

CRITICAL THINKING: TOOLS FOR THE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN



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It seems that in general the only thing we agree on as a society is that democracy is collapsing, capitalism has failed and liberal values are not enough or have been lost. We drift in the midst of polarization between two currents of thought: one is that institutions must be torn apart and rebuilt by one group based solely on the moral principle that they represent the people: in other words, populism. The other is that we must go back to protectionism and nationalism, for those were times of prosperity and happiness. Both currents are pessimistic, extremist and deeply opposed to values necessary for democracy to thrive, those for which humanity has fought at great expense at least since the 18th Century. Among those values are integrity and equality. In the case of this work we take a look at gender equality, a concept that is still forming and being assessed as men and women continue searching for a definition of ourselves as human beings through our gender.

In developing countries where democracy still strives to stabilize itself one of the main questions is: why? If western society has proven over the course of at least two centuries, through bloody revolutions and devastating world conflict, that liberal values are the best way to guarantee the development of nations in which

human rights flourish and people have at least more opportunities to obtain the means to fuller and more prosperous lives, why has economic prosperity been so slow to follow? And why are women at a disadvantage when democracy is supposed to be a system that guarantees equal opportunities and no discrimination? After all, when we take a look at Latin America, from South of the Rio Grande to Ushuaia the majority of these countries have excellent constitutional law and have all given democracy a shot, but the entire continent still deals with violence and poverty, and a big gap between the liberties it grants to all citizens and the reality of women who struggle to become economically equal and of course independent. Latin America is still a migrant continent that its people flee in order to survive. Few of their citizens have enjoyed the freedom and rights their constitutions grant them. The answer is more obvious and simple than one would care to think: inequality and corruption. And who are one of the most vulnerable groups facing these phenomena? Women.

1. Concepts and Impact on Economic Empowerment

The first step towards analysing the links between corruption and gender is to take a look at how different societies define them. It seems that gender and corruption are, or at least should be, clear-cut concepts, that follow the same lines across cultures. In reality people look at gender and corruption in very different ways depending on their background and professional environment. In Latin America both gender and corruption have different definitions, with roles and behaviours that have turned into norms that shape the conduct of their citizens.

To address the problem, we need to understand that gender goes beyond sex. The latter refers the biological characteristics of men and women. On the other hand gender, as the World Bank states, “refers to the socially constructed differences between men and women that may influence social and economic activities as well as their access to resource and decision making.”¹

A definition of gender refers to a cultural concept that depends on continent, country and community. It has to do with a vision of the world, with identity, with family and with the level of exposure to technology and education. This impacts movements that have the goal of transforming the world and achieving policies that make societies more fair and democratic. Policies need to begin by recognizing that their scope must be plural, flexible and take into account the individual realities in different parts of the world in order to be successful.

Corruption may seem easier to define but is also vulnerable to interpretation within different cultural contexts. The International Monetary Fund defines it as “the abuse of public office for private gain—involves illicit payments or favours and how they are distributed.”² It goes on to make a distinction between grand corruption that occurs at the political level and petty corruption that occurs at the bureaucratic level. A 2017 article by Lipton, Werner and Gonçalves, about corruption and Latin America states that this behaviour when deeply installed in a society can, and in fact has, become the norm³. In Latin America, corruption is perceived as natural and inevitable. There pervades a general notion that everyone is engaging in bribes and abuse of power, horizontally as well as vertically. This frame of thought reaches large scale politics as well as areas of basic administration and services⁴.

When citizens regard corrupt behaviour as the norm it generates a lack of accountability in exercise of duties at all levels of administration in both the private and the public sector and in the interaction between both.

This has a direct impact on the empowerment of women, for they are extremely vulnerable when it comes to how corruption affects different demographics. In countries like Mexico, a popular saying is “*el que no tranza no avanza*” which means that he who does not engage in corrupt behaviour does not go forward. This colloquial saying reflects a conduct imbedded in the way business and politics are seen. Corruption is regarded as a necessary evil and people feel powerless when it comes to addressing the problem. Abuse creates a discrepancy between policy and reality, making it ever more difficult for the problems of communities to be addressed and solved.

