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Libraries for women and the requirements of economic and social development: a gender focus

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1 INTRODUCTION

Some time ago a piece of information published by Mexican newspapers told that in the upcoming elections, in one region of Pakistan, women could not vote because of the specific request made by the chief of the tribe. Knowing the existence of events like this in the life of women in different countries of the world and in varied circumstances makes it necessary for us to examine women's situation in our current society in terms of, among other things, the exercise of women's rights in all the areas of human activity. Out of necessity, this leads into examination of the feminist theory in which these rights have their basis.

I cannot undersnad that mere mentioning of the fewminist theory can cause such concern in vertan sectors which stick with their concept of feminism as an aggressive movement of women who have not understood their real place in the world and life. Ragrdless, I'm also sure that all the time men and women understand the real meaning of modern feminism as equality in difference, it is, from the point of view of accepting the differences of biological and emotional order between men and women and the recognition of equality in those fundamental capacities in terms of intellect in their creative resources, analysis, critical judgment, etc.

It's sure that the devotion and struggle of millions of women and men for the full exercise of women's rights has been long and still continues. Also, it's sure that issues studied in this field are not isolated phenomens but interrelated with themes such as democracy, exercise of power,

sex discrimination at work and, naturally, access to information. The last issue reveals the possibility that individuals in general and women in particular could understand the problems and seek solutions starting from knowledge that not only results from experience but evolves, in an organic and systematic manner, from processes generated from information.

2. THE FEMINIST THEORY

While the purpose of this paper is to discuss libraries from the gender perspective, It seems important to me to keep in mind the feminist theory because it permits, perhaps, in the clearest manner to explain the meaning of "being a woman." In this way it's possible to understand gender marginalization that women have experienced during centuries, marginalization that to this day continues influential in different sectors of society in different ways. In order to investigate the feminist theory, it is necessary to revisit some of the topics that are related with it. One of these topics is the myths that are applied to women and that to a great extent have been used as instruments to subordinate and dominate women. As such it's possible to mention the myth of Eve in which woman is not born from herself but is created from the rib of man, Adam. This myth supposes the lack of woman's autonomy and a dependency from man who has given her nothing less but life.

Another myth tell of feminine weakness that doesn't allow for her the same hard work as for man. These biological differences undoubtedly exist when comparing woman with man, and in most cases this is true in regard to physical capacity required by certain kind of work. However, it's a mistake that this physical weakness applied to women in some cases is expanded to emotional or intellectual weakness with pretension to present women vulnerable in life's difficulties and incapable to solve a variety of problems.

The last, one more of the great myths about women is the motherly instinct. This belief has been established in society to such extent that when a woman makes it clear that she doesn't want to get married and have children, she is considered abnormal. In fact, the theory of motherly instinct has its roots in the roles that society assigns from early on to boys and girls. Girls must play with dolls, a servant, a nurse, while boys play stronger games in which they use not only physical force but also capacities of judgement, decision, etc. These playful activities are transformed into learned behaviors that form individual status. Lamas remarks that already "in 1942 Linton indicated that all persons learned their sexual status and appropriate behaviors. In this manner, he understood masculinity and femininity as instituted status that become psychological identities of each person. These socially imposed and socially learned behaviors have a remote origin that defined, as such, the remote origin of women's oppression." (1)

In this sense, Hierro explains that "The cause of feminine oppression happened about 3000 years ago when there appeared the control of a group of men over the rest of men and over all women. This manner corresponds with a new form of exercising power in a new social order, the patriarchy, that was formed from the power of the fathers, the patron and the eternal father, and that replaced organizations where power was shared between men and women."(2) Based on this argument, Hierro states that "The modern world almost universally values more men than women: habits and social and political institutions render women subordinate to men. This

doesn't mean that women cease to have importance and power in a world where they give birth to and take care of children and where they work, but they are very few who are doing it, everywhere in the world, only a small group within one social class. However, on the basis of patriarchal power that dominates political and economic life, men at every instance come to play a central role and in this manner exclude women..."(3)

In reality, as Hierro herself admits, not men or sex determine the social structure but the concept of power that can be hierarchical, i.e., a patriarchal type, or participative, where men and women join together.

