellbeing. They also valued the emphasis on justice as the base upon which to address gender equality.

Session 1. Macroeconomics, wellbeing and gender equality

This session analyzes the impact of macroeconomic politics on the situation of women and gender relations.

First of all, the speakers recognized the systematic lack of gender analysis in the macroeconomic policy debates and praised the report for including it. They also appreciated the fact that the report identifies the gender inequalities caused by the functioning of the global economy, placing the macro vision in front of the micro vision in the search for solutions.

The evidence presented in the report shows that the promises of the neo-liberal model were not kept and, instead of leading to greater equity, it strengthened inequalities in contexts where states have limited capacity to redistribute resources and alleviate the effects of the economy. The current moment is the beginning of a new stage post subsidiary state, post Washington Consensus, post neo-liberalism. In a context of increasing economic, gender and North-South inequalities, we face the challenge of creating a new paradigm.

This new stage requires alternative, sustainable and heterodox programs with input from feminist economists, based on economic democracy, that promote the return of the power of political economy to the state and, fundamentally, include an exhaustive gender analysis as a main component.

The challenges are multiple:

- How to make visible the impact of policies not only in the public sphere but also in the private sphere?
- How to incorporate the economy of care among the results and impacts of economic policies?
- Which would be the indicators to show changes in gender relations?
- How to improve the existing statistics and records in order to produce a detailed documentation of the differential effects of policies according to gender?
- When we talk about the intervention of the State, how, how much and to what extent is this desirable, taking into account that former models of interventionist state have also produced social and gender inequalities?
Several times during the seminar debates, participants reflected upon the conditions under which the neo-liberal model was established, pointing out that there was little resistance to it even though its social costs rapidly became visible. Today, facing a change of paradigm, we must make sure that the changes that occur are geared towards greater equality.

One of the key points addressed in the UNRISD report and discussed during the seminar is the relationship between growth, global inequality and gender inequality. Evidence shows that economic growth is necessary but not sufficient to improve human development, achieve equality and close the gender gaps in income and wellbeing. Furthermore, economic empowerment does not necessarily imply greater equality in gender relations, just as changes in purely economic aspects do not necessarily reflect what happens in other spheres of life.

The report points out that the income generating opportunities created by globalization have not allowed improvements in the wellbeing and stability in women’s lives. It is clear that greater female participation in the paid labour force does not imply greater equality, since women access low paying jobs mostly in the informal sector or under disadvantaged conditions. However, even when jobs are better, as they might be in some countries of the Latin American Southern Cone, gender biases in the functioning of the economy hinder any progress in reducing inequalities. Therefore, it is also necessary to address institutional, political and cultural issues including time use, resource utilization within households, and other matters that go beyond purely economic aspects and help to explain the persistence of inequalities.

In Latin America, overcoming inequalities is urgent. However, of all inequalities, gender inequalities could very well persist in the context of greater distributive equality if the gender biases of institutions and policies are not altered.

Session 2. Women, work and social policy

This section refers to the effects of the liberalization process on women in different contexts: employment, rural life, migratory movements and the growth of social vulnerability.

Regarding employment, participants pointed out that the definition of the informal economy should differentiate the traditional informal sector in Latin America from

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2 Data from the Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) for 15 Latin American countries show that women’s average income per hour of work is 80% of men’s. When the average education is over 13 years, women’s average income is 72% of men’s (NU, 2005). Another study shows that women’s participation in low productivity activities is higher than men in 14 of the 17 countries studied, and has risen between 1990 and 2002 (CEPAL, 2005 and NU, 2005). Studies also report female structural unemployment, as well as underemployment and disguised unemployment (CEPAL, 2004).
informalization as a consequence of labour precarization and flexibilization. In other words, it is necessary to differentiate workers (steady or temporary) in informal businesses from unregistered workers within the formal sector (subcontracted, tercerized or even regular workers in the formal economy who are not registered). Even though informalization and precarization share common characteristics, they have different causes and therefore require different policies to address them.

