

DRAFT DOCUMENT

Exploring the gender dimensions of reconstruction processes post-hurricane Mitch

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Abstract

The paper will consider the reconstruction process in Nicaragua post hurricane Mitch. First, the success of civil society co-ordinations at promoting common people-centred agendas will be highlighted and contrasted with the difficulties they have faced in becoming gender inclusive spaces. Second, the extent to which the official rhetoric they helped to promote has been translated into reality is examined, suggesting that on the ground projects remain at best 'women-centred'.

Introduction

In October 1998 Central America suffered one of the worst disasters in over 200 years (CINDI, 1999). Hurricane Mitch resulted in losses estimated at over \$US 6 billion (CEPAL, 1999), and over 3,000 people died in Nicaragua alone (Linneker *et al*, 1998). As the hurricane brought the inequalities and vulnerabilities of the region into sharp focus there were hopes that out of the destruction new strategies for sustainable human development would emerge, focussing on the poor and marginalised sectors of society. Following Mitch, the region's governments produced reconstruction plans with titles such as "Transforming El Salvador to Reduce its Vulnerabilities" and slogans such as "The government invites you to reconstruct and transform Nicaragua together". The idea that opportunities for transformation exist after a disaster is largely based on the profound changes that such an event may produce in the lives of the people involved (Byrne, 1995; CAW, 1998). It may also be related to the fact that disasters tend to reveal existing national, regional and global power structures, as well as power relations within intimate relations (Enarson and Morrow, 1998: 2). Conversely, as Blaikie *et al* (1994: 210) point out social, economic and political vulnerability are often reconstructed after a disaster, thus reproducing the conditions for a repeat disaster. Anderson and Woodrow (1998: 2) go further in stating that too often disaster responses have not contributed to long-term development and, worse, they actually subvert or undermine it.

This paper will consider to what extent reconstruction initiatives in post-Mitch Nicaragua can be seen to have transformed pre-existing conditions, and to what extent they have merely reconstructed them. More specifically the paper will consider the impact of the reconstruction process on gender roles and relations examining both the macro and micro level effect of the reconstruction process. At the macro level the paper will consider the role women have played in designing national plans for reconstruction and the obstacles faced in the construction of gendered reconstruction plans. At the micro level the paper will examine to what extent local level projects have been both pro-poor and pro-gender and the possible consequences of 'women-oriented' reconstruction initiatives for reducing women's 'vulnerability'.

National plans for reconstruction post-Mitch

After the initial emergency and relief period was over the countries of Central America set about devising plans for reconstruction to be presented at the Consultative Group meeting in

¹ The fieldwork for this paper was undertaken during a 3-year career break from Middlesex University, financed by ICD/CIIR UK and based in Puntos de Encuentro, Nicaragua. The views expressed in this paper are the author's alone and do not represent the views of any of the organisations mentioned. The final version of this paper was published as Bradshaw, Sarah (2002) 'Exploring the gender dimensions of reconstruction processes post-hurricane Mitch' *Journal of International Development* 14, 871 –879

Washington in 1998 and finalised before the Stockholm meeting of 1999 in order to receive funding from the international community (see Bradshaw *et al* 2001).

Civil society also responded to the situation by forming new post-disaster co-ordinating bodies; Interforos in Honduras and the Civil Coordinator for Emergency and Reconstruction (CCER) in Nicaragua. In Nicaragua the last 20 years have seen the development and strengthening of different expressions of organised civil society, with the rise of organisations working especially within the themes of health, education, the environment, human rights, governability and gender amongst others. Hurricane Mitch brought with it a new stage in the development of these distinct organisations as they came together with the objective of co-ordinating a collective effort to respond to the immediate necessities of the populations in the affected zones (CCER, 1999a). Out of this the CCER was formed as a coordination of 21 networks which represents the involvement of more than 350 national NGOs, social movements, sectoral networks, producer associations, unions, collectives and federations. The coalition, that has recently celebrated its 3rd year of existence, sought to combine a practical, a research and an advocacy role seeking to use the information it gathered and generated to lobby national and international policy makers in order to ensure reconstruction responded to the needs of the people (CCER, 1999a). Adopting a pro-active stance the CCER formulated its own proposal for reconstruction that was presented to the international community as an alternative to the government's plan (CCER, 1998). The government's proposal for reconstruction placed particular emphasis on re-building the country's infrastructure.² The civil society document stated the first aim of reconstruction should be "To construct solid foundations for sustainable human development, transforming unequal power relations at all levels as an indispensable condition for overcoming the population's social and economic vulnerability..." continuing by highlighting the need to "reduce disparities in the access and control of resources resulting from conditions of class, gender, ethnic identity and disability"(CCER, 1999b).

While the proposal highlights the need to reduce unequal relations of power as fundamental in reducing vulnerability, paradoxically the formation of the civil coordinating body post-Mitch highlighted some of the existing inherent power relations within civil society, not least those based on gender.

