

RESEARCH ON WOMEN IN LATIN AMERICA

Gloria Bonder

Comme l'indique Gloria Bonder dans cette évaluation du progrès de la recherche faite sur les femmes latino-américaines au cours de la Décennie pour les femmes de l'ONU, cette recherche est une tâche extrêmement difficile à accomplir. Les conditions répressives imposées par les dictatures militaires dans beaucoup de pays latino-américains, ainsi que la crise économique, ont eut des effets néfastes pour la recherche sur la situation des femmes. L'auteure évalue le travail accompli jusqu'à cette date et propose des priorités pour les projets de recherche à l'avenir.

Research on women in Latin America has been marked by a continuous development since the beginning of the 1970's. A survey of the most important examples of research on women developed by Latin American social scientists during the first five years of that decade reveals some common characteristics.¹ The studies originate in the individual initiatives of women who participate in centers of social research, both private and governmental. They concentrate on the development and composition of labour power, and are strongly influenced by the theoretical perspective of Latin American social scientists for the comprehension of the region's social and economical situation: the theory of the dependence of peripheral countries on central ones. Finally, they ignore and/or do not wish to be identified with feminist currents. Marysa Novarro describes the work of these researchers:

The main objective of most Latin American social scientists working on women is to analyze Latin America's social formation, to understand how the capitalist mode of production in its dependent form operates. They do not view women as a valid category of analysis but as a focus that can be used profitably insofar as it increases our knowledge of the social formation. For them, focusing on women means that they cannot be studied in isolation from socio-economic conditions . . . Women must be studied in each Latin American country, in

an urban or rural environment, in their class, and especially in their family.²

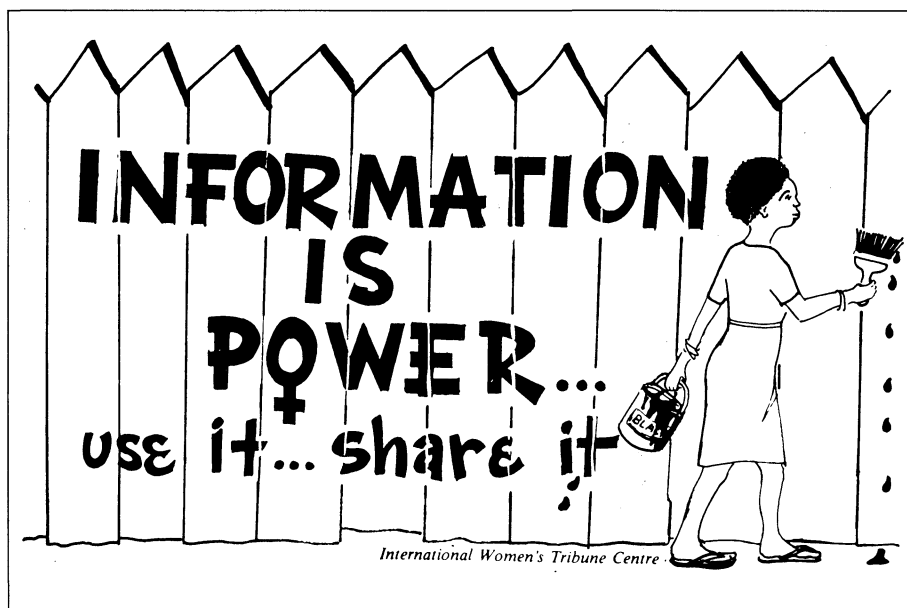
The majority of research projects on women during this period concentrated on research areas already well established in Latin American social sciences: labour, population and development. Social inequalities between the sexes are perceived as the product of the socio-political system. There exist few studies in other areas. Feminist analyses had not yet exercised any influence. From the mid-decade of the 1970's on, we can observe the appearance and development of another research tendency on women's issues in Latin America, already considerably influenced by feminist methodologies and ideas.

The first UN Conference on Women, held in 1975 in Mexico city, signalled the growth and expansion of the feminist movement in Latin America. The gradual diffusion of North American and European papers in the region contributed to slowly sensitizing women towards different research fields – in their theoretical assumptions, as well as in the selection of research issues, subjects and methodological approaches. The concepts of the sexual division of labour, public and private domains, social production and reproduction, the re-conceptualization of

housework, feminist theorizations on gender issues, the emphasis upon women's every-day experiences as revealing of their condition, and the notion of the patriarchy, form a group of notions that, in diverse levels of theoretical development, suggested new research directions.