Another point made is that some changes in the labour market are temporary or circumstantial. Thus, greater female participation has more to do with variations in the demand of labour than with changes in gender roles. In the case of Argentina, the increased female participation in the labour force was related to decreasing household incomes as a consequence of male unemployment. Currently, reindustrialization and the rise of construction work are generating an increase in male employment and a fall in the participation of women who are leaving the labour market and returning to the former male-provider model. This is a sign of the gender segmentation that persists in the structure of the labour market and highlights the need to distinguish between long term and other processes that arise as responses to circumstantial changes.

Regarding rural living, the report addresses the growing diversification of rural livelihoods of agricultural smallholders who cannot produce enough for subsistence and must resort to other sources of income. Seminar participants expressed that most alternative sources of income are usually external to the communities (wages, remittances and subsidies assigned through social policies) and therefore the term “diversification of livelihoods” hides an increased vulnerability of rural livelihoods.

Regarding migration, the rural to urban migration processes forced by rural poverty in Latin America belong to the past since nowadays cities have lost their capacity to absorb the labour force (even in the informal sector) and are expelling it rather than receiving it.

In the case of international migration there is an increasing presence of women migrating alone or with their families in search of work as a survival strategy. This can have diverse effects. On one hand, when women leave their children and partner behind, if there is no grandmother or female relative who replaces her, this might imply greater participation of men in domestic life. In addition, migration frequently contributes to the exercise of citizenship as it provides access to certain rights. However, migration also increases women’s vulnerabilities due to discrimination based on national origin, race, class, gender, and to the exploitation they are subjected to (including sexual exploitation).

The fact is that international migration responds more to the requirements and demands of the receiving countries rather than to the conditions of the communities of origin. Women who migrate to work as domestic workers, to care
for children or the elderly or to work as nurses, are filling deficits in the economy of care of richer countries.

Regarding social policies, participants expressed the need to integrate the analysis of economic strategies with the analysis of social policy since the orientation of the latter significantly depends on the former.

The social policy models that emerged from the increase of poverty –focalized programs and conditioned transfers- contrast with universal policies. Universalism is associated with policies that grant rights –although its real universal meaning is lost when access to such rights is hindered by different obstacles or when quality is deficient – while focalization, closely linked to World Bank policies, does not grant rights but rather classifies “the eligible poor”, putting emphasis on households and individuals rather than in transforming the macroeconomic context.

Analyzing focalized policies from a gender perspective, they see women as passive beneficiaries, reinforcing the traditional roles of care and assistance within the family and the inactivity of women. At present there are numerous programs that supposedly include the so called “gender component” simply because they target women, oftentimes as a way to reach their children. Women have become instruments of programs, they are tired and oversaturated by the combined responsibilities of paid work, domestic work, caring for their dependants, and the services they must provide in return for state subsidies.

Universal and focalized policies are not necessarily opposing forces, they can be complementary. It is not bad to have a focalized social policy tool framed within the respect of collective rights. The challenge is to incorporate rights and gender perspectives into social policies (despite the influence of the World Bank in setting the agenda), taking into account the cultural diversity and the need to create inclusive policies for rural, indigenous and migrant women.

Session 3. Women in politics and public life

In the last decade there have been significant but insufficient efforts to overcome the underrepresentation of women in the political system. One example is the quota laws for women in political positions. However, serious difficulties exist in their implementation and enforcement, as well as in the quality of representation. In some cases, results have not been as expected. Many women in leadership positions are no more than an extension of male power structures or strategies to attract female voters. Other women are extremely influenced by the Catholic Church and are afraid of becoming involved in gender issues. Presently, throughout Latin America there are many women whose political careers are widely recognized; however, this does not necessarily reflect their capacity nor their will to push forward gender policies and foster women’s interests.

At the district level there has been more progress in the participation of women as well as more permeability and room for the expression of social diversity. However,
the inclusion of women in public positions at the district level does not imply significant changes in domestic life and has limited visibility. Furthermore, in many cases women do not become “professionals” in politics and, as opposed to men, they come in and out or have problems remaining in the field, mostly due to their responsibilities in the private sphere.

Women’s participation in political life must be encouraged, and efforts must be geared towards consolidating democracy, changing the culture of politics and making it more inclusive and respectful of diversity and women’s rights.