A superficial glance at the make-up of the CCER would suggest it to be a 'gendered' organisation. The elected spokesperson is a woman health activist, one of the more radical feminist NGOs was a founding member, and possibly the strongest women's network in the country, The Women's Network Against Violence, participates. However, from the outset a number of important personalities and expressions of the women's movement chose to remain firmly outside of the CCER, as occurred also in terms of Interforos in Honduras. Interviews with feminist leaders in both Nicaragua and Honduras suggest that the decision was based on past experience as much as the conditions in the countries at the time³. Entering 'mixed' spaces was considered by many women to lead only to much work for little reward.

For those who did choose to work within the new co-ordinating bodies, the process highlighted that being part of organised civil society does not automatically mean working from a gender perspective or sensitivity to such issues, let alone sympathy with the demands of women and feminists. Indeed in Honduras it has been suggested that the success after Mitch should not be

² The original government document was written exclusively in English under the title 'Of Potholes and Crossroads'. It was later drastically revised and re-titled 'From reconstruction to transformation'.

³ Interviews were undertaken with women leaders in Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador as part of the project 'Actualización de la metodología de evaluación de los efectos socio-económicos de los desastres naturales: Incorporación del análisis de género' undertaken for ECLA (México) in September 2000.

seen to be the inclusion of a gender focus in reconstruction plans, but rather the fact that some women have continued participating in the new spaces created despite the sexism they faced and the fact that most of the time their voices were not heard (Bradshaw, 2001b: 53).

The situation in Nicaragua, however, was somewhat distinct. The initial proposal document the CCER presented in Washington was largely the work of a small group of experts in different fields (CCER, 1998). Post-Washington, the CCER recognised the need to validate its own proposal and to improve it. First, themed commissions were formed to re-work and develop the proposal in the key areas of health, education, production and small business, environment and development, decentralisation and local power, housing and infrastructure and the macro-economy. These were complemented by the gender commission, and commissions focussing on young people and children. In addition, due to the differing ethnic identities of the autonomous Atlantic coast regions, there was a semi-autonomous commission of the Caribbean Coast. These transversal commissions were to work with the themed commissions to ensure that issues such as power relations between men and women, and ethnicity were taken into account in all the proposals emerging from their work. Once a draft document had been written a consultation process would begin across the country culminating in the First National Meeting of Civil Society (see Bradshaw *et al*, 2001).

Before the national meeting of civil society the gender commission hosted a national one-day women's workshop to discuss the draft proposal. While this meeting had been planned since the outset obstacles encountered by representatives from the gender commission in attempting to work with the themed commissions akin to those encountered by women in Honduras described above, meant the meeting assumed even greater importance. Ultimately the proposal presented at Stockholm was shaped by the recommendations arising from this workshop. This was largely achieved through members of the commission working alongside those (men) responsible for the final edition of the proposal to ensure they were taken on board. While the gendered vision presented in the CCER document then should not be read as representing a common vision shared by all those involved in the coordination it does illustrate the openness of those involved to pro-gender ideas. Similarly while it should not be assumed that the CCER is a gendered space, such processes suggest it is a space where negotiation can occur between competing groups with differing interests and demands to at least the limited satisfaction of all involved.

However, such internal processes are not always evident to those outside of them. Discussion around how best to ensure that the space becomes more 'democratic' has been the centre of a lengthy process of internal re-organisation and institutional strengthening that is on-going within the CCER in recognition that decision making processes are not always transparent (CCER, 2001a). At a general level, steps have already been taken towards ensuring the space is more inclusionary. For example, the most recent CCER document, a critique of the proposed Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper formulated by the government in conjunction with the World Bank and IMF, was produced through a series of workshops across the country and themed expert group meetings only supplemented this participatory process (CCER, 2001b). Thus the CCER could be said to be actively working to improve its legitimacy and credibility with the people it seeks to represent and has demonstrated its commitment to progressively strengthening itself as an inclusionary space.

Moreover there is some evidence to suggest that as the CCER matures opportunities to enhance relations between itself and other movements and groupings may also evolve. More recently the CCER worked alongside the wider women's movement to protest government threats against a number of gendered NGOs and individual women and 1000's were mobilised to march in the streets of the capital in protest. Common ground between women, both inside and outside the

CCER, to promote shared interests suggests, therefore, perhaps there is also room for optimism in terms of the future of the organisation as a more inclusionary gendered space.

While internal problems persist, the evolution of the CCER to the newly named Civil Coordinator, which better reflects its role as the anti-neo-liberal opposition voice in the country, does demonstrate that such co-ordinations can exist and survive despite the competing interests that they must contain in order to do so. However, the indirect impacts of such coalitions need also to be considered, not least the possible divisive affect on other social movements. This is not to suggest that it is organisations such as the CCER that cause problems that result in divisions, but that their existence may reveal long standing unresolved issues. The formation of the CCER highlighted existing power relations not only between men and women, but also between women existent in the country long before its formation. While the CCER has not fundamentally altered these unequal relations, they have made them more visible, both in the documents produced to date, and in the processes that have led to the production of these documents.

Thus while the extent to which the CCER can be seen to have presented pro-gender policies is clear from its documents, the extent to which it is in itself a pro