

**Sugar and Spice and All Things
Nice:
A Feminine Approach to
Community Development**

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Introduction

The role of women in the field of community development is becoming more and more prevalent across the world stage as changing political climates enable women to find a voice in the world forum and a place to become activists. The movement to increase women's involvement in community development as a means to their empowerment is an area that deserves attention and support.

Styles of policy development and implementation are fluid and changing based on trial and error, but some practices are harder to turn away from than others. Community development organizations are constantly trying to identify potential advancements and trends that can be utilized to increase the impact and sustainability of their efforts. However, no community development initiatives have been successful in fully realizing the goal of gender equality. On the contrary, women are often the hardest hit by inadequate policies. One aspect of community development that has not been fully explored, but could

perhaps rectify this problem, is the gender differences that are used in problem solving.

This paper will focus on the gains that can be made in the field of community development by adjusting policy formulation and project implementation in order to maximize a feminine approach. Additionally, it will serve to explore the potential of typically feminine traits as they serve to impact leadership roles in community development initiatives.

Background

A feminist critique of social progress states that the status of women in a society directly reflects its advancement. Similarly, the progress of women is considered to be a fundamental stimulus in propelling a society forward. Charles Fourier asserts that, "Other events influence these political changes, but there is no cause which produces social progress or decline as rapidly as a change in the condition of women....The extension of the privileges of women is the fundamental cause of all social progress." (Fourier, 195) Consequently, in order to assert the role of women as leaders in community development initiatives and to maximize the effects of policies on women as the recipients of services, it is necessary to promote the feminine aspect.

However, the concept of categorizing elements of human nature as masculine or feminine is an ambiguous task, at best. Therefore, two questions need to be addressed for the purposes of this paper. First, what characteristics

of leadership styles can be combined to constitute a feminine approach? Secondly, what benefits and results can be seen in the field of community development as a result of a feminine approach?

Problems

Before the potentials of a feminine approach to community development are explored, it is necessary to recognize the inevitable problems with such an endeavor. There are certainly fundamental stumbling blocks that are encountered when dealing with the controversial nature of gender roles, three of which need to be addressed as a precursor to the following discussion.

The first problem deals simply with the aversion to the term “feminism” that is prevalent in most societies. The negative connotations that surround the term are very often misleading, but powerful, none the less. Furthermore, even within the feminist movement itself there are multiple perspectives on the proper objectives of the discourse and differing opinions regarding the appropriate line of action.

For the purposes of this paper it is possible to disregard the marginal factions of the feminist movement and focus on a basic tenant of gender studies that is widely accepted from all angles. “Gender operates at the level of ideology by valorizing certain social institutions, actors, practices, and processes that are associated with men and masculinity at the expense of others that are associated with women and femininity. Feminist theorizing is centrally concerned with

breaking down or deconstructing this hierarchical dualism of masculinity/femininity, which constitutes an ordering system that determines what is deemed to be of value and what is not.” (Marchand, 12) It is because of this basic premise concerning the role of gender in the global society that it is necessary to address the benefits of a feminine approach to community development.

Another major problem of successful policy implementation in the field of community development is arrogance and the idea that a single solution is applicable to all people. Whereas gender inequality continues to be an issue in all societies, a cultural reconfiguration of policies is always necessary. “In most cultures,” states Christine Di Stefano, “gender is patterned in dualistic, dichotomous, and hierarchical modes which promote male privilege and female subordination. Nevertheless, the actual contents of gendered representations carry enormous cross-cultural variability.” (Shanely, 147)

Therefore, a sweeping implementation of policy for all women involved in community development would be disastrous. This same concept presents a challenge when looking for a solution to women’s inequality and their potential to contribute more fully to community development. This has become obvious as the well-intentioned efforts of many feminists have come under fire.

It has increasingly become the criticism of women in non-Western nations that a sense of arrogance exists under the guise of women’s empowerment. A great deal of policy reformulation was needed after non-Western women pointed out that the values, beliefs and ideal practices that were being disseminated in a

blanket approach to women's rights, were in fact representative of only white, middle class women from Western countries. Catherine Eschle explained that past movements have, "frequently replicated imperialist and racist attitudes toward black and third world women inside Europe and America and beyond, undermining an expressed belief in the moral unity of women by positioning them as 'little sisters to be saved.;" (Eschle, 200)

When attempting to define a feminine approach to community development, policy makers and service providers must pay close attention to the many different social, economic, and political circumstances that women are living with. But these differences actually serve to exemplify the importance of a feminine approach, specifically regarding democratic inclusion and grassroots activism.

Lastly, a great deal of caution is necessary when approaching the idea of defining characteristically feminine qualities, and consequently, a feminine approach to community development. There are many potential problems that could arise from trying to formulate this classification, and the problems are very similar to the ones that have been raised regarding the many feminist issues that encounter accusations of arrogance. Just as a single solution to community development cannot be universally applied, it is wholly inappropriate to premise this paper with the idea that a single definition can be applied to what is "feminine". Just in one community alone the diversity among women is astounding. Even the seemingly most homogeneous communities house a

population of women that differentiate in class, race, and religion, among other factors.