In Latin America with few exceptions women are seen as the weaker gender. Women assume the role of caregivers to children and the elderly, and in many cases they support their entire household on incomes that are inferior to men’s and insufficient.⁵ With the load of being centre of the family it becomes a struggle to complete education. Recent studies in Mexico found that though literacy is almost at equal rates between men and women, there is a gap that becomes wider at higher levels of education. Mexico is being one of the few countries where there are fewer women with higher education and with an alarming figure of 31 women to 100 men in areas relating to science, technology and engineering.⁶

The view of women as a weaker gender and the load of responsibilities attributed to a socially constructed role within societies that assume corrupt behaviour as normal affects the access to services and opportunities. This has a negative impact on the goal of women’s economic empowerment. This kind of empowerment is what the Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean describes as autonomy that results from the opportunity of women to make decisions as to how and in which sector of the labour market they want to engage in, to have access to their own income and “an equitable distribution of time use”.⁷

1 Transparency International (2014), Policy Brief #1, Gender, Equality and Corruption, What are the linkages? Retrieved from www.transparency.org

2 Lipton D., Werner A. and Gonçalves C., (2017, September) Corruption in Latin America: Taking Stock, retrieved from www.blogs.imf.org

3 Ibid

4 Shaw, A. Performance accountability and combating corruption, The World Bank, 2007

5 Ella Guide: Area: Governance, Evidence and Lessons from Latin America, Gender Equality in Latin America, A regional commitment to reducing gender gaps, retrieved from www.fundar.org.mx

6 Frias, Sonia M. (2007). “Measuring Structural Gender Equality in Mexico: A State Level Analysis”. Social Indicators Research. Retrieved from: Gender Inequality in Mexico, powered by Wikimedia.

7 Gender Equality Observatory of the Caribbean, (2018, January) Note for Equality N°25: Who takes care of dependant population in the city? Urban politics and women’s economic autonomy.

2. Women and corruption

In terms of the social structure that constitutes the female role, women are the primary caregivers because they are seen as more connected to family due to their biological role as child bearers. The view of women being ideal caregivers based on nature has also helped support a belief that women are intrinsically less corrupt than men. This belief is not exclusive to Latin America, but is a theory that has been put into practice across the world.

In Latin America there are examples like gas stations in Mexico City exclusively operated by women.⁸ Gas stations are an easy target for petty corruption in the mishandling of gas meters and credit card fraud. When we talked to the owner of one of such business he stated that an all female staff practically eliminated these incidences. Public policy also incorporated this notion when an all female police force was created to tackle crime in Mexico City in 1999.⁹ The project ultimately failed, but the stereotype continued and is being proposed again by a candidate to the city government in the 2018 election.

Whatever the outcome of isolated projects and policies data is still inconclusive. In a 2003 study Goetz pointed out that the vast majority of studies behind the idea that women are less corrupt than men left out a key factor in the entire process of analysis: opportunity.¹⁰ The cases analysed came from societies in which women do not have the same opportunities as men to access positions of power. There simply is not enough evidence that given the chance women will not engage in corrupt behaviour. Recently at least two Latin American female presidents, Kristina Kirchner and Dilma Roussef, have been involved in cases of corruption. The argument then that gender is a guarantee for transparency seems weak at best.

8 Pemex Gas Station, (June 2018), Paseo de la Reforma, Mexico City, personal interview.

9 Sim B., Blanes N., Bockelie J., Khayra A., Nunes A.P., Ortiz J.R., Romain L., Singal S., Vainqueur J., (2017) Gender and Corruption: A toolkit to address the “add women and stir” myth. Retrieved from www.oecd.org

10 Ramos Ruiz, Y. (2016, Julio-Diciembre) La Corrupción y sus vínculos con el género, Revista Mexicana de Análisis Político y Administración Pública, Retrieved from www.remap.ugto.mx

Arguing that women are less corrupt than men solely on gender and disregarding other factors runs the risk of reaffirming the stereotypes that women have been fighting for decades, and that contributes to lack of opportunity and discrimination. To assume that women’s moral conduct is just based on their gender leads to a lack of fairness in the appointment processes and can end up serving a corrupt system instead of one based on performance and merit. These stereotypes damage and weaken institutions and make them more vulnerable to abuse of power. Rather than being a strength, it reinforces the idea that women are weaker than men because it holds true the assumption that women make decisions instinctively on gender instead of through their liberty of thought, skill, education and their values as individuals.

3. A matter of vulnerability

Women are not necessarily weaker than men. The statement can be a dangerous generalization. Nonetheless, they are more vulnerable than men due to the social constructions of their gender role.¹¹ This vulnerability has to be taken into account in the development of policy that aims at solving problems and fomenting economic development and institutional stability. In order for policy to be effective it needs to take into consideration the gender gap and assume as a short-term goal to provide relief for that vulnerability but aim at closing the gender gap in the long run.

Many policies take into consideration that women need some sort of legal and institutional protection in order to meet their necessities and be able to enjoy their rights as citizens, but are short minded and do not provide solutions sustainable in over time. One example is the women-only transport implemented in Mexico and Brazil. It seemed like a solution but rather than closing the gap and creating a conscience of equality, it generated violence against women, and did not make transport more efficient or safe and did not contribute to equality in general.