The demands for equality in gender and other subjects (cultural, ethnic, etc.) have been channelled through social movements and NGOs, transforming the social space in the arena of the struggle for equality. Participants proposed a series of settings, besides the political spaces on which the report focuses, from where it is possible to influence politics and advocate for greater gender equality. One of these is known as the “judicialization of politics” that implies a growing activism of the agents of the justice system to guarantee the rights established by law. This space is non-representative, non-partisan, and access to it is based on merit. It has a growing influence on the functioning of public institutions and it is gradually opening to greater female participation.

Other spaces include social movements, such as the women’s movement that has had an impact in some governments and fundamentally at the international level, although it is not the only movement with significant presence of women. Moreover, the NGOs that currently abound in the public sphere have become a preferential setting from where many women choose to practice politics outside of the more traditional political spaces. In the Latin American experience, NGOs constitute an important arena of struggle for gender equality open to new social actors. Finally, the mass media, particularly the written press, allow for a growing presence of women as opinion leaders.

Also, alliances known as “empowerment triangles” between women’s movements, women from political parties and the State are quite effective. This political action strategy has achieved some positive results such as the equality of opportunity law in Chile and laws against domestic violence in other countries. Alliances must also be made with officers from international organizations, many of whom are women with vast experience in the women’s movement, who are committed to pushing forward the gender agenda by supporting women’s networks and organizations at the national and regional level.

Although participants considered these settings as effective spaces from where gender equality can be promoted, they also marked as essential the action within the traditional spaces of power, decision making and resource allocation. In this regard, some participants expressed concern for what they felt was a “lack of leadership” in the feminist movement, caused by the tiredness of the older generation and the lack of motivation of the younger ones that are content with the goals achieved so far, and prefer not to become involved in politics.
Session 4. Gender, armed conflict and the search for peace

The report focuses on situations of war and armed conflict, and the peace seeking processes post-conflict. In Latin America there have been situations of war (Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Colombia) as well as situations of state terrorism and dictatorship. The discussion during the seminar focused mostly on the human rights violations that occurred under dictatorships. Participants pointed out that the first reports of the investigating commissions (CONADEP in Argentina and the Rettig Report in Chile) lacked a gender perspective. This becomes evident mostly in the absence of detailed records of sexual violence against women, one of the most degrading human rights violations.

In the case of Chile, in 2003, a new report on arrests and torture was elaborated. This report addresses gender violence and includes the testimonies of women who were raped. Guatemala and Peru also have reports that address sexual violence. Such approach has been strongly promoted by the female members of the investigating commissions.

The experience of the Commission on Truth and Reconciliation in Peru, where efforts have been made to include the gender perspective and testimonies of sexual violence against women, poses a series of dilemmas such as how to address the issues of silence and shame, a topic that brings up ethical issues and requires a careful but not necessarily individualized reparation policy.

In the case of Argentina, it is important to note the existing tension between human rights movements (with a strong presence and protagonism of women such as the Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo) and the women’s movement. In both movements a mutual resistance to work together is perceived. Issues such as the rape of women and the theft of babies imply a specific view on women but not necessarily a gender approach.

Session 5. Lessons learned from the report: towards a future agenda

First of all, participants showed concern for the fact that the report did not address the issue of health, particularly sexual and reproductive health, one of the areas where gender inequalities are most clearly expressed and where such inequalities can exacerbate biological vulnerabilities. In addition, this field constitutes a global ideological battlefield where certain powerful political actors have at the core of their agendas the goal of preventing any progress in women’s empowerment and the recognition of women’s rights. For this reason, and for all the effort that the women’s movement has made to achieve what has been attained so far, sexual

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3 For example, women’s low social esteem and structural disadvantages enhance their greater biological susceptibility to HIV (Weiss and Rao Gupta, 1998).
and reproductive health and rights cannot be neglected, and therefore cannot be left out of the agenda for gender equality and women’s wellbeing.

Another topic posed at the seminar was how to defend the conquests of the recent years against the sustained advance of conservative and fundamentalist postures that jeopardize the rights and recognitions attained. Today the feminist movement is weaker than ten years ago, but a larger collective has taken up the gender field. Within this context, participants asked themselves how to articulate efforts and search for common grounds with other movements such as the ecological movement. They also asked what results can be expected from such alliances, taking into consideration that in many movements the body is the support of the ideas but not a political field in itself as viewed by feminism.