When you apply this idea of difference at a global level a clash of ideology among women seems inevitable. However, there are some universal characteristics of a feminine approach to community development that, when taken within an individual cultural context, can be effective and beneficial to all women.

Needs-Based vs. Asset Based Development

It is my argument in this paper that approaching the gender issues of community development is best done by utilizing a feminine approach, as opposed to a masculine approach, the two of which can be differentiated by examining women's organizations and leadership styles and contrasting them with male-led organizations.

Concisely put, redefining community development through a feminine approach constitutes a more holistic approach. Its prominent characteristics include democratic discourse, community participation, a cooperative and egalitarian leadership style, and an emphasis on networking and communication. These traits can be utilized differently and with different results than a masculine approach that would include a hierarchical structure and top-down decision making. Similarly, a masculine approach includes "experts" who look to address the problems of a community, while grassroots organization and input is

generally lacking. Certainly there are aspects of both that can be effective, however the trend in community development is definitely leaning towards characteristics of the feminine.

Perhaps the contrast between a masculine and feminine approach to community development can best be exemplified by contrasting needs-based community development and assets-based community development. The field of community development has traditionally utilized a needs-based approach which examines the problems and weaknesses of a community and then engages a hierarchical, top-down implementation of policy.

In contrast, assets-based community development is accomplished through a process of learning what resources are already available within a community. John Kretzmann and John McKnight defined assets as the “gifts, skills and capacities” of “individuals, associations and institutions”. The flexibility that is inherent in an assets-based approach provides for the contextual adjustments that are needed to promote effective and sustainable change within individual communities. The process exemplifies the need in this field for democracy and a holistic approach to improving the quality of life, both of which are characteristically feminine qualities.

Women and a Holistic Approach to Community Development

The articulation of a holistic approach to community development is a strong theme in the feminine approach. The factors that are involved in a holistic approach often appear as the projection of women's empowerment. This focuses on the well-being of the community before it confronts the technical and physical skills that are emphasized through a needs-based approach. With a feminine approach to community development, the involvement of women is not seen as a purely political act. Rather, development becomes an extension of their role as women, wives, and mothers.

"In the past two decades, the shift in the priorities of community organizations to community development, defined as the construction of affordable housing and business development, has been resisted by organizations with strong women's leadership across the country. Women-led community development organizations (CDOs) have resisted a narrow program of physical development by pursuing more comprehensive neighborhood policies. These CDOs included in their definition of community development issues that directly responded to the needs of women, children, and families, even in the face of reduced funding for those concerns." (Gittell, 125)

Women's participation within the policy formulation (addressed through democratic discourse) is most evidently lacking in the existence of community development initiatives that do not accurately reflect the needs of the people. Because women are often left out of the decision making process as well as the implementation, their needs are left unaddressed. The ability for women to organize on behalf of their own local issues can be invaluable. It is interesting to

see that when women are given the opportunity to organize, often their goals represent a strategy of self empowerment rather than defining development as a physical task.

Democracy, Participation, and Gender Roles

It is possible to acknowledge the differences that exist among women, such as race, class, ethnicity, and religion, while at the same time recognizing that there are some commonalities that women share in regards to their approach to community development. These similarities can be observed in the leadership and participation styles of women in community based organizations. In many cases, women have taken an approach to community development that directly combats the problems associated with needs-based development. Instead of a hierarchical structure, the development techniques of women tend to emphasize community participation and local democracy. When interviewed, many of these women stated that this particular approach to community development and its egalitarian emphasis was unintentional. Rather, the focus of these women was to simply take action on behalf of their families and their communities, an act that they did not identify as being political. By using their traditional and accepted gender roles as wives and mothers they were engaging in a very progressive movement of effective change.

Organizing for Women's Empowerment in Chile

An inspiring story and an excellent example of this human centered community development has occurred over the last few decades in Latin America among the women of Chile. The actions of people living under authoritarian rule give weight to the theory that a dictatorship destroys a citizen's ability to think. To counter that, a person under the oppressive rule of a dictator must find ways to strengthen their will and test their limits. This is even more crucial if you are a woman living under a dictatorship.