As we can see, the feminist theory has revealed reasonable aspects of women's condition. It's clear that in this topic of feminine condition exist different modes according to different groups of population, us ages and customs and levels of educational and social development. In general, differences can be of some degree, but they all have the same origin and the same purpose: to make women inferior in a patriarchal society.

A study conducted by antropologist Marcela Lagarde showed that "A woman's condition is determined by the joint relationship of production, reproduction and all other vital relationships in which women are immersed regardless of their will and conscience and by the ways they use to participate..., by the concepts of the world that define and interpret them." (4) The same outor clarifies the difference conceptual between "condition" and "situation" of the woman: the latter means the concrete existence of individual women based on their real life conditions. In conclusion: "Women as a gender share the same generic condition but they differ in terms of their life situations and in degrees and levels of oppression." (5)

If we have a look at Latin America, we can see that, in the last years, women have acquired a mejor presence in different areas of national activity in different countries, to the point in some cases to occupy some of the more important political offices, including the presidency of some countries.

It is possible to ask to what extent this participation entails also women's presence in processes of planning actions and of decision making, or whther this all is one more way to make an impression of feminine integration in areas of power. In any case, the participation of some women does not mean, in no way, the participation and wide acceptance of gender. In this asubject it is not possible to measure with the same exactitude different social groups. One means is to analyzize the urban middle class, possibly intellectual, with possibilities of communication and access to information; then it seems simple to affirm that currently women's participation in society has increased considerably and that, likely, it will remain certain.

Regardless, the view changes when the analysis is linked with marginalized classes that are becoming greater and greater: workers with extremely small pay, impoverished farmers who have lost their land, women (and men) out of work and anxious at least to survive from day to day; human beings in many cases more and more drowned in hopelessness and in situations where women must fight every day for survival. But, in addition to all this or perhaps better, in the origin are found besides serious social injustices, impressive defects in the field of education,

that all affect women and men and determine, among other serious consequences, an inadequate relation between genders.

3. WOMEN'S EDUCATION

Women's education has passed through various stages with correspond to their situation in different societies and in certain periods. In patriarchal societies women's and men's formal education started in the family; later the organs of state or private agencies shared this responsibility. The first educational activity of a family permits an individual's socialization in regard to their own need. On the other hand, this form determines how they will relate with the world later and, as we know now, with themselves; it means, relationships are made in the way they have learned in the family.

In the educational process within the family are handled ideological questions that in turn are related with the power structure supported by the society; thus, the reality is transmitted to individuals in the way the society wants itself to be known, not as it really is. In this manner, the family becomes a medium by which the state system sends its ideological message in order to influence the main component of the society.

It is important to make some specific points: In the first place, regarding the roles assigned to girls and boys. Girls who are considered images of sweetness, tenderness and other similar qualities, will receive education that prepares them for a role women must accept by social mandate: fateful wives and selfless mothers. They will be given knowledge of "certain feminine resources" they can use in order to achieve that which women do not have and that by law belongs to them. At the same time, the mother-educator transmits to her daughters her own frustrations and all the defense mechanisms she has built during her existence to survive in a man's world.

Boys, for their part, are prepared to exercise power whatsoever it may be: in the family, in the economic activity, in the society in general. But also, in a hidden way, they are prepared to make gender differences and, in this sense, ignore women's rights and the rights of the members of the family they will form by means of despotic use of power. Here the circle is closed and the cycle is repeated.

Both woman and man have received through family education a set of rules the system is interested in transmitting and both are prisoners of stereotypes foreseen by the system itself. Although the family education has produced submissive women who accept oppression "as a cross," also the man has been closed in limits which, in the last place, do not permit him to grow emotionally and spiritually.

The education model developed within the family has its continuation in school education that in general confirms and limits limits set between genders and the supremacy of one gender over other. The patriarchal line of education proposes repetition of models in women's life and behaviors learned and transmitted from generation to generation. This form of education is based on obedience to socially accepted rules.