The most significant consequences of the new feminist-influenced research current are:

- There is a new awareness of the sexist character of the prevailing theories in each discipline, and there is a consequent need to submit the theoretical assumptions that have distorted or omitted women to criticism and revision.
- There is a proposal for a research model based on consciousness-raising and the transformation of women's situation.
- The criterion of objectivity for the evaluation of traditional theoretical and methodological approaches is under scrutiny.
- New forms of methodological approaches are being developed (for example, participant and action-oriented research).
- The debate about gender and class relations has deepened.



- "Private" issues such as sexuality, motherhood, every-day life, etc., have begun to acquire public relevance.
- "Academical characteristics" of research on women have begun to be questioned and consequently dissolved.

It is mostly within the areas of action-oriented and participant research that the development of new methodologies can be observed, for data-gathering and data-analysis. These methodologies emphasize personal inter-action between researchers and researched women, as well as the active participation of the research subjects in different stages of the research process and the use of diverse techniques to carry out consciousness-raising, training and/or organization of the women participating in the project. The techniques which are commonly used include:

- Workshops or group discussions with the objective of exploring and analyzing women's common problems, with the researcher in the role of discussion-facilitator.
- Life histories, developed within a context of close and frequent interaction, which enable researchers to capture women's past and present experiences related to the areas they want to explore.
- Women's testimonials which reflect the particularities and complexities of women's experiences.
- Games, dramatizations and role-playing, which enable the expression of women's personal experiences and opinions about their experience.
- Audiovisual stimuli to help women produce less structured responses.

In these new methodologies we can observe the influence exercised by the tradition of popular education techniques in Latin America, and the qualitative methodologies used in anthropological studies, as well as the increasing influence of psychological and psychoanalytical techniques and perspectives to approach women's subjectivity.

Nevertheless, we must point out several critical aspects of this kind of research. First, many of these projects have counted on short periods of time for their fulfilment, and most of the cases have lacked a follow-up, and consequently, an evaluation. Secondly, most of these projects have been carried out by novice re-

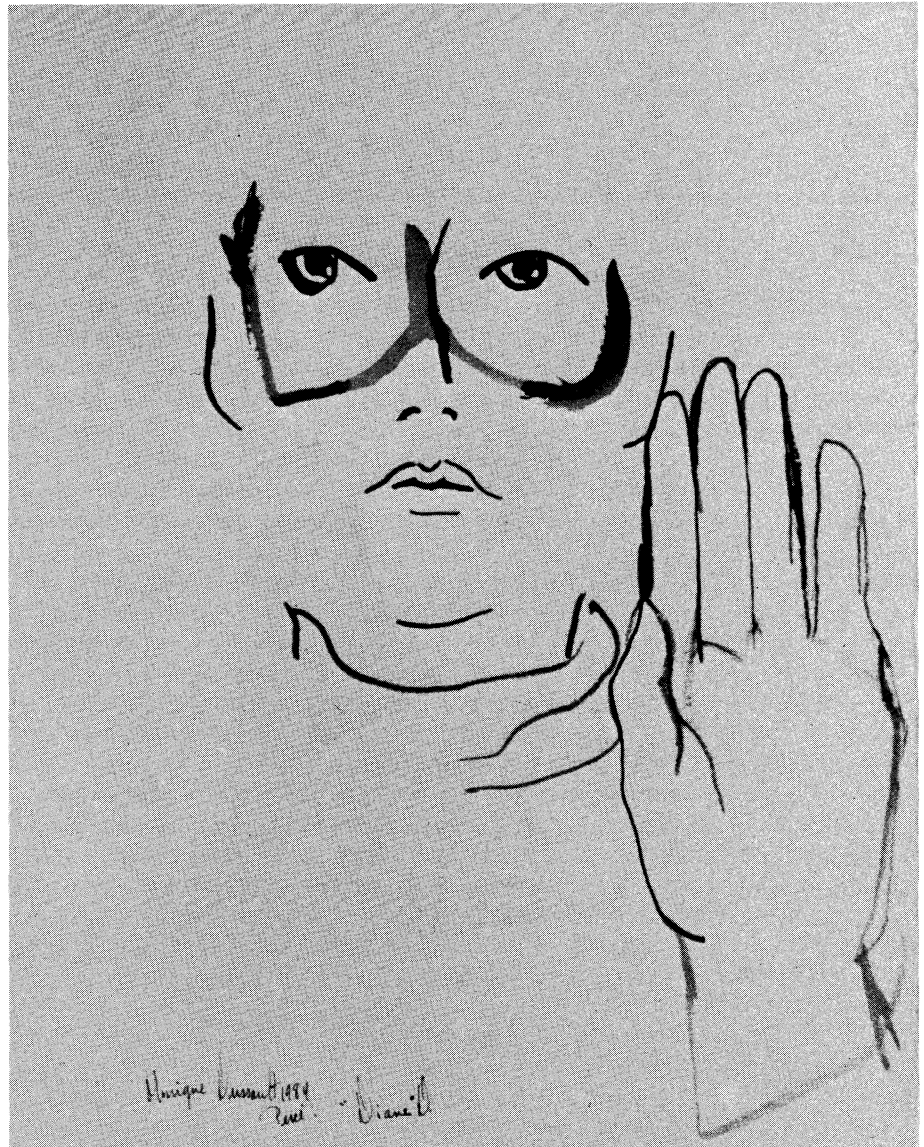


Illustration: Monique Dussault (huile sur papier)