11 Transparency International (2014), Policy Brief #1, Gender, Equality and Corruption, What are the linkages? Retrieved from www.transparency.org

Transport is key to economic empowerment and independence. So the fact that women face harassment or need to restrict their movement to special carriers in limited routes for very large urban areas, impacts their ability to fulfil their economic rights: a perfect example of how females end up having less access to resources.

Another resource that is more difficult to obtain for women is credits and capital to initiate their own ventures. Recently there have been initiatives with great success from banks that give credits designed specifically for women who want to venture.¹² These institutions let women borrow capital and have a great return rate, which perhaps in the future can shed light on the debate of corruption and gender.

4. A matter of institutions

This leads to one of the key issues with corruption in Latin America, a matter of weak judiciary institutions that do not enforce the law and fail in the essence of their own being: guaranteeing equal rights for all citizens regardless of their gender. The severity of the problem evolves past a gender issue and can become a fracture in democratic systems. Corruption is seldom contained to a single matter of public life. Abuse of power, lack of accountability, the use of public funding for private gain and discrimination in access to resources based on gender that leads to fraud and economic or sexual extortion are issues that need to be solved by policy that addresses them as the base for democratic stability. In other words, this is not just a cultural issue but also one that affects countries in general. Once corruption is normalized as a gender issue it makes the whole system vulnerable to abuse.

Independent and strong institutions at all levels not only provide for transparent mechanisms of government, they permeate into the private sector at greater and smaller levels.¹³ Women who face incidents of abuse seldom report them for there are almost no channels to answer fairly and efficiently. As women venture in business they factor in corruption, abuse and extortion

as normal obstacles and necessary evils. Policy is often more oriented to securing the political advantage of a certain group than to guaranteeing equal rights.¹⁴ While there is growth in the development of female owned business this growth has been slow and limited, and they usually account their failure to a lack of capital.¹⁵

5. A look at Possible Solutions

The first step towards addressing the issue of gender inequality and corruption is understanding it. Discussions about gender inequality rarely lead to critical thinking about specific problems. Lawmakers need to call to national encounters with members of communities, the private and public sector to see where the real gaps are that need to be filled by specific policy, aimed at leveling the opportunities of men and women in time, as well as ensuring that there is no discrimination in pay.

It has become a norm to allocate gender quotas on institutions. The problem is that at any point there might be more women than men ideal for a certain position and vice-versa. Quotas can backfire and do not imply equality; they give an illusion of it and do not solve the problem of opportunity. Policy and resources both human and material, should be about education at all levels. Education programs should focus on normalizing empowerment of the female gender, broadening its role and giving women a choice for development of individual skills.

Solutions to such problems require broad action. One of the main problems in Latin America is the lack of independent institutions that guarantee basic individual rights. However, a problem is that a big part of the population is unaware of rights and the mechanisms the law provides to protect them. This creates a kind of vicious cycle that should be addressed from the base, like independent prosecutors, non-corrupt police enforcement and accountability for administrative corruption. If democratic institutions are not stable, corruption will develop

12 Sitio oficial Compartamos México, Retrieved from www.compartamos.com.mx

13 Lipton D., Werner A. and Gonçalves C., (2017, September) Corruption in Latin America: Taking Stock, retrieved from www.blogs.imf.org

14 Ella Guide: Area: Governance, Evidence and Lessons from Latin America, Gender Equality in Latin America, A regional commitment to reducing gender gaps, retrieved from www.fundar.org.mx

15 Endeavor Insight, (2018, March, 21) Entrepreneurship Ecosystems Insights, Five things you should know about female entrepreneurs in Latin America, retrieved from www.ecosysteminsights.org

and favour all kinds of abuse. Stability comes from citizens understanding and incorporating these principles into their culture. Education and institutions need to be in synchronicity.

Another factor to take into account is that opportunity for women cannot start at higher levels of education or later when she decides to venture into business. Empowerment needs to begin at an early age. For power to exist there needs to be choice: the ability to decide for oneself. In order for options to be realistic there needs to be a plausible way for women to obtain the means to live and sustain their families. Policy needs to address broad issues as well as practical and immediate ones, like transport, child care, availability of contraception, equal pay and protection by labour law. Policy has to guarantee that women develop their interests and skills without undermining the importance of them later finding work in those areas and at an equal pay.

Education is usually a policy that is frowned upon because many believe it is too expensive and takes too much time. But the development of critical thinking is necessary so that individuals can grasp concepts such as gender and corruption. Governments need to make sure that citizens can decide for themselves and that those choices are the result of an assessment that concludes the best option for the individual and the community. Policy by itself does nothing if citizens do not grasp their scope and importance.

Changes need to come from within, from policy that allows the citizen to engage and articulate the ideals placed in the law. This is especially true for those whom for so long have held a less favourable role in society.

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