Undoubtedly, there is required an educational opening destined to modify thought forms and behavior patterns, an education that has as its objective appreciation of women and their recognition in the society as active participant in social life and in the development of countries. For this to happen, education must be directed for women to obtain autonomy and equality. A proposal for women's new education requires men's participation in the new perspectives originated in this process. This means that both genders share rights and responsibilities. The opening of women's life, where they enjoy fully of their rights, would signify also men's liberation from their own atavisms.

Women's new education must start from the knowledge of their own necessities, from knowing who they want to be and how they want to develop themselves. This opportunity "is the moment to bring about a process of reassessing their identity that should have in it something more than only physical beauty and youth, to place importance on working, personal realization, effective political participation and social contribution."(6)

4 THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND LIBRARIES IN WOMEN'S EDUCATION

Based on the above analysis made on the condition and situation of women, it is possible to define some important themes that are integrated in the personality of many women and that influence in determining their attitude towards life and society. The treatment of women as inferiors from which they have suffered during ages has greatly affected their self-esteem and caused them to feel that their presence in the world is of secondary value. I believe in education as a life-long process for women and men and for the library to contribute directly in the educational process that is impossible without its help.

Women's educational program must take into account those same sensitive points that in most situations don't get a due attention. In this sense, ad hoc bibliography plays an important role, really basic, for women to be able to orient their thoughts by those themes that permit them to understand their value as human beings and the right they as such have to be respected, productive and happy.

Among the sensitive points mentioned above there is women's own body. To recognize that her body is of worth and should be respected by women themselves and by others is part of forming the feminine character. Also, this supposes a recognition that nobody has a greater right to make decisions on women's bodies than they themselves. And this supposes also taking loving care of her body and so using her right to health and a healthy life. In this sense, the library has capacity to deliver materials with information that show women the necessity of doing periodical exams in order to prevent such illnesses as breast cancer or cervical cancer of uterus and sexually transmitted diseases. In addition, it is possible in this case in the library extension programs medical professionals present their knowledge in talk programs and other activities.

Women's right to make decisions on their own body includes, naturally, the decision to have or not to have children and, in any case, to decide how many. For this purpose the library should display for users materials that inform of different methods to avoid undesired pregnancies.

Violence against women and family violence is another topic that should be included in the library's collection that serves women.

The final objective should be that women were capable of having self-esteem in this way understand the importance of their participation in their society's life and what their contribution means in their countries' development. Once the "being woman" has been restored, it is possible to share the effort with men at an equal and respectful level.

While the above agreement is seen as an example, the function of women's libraries takes on relevant importance and, perhaps, this obliges to revise the concept of this type of libraries for the purpose of extending services and activities. Most women's libraries at present owe their existence to feminist organizations that have been interested in documentation of the feminist movement. A good example of this are the numerous women's libraries that exist in Europe and that, in some cases, are forming national networks. Since 1909 when the first women's library was created in Barcelona, the model has been reproduced in many European countries and its multiplication happened at a par with the strengthening of the feminist movement.

In developing countries, in our case in Latin America, it is required to urge women's participation in programs that are destined to present new and more satisfying forms of life for the whole population. At this point, women's libraries assume an important role in relation with making women conscientious of themselves in terms of gender and also of their education for active social participation. In these countries, women's libraries exist rarely and, for this reason, one could think that public libraries would assume this responsibility by devoting part of their collection and their corresponding activities for this purpose as well as specifically prepared personnel to attend these needs. The above proposal has as its aim to cover information needs and education of women in a situation where resources are meager and solutions must be found according to existing possibilities.

Of course, one should not forget the creation of women's libraries in developing countries, and this objective can be achieved when conditions so permit. Until then, it seems to me that this new model of service for women presented above is able to cover the most urgent necessities and, above all, should permit that the processes of economic and social development will be seen favorable for women's participation while they are already prepared for involvement by the way of their gender conscience and development of their own capacities.

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