We could state that, presently, the gender perspective has been considerably mainstreamed within institutions, although more as an “empty speech” or as a politically correct gesture, with a limited scope, oftentimes due to the inability or lack of will of the technical bodies to incorporate it to their analysis and translate it into policies.

Evidently, more progress has been made in the recognition of rights than in concrete actions taken to guarantee them. Despite the international conventions and treaties that have been ratified, states have been incapable of guaranteeing the respect of those rights. The goals set in Beijing have had limited progress. Today thousands of women are still living in situations of oppression, discrimination and violation of their rights. What needs to be done so that the conquered rights are a daily reality for all and not merely an expression of desire?

In order to figure out the “how” we must think of collective and plural alternatives, and move on from the accumulated description and analysis to concrete feasible strategies based on the available theoretical and empirical knowledge.

It is also necessary to better understand the existing gaps between laws and policies and what is actually done in practice, by analysing policy and program implementation processes, and the factors which led to failures - and few successes- in the attempt to reduce gender inequalities. In the specific case of health, it is known that between 88% and 98% of maternal deaths are preventable with moderate levels of health care. Then, why have maternal deaths not been reduced to levels that would be possible given the available evidence and the low investment of resources necessary? The search for answers should be directed towards a better understanding of the functioning of institutional microspheres such as the family, the educational system, the judicial system, hospitals, social organizations and all settings where more global dispositions are “played out”.

Furthermore, the title of the report “Gender equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World” poses an important conceptual question: what does gender equality mean? To what extent can rights solve the inequality problems of those whom society signals as different? When should biological differences be
recognized in motherhood? Equality cannot refer to equality of results because it does not necessarily reflect justice. Then, the concept of equality must be understood by recognizing the differences, and many times policies of equality should be policies of difference.

Global experiences show that even when policies of equality do exist, men and women conduct their family relationships –maternal and paternal- in different ways. The future agenda is the time to think what maternity is and to what extent the struggle for gender equality and justice must consider -or not- a reformulation of this concept.

References


Naciones Unidas (NU, 2005) Objetivos del Milenio. Una mirada desde América Latina y el Caribe, LG.2331, Santiago de Chile.


This report was prepared by Nina Zamberlin.
Annex: Seminar Program

Seminar
Gender equality:
Striving for justice in an unequal world.
The UNRISD report and the future agenda for Latin America

May 10-11, 2006
IDES
Aráoz 2838
Buenos Aires

May 10

9:30. Opening
• Shahrashoub Razavi (UNRISD)
• Maria del Carmen Feijoo (UNFPA)
• Elizabeth Jelin (IDES)

10:00 – 12:00. Session 1. Macroeconomics, wellbeing and gender equality
Moderator: • Valeria Esquivel – UNGS, Argentina
Panelists • Lourdes Benería - Cornell University, USA
• Luis Beccaria – UNGS, Argentina
• Alma Espino – CIEDUR, Uruguay

14:30 – 16:30. Session 2. Women, work and social policy
Moderator: • Irma Arriagada – CEPAL, Chile
Panelists: • Mercedes de la Rocha – CIESAS, Mexico
• Rosalía Cortés – FLACSO, Argentina
17:00 – 19:00. Session 3. Women in politics and public life

Moderator: • Gloria Ardaya – Universidad Mayor de San Andrés, Bolivia
Panelists: • Cecilia Blondet - Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, Perú
• María Herminia Tavares de Almeida – Univ. de San Pablo, Brasil
• Teresa Valdés – FLACSO, Chile

May 11

9:00 – 11:00. Session 4. Gender, armed conflict and the search for peace

Moderator: • Flor Rojas Rodríguez – ACNUR, Cono Sur
Panelists: • Roberto Garretón – Santiago, Chile
• Kimberly Theidon – Harvard University, Estados Unidos
• Andrea Pochak – CELS, Argentina

11:15 – 13:00. Session 5. Lessons learned from the report: towards a future agenda

Moderator: • Clyde Soto – CDE, Paraguay
Panelists: • Lilian Celiberti – Cotidiano Mujer, Uruguay
• Silvina Ramos – CEDES – Argentina
• Elizabeth Jelin – IDES, Argentina