Women in Chile did not enjoy many rights or freedoms under the democratically elected Salvador Allende, but the few rights they were allowed to exercise were restricted even further after a military coup overthrew Allende in 1973. The military then established a strict hegemony and started a reign of terror that lasted until 1990. Women were hit especially hard by the dictator oppression. Specific women's issues that had struggled to retain government support were now virtually eliminated. This included women's labor benefits and many social services. A great reduction was seen in the amount of money spent on health and education services for women, not to mention that the overall availability of job opportunities, for men and women, was devastatingly wiped out. (USAID, 26)

But, while many scholars argue that only open democratic societies lead to organization and participation, the Chilean women emphatically disproved this by using the oppression as motivation to develop their political skills. The military, under General Pinochett, attempted to reshape popular participation of

women by myopically focusing on their role in society as wives and mothers. The Pinochet regime identified the primary purpose of women as fostering the young children who would grow up to be patriotic supporters of the military. In accordance with the definition of a feminine approach to development, the reaction of the Chilean women was to organize into *organizaciones economicas populares* (popular economic organizations). Under the auspices of these organizations the women were able to raise their own standard of living as well as contributing to the overall quality of life in their communities. Their work included operating cooperative soup kitchens, tending collective gardens, producing artisanry, organizing shopping collectives and developing other assets-based strategies that led to the survival of the citizens under conditions of extreme poverty. (USAID, 44)

Furthermore, the actions of these women served a much broader purpose than simply improving the economic situation of Chile. The most important result of strengthening civil society was raising the consciousness of women to the idea that they had the power to promote substantial change. “By engaging in the operation of an all-women soup kitchen, they are criticizing traditional gender relations from the bottom to the top; they are raising doubts; they are promoting questions; they are seeing themselves differently.” (USAID, 44)

This idea of women’s empowerment is, again, a central theme in a feminist approach to development, as is democratic discourse. The newly spawned interest in local politics and change led to the establishment of women’s study circles in Chile. The study circles provided women with a forum through

which they could debate the more controversial gender issues that they identified as causing women the most harm. Sexuality, divorce, and abortion were among the top issues that the women of Chile felt needed to be addressed, but because of the historical role of women in Chilean politics as second class participants, these issues had previously been repressed and ignored.

Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML)

A further example of the success of participation and democracy in community development that should be emulated is the women's organization, Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML). This organization functions primarily to empower women all over the world who are governed by Muslim rule, whether or not they, themselves, are Muslim. As you can imagine, this group seeks to represent an extremely diverse community of women. Just as it is impossible to universalize the situation of American women, it is essential to recognize the vast differences in Muslim women. The situation of Muslim women varies greatly based on the culture of the specific country, the class that the women belong to, as well as the sect of the religion, the school of thought, and even the continent upon which the women live.

But the purpose of Women Living Under Muslim Laws is not to generalize the need of all Muslim women. Instead, the purpose is to facilitate access to information regarding the global status of women as well as providing the international community with information about their particular situations. As the

website for WLUML states, the existence of the organization “depends on our links and not on the specific activities undertaken or positions held by any group or individual involved in this process.” (www.wluml.org) Clearly, the importance of dialogue, grassroots networking, and the principles of democratic inclusion have been embraced by this organization and they will continue to grow in an effective movement for change because of this. The essential reason for their success is that the ideals Women Living Under Muslim Laws represent will continue to be relevant to the changing international situation of women based on the continuing dialogue and the renegotiation of priorities.

The Importance of Dialogue

Charlotte Bunch suggests that, “The path to effective global feminist theory and action is not through denial of any issue or analysis but through listening, questioning, struggling, and seeking to make connections among them.” (Bunch 18) This again stresses characteristics of the feminine approach to community development: communication, networking and engaging in democratic dialogue.

The importance of dialogue cannot be underestimated in the field of community development. Women in different communities struggle against the same issues, but these problems manifest themselves differently in different global contexts such as culture, geography or economic position. Mobilization

must occur in different contexts according to what is appropriate for that situation and then, through dialogue, it is possible to develop an understanding between women of their differences as well as their commonalities upon which they are able to unify and build. This approach is also based on the idea that the knowledge of other women's situations can be extremely beneficial to coping with one's own struggles. This strategy for community development allows different women to strive for their own vision of what is best and possible, dependent on the variants that they encounter within their own unique life experience. A feminine approach to community development involves, "increasing community participation and trust, as well as by creating community networks and civic action." Women can contribute to sustainable development based on a universal understanding and mutual respect.

Conclusion

The ideals of a feminine approach to community development are already exemplified in many individuals and organizations. Great strides can be made through community development initiatives that expand the reach of this approach and sees a community as an extension of the family and infuses it with democracy. It is necessary to expand and redefine our definitions of successful development and see that many women leaders have pointed out that issues such as hunger, a lack of child care, drug abuse, domestic abuse, or untreated

mental illness need to be addressed before community residents are able to benefit from housing, economic, or other development programs.

A feminist approach to community development, with its emphasis on being holistic and democratic, will continue to raise the quality of life for women around the world. Conversely, a development approach that is solely based on infrastructure or technical skills will fail to address the needs of half of the world's population. The field of community development should focus on attempting to reconstruct a new form of global democracy in which different movements can occur, but one with constant discourse, renegotiation of goals and a dedication to women's empowerment.

As Charlotte Bunch stated, "The realization of global visions can only be achieved through the everyday lives and actions of women locally. It depends on women deciding to shape their own destiny, claiming their right to the world, and exercising their responsibility to make it in some way, large or small, a better place for all." (Bunch 18)

As more organizations do this with a commitment to community development and a sense of connection to others, we can say that the field of community development is meeting the challenge of providing sustainable and effective change.