Photo Credit: Monique de Longeville

searchers, using these methodologies with little or no training and experience in other methodologies. Many young researchers of Latin America who have gone through this "initiation rite" of using qualitative research on women may have been negatively affected by the difficulties they have had to face during this process. Our exchange with women's studies centers carrying out this kind of research in Latin America has confirmed this as a common concern. We believe that the development and deepening of this new methodological perspective within research on women is now facing a critical period.

The third element that must be taken into account is that this kind of research project has not always constituted a personal or institutional option: research

agendas and priorities are strictly linked to the financing policies of national and international organizations that support projects on women in Latin America.

Usually, the agencies define their financing policies for research without the advice or participation of Latin American researchers, who know the needs and priorities of their region. Consequently, research on women in Latin America is usually based on issues and perspectives that do not favour the formulation of policies for the transformation of women's condition in society. Finally, we can confirm that it has not yet been possible to carry out a systematic evaluation of this kind of research. In other cases, once a research term has been completed the final reports are not distributed in the region and sometimes not even in the

country. Only in rare cases can we count on publications that provide information, or can we eventually have access to informal information through personal contacts.

Participant research on women, which has been used in Latin America during the past few years, emphasizes important epistemological, theoretical, political and ethical issues, which we should develop:

- Are we building new methodological criteria with new concepts of validity, reliability, objectivity and generalization?
- Who are the beneficiaries of research on women?
- What do we understand for participation? Who participates? How do they participate? What do they participate for?
- Which are the study objects and the units of analysis elaborated through this kind of research?
- What comparisons can we establish between the hierarchical and power relations among researchers and researched in this kind of research and in the traditional kind?
- What relations exist between the proposed objectives and the final achievement?

Finally, what is the impact of all this effort of creativity, participation and elaboration of knowledge on women's condition in Latin American society?

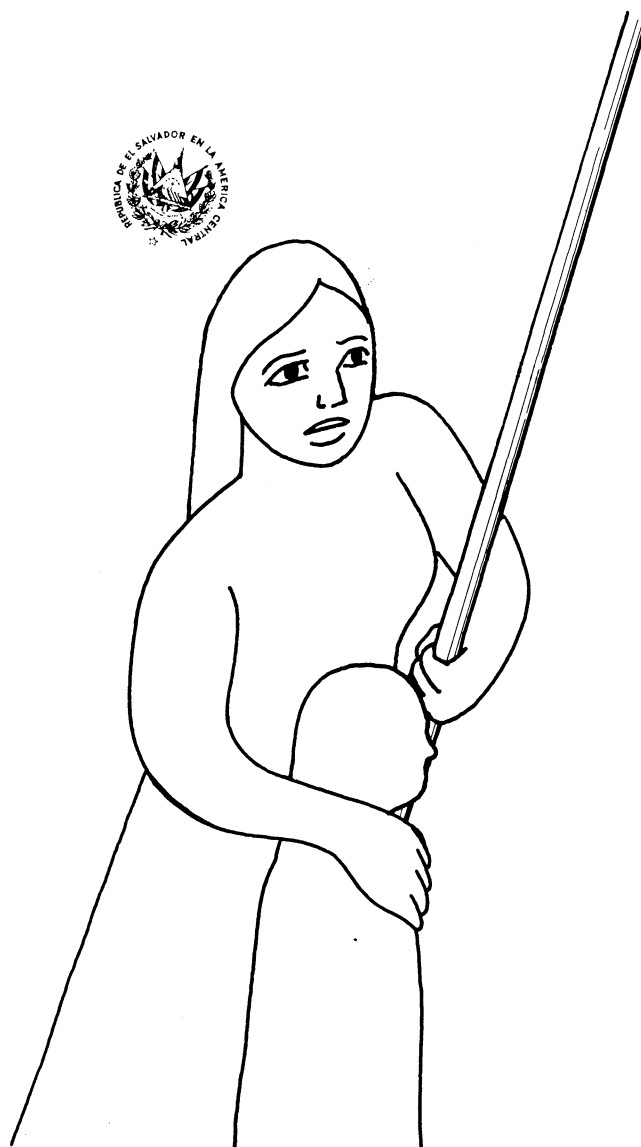
At the Workshop on Research on Women, carried out at the 2nd Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Meeting in Lima, 1983, the considerable increase in the number of projects since the 1970's – as well as the remarkable application of feminist perspectives in new research projects – was evident. The issues of employment, urban and rural work, and fecundity (in those countries with high demographic growth) have prevailed. We can observe a considerable production of knowledge concerning living and working conditions of women and families in urban sectors. Housework and paid housework have begun to be defined as important issues, as well as women's forms of organization, specifically with relation to poor women. Other subjects, such as political, trade union and religious participation, mass media, state policies, education, historical and ideological studies, health, mental health, have been little studied. Issues which are centrally relevant to the feminist movement, such

as abortion, prostitution, violence, rape, sexual roles and even legal issues, have not been systematically studied.

At the the meeting we made two important recommendations: 1) We consider it essential that the research agenda in Latin America must be the result of a joint action between feminist researchers and acti-

vists. We stressed the need for building new channels for interchange and reciprocal stimulation between the feminist movement and the centers that carry out research on women from a feminist perspective. 2) While keeping in view the objective of the community's awareness of women's status in society, the develop-

FOR THE HOMELAND SOVEREIGNTY WOMEN AT THE FRONT OF THE STRUGGLE



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ment of research on women must lead to the elaboration of policies related to the State – as well as action programmes related to spreading information using, for example, mass media.

One of the priorities established at the Seminar on Programmes for Women's Studies in Latin America and the Caribbean carried out at the Colegio de Méjico in June 1985, was the creation and promotion of regional courses for the development of researchers and specialists in women's studies. Programmes of scholarships, university summer courses, and the promotion of exchanges of researchers between women's studies centers and universities and research institutions in developed countries could facilitate training development. Researchers must also overcome the lack of documentation: little information is available about studies carried out in the region and foreign bibliographies are generally not translated to Spanish. One of our goals is to have a Latin American Journal on Women's Studies, to spread information about research on women carried out in the region. Another goal is to establish a reliable documentation center to process data from all countries. Finally, we have repeatedly outlined the imperative need of building exchange networks between researchers and women's institutions in Latin America. Diverse attempts have already been carried out (for example, the creation of the Latin American and Caribbean Association for Women's Studies); the re-inforcement of these existing channels is important.

Many Latin American countries have gone through most of the Women's Decade under dictatorship regimes (particularly the countries in the South Cone). If the repressive conditions in these countries have hindered the development of social research in general, it is easy to imagine to what extent repression has discouraged research on women's situation. Another aspect that must be taken into consideration is the critical economical situation that affects all Latin American countries. We know this situation will doubtless be reflected in the already poor state budgets allocated to research, and that the restrictive measure will obviously continue to hamper those research areas which are considered secondary when it comes to establishing priorities.

Within this context, it is difficult to sug-

gest priorities within research on women in Latin America; however, we will point out some points we consider essential:

- *research that can provide basic up-to-date data about women's situation in each country.* The research centers must have basic statistic data about women's situation in the areas of education, health, the labour market, legislation, etc., in order to elaborate realistic research priorities. This information will enable the elaboration of policies designed to improve the situation of the majority of women.
- *research oriented towards the exploration of the effects of the economic crisis upon women's living conditions.* Such research must take into consideration the different social sectors and diverse areas: participation in the labour market, family structure, sexual roles, access to the educational system, physical and mental health, women's organizations, etc.
- *research that explores the effects of military dictatorships on women's lives, as well as the growth of the democratization process.*
- *research that can provide data about the similarities and differences between women of different social levels, ethnic groups and geographical environments.* This data may produce an advance in the theoretical development of the relationships between gender, class and race.
- *studies carried out on women's everyday experience* in different historical periods and in different social levels.
- *multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research.*
- *evaluation of the projects already carried out within action-research and participative research frameworks.* Even though many of these projects haven't developed a formal research aspect, they contain important and valuable data that can contribute to the accumulation of knowledge.
- *research projects centered on gender relations,* particularly those oriented towards the area of social changes in gender relations.

At the end of the UN Decade for Women, we find that research on women in Latin America is still in a process of legitimization. Much has been done, and

this is why we know how much must still be done. We are corroborating the discrimination of women in all areas of social life. It has become necessary that, starting from these certainties, we advance towards the formulation of new questions, thereby enriching our comprehension of women's situation in Latin America.

¹Marysa Novarro, "Research on Latin American Women," *SIGNS*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Autumn 1979).

²Op. cit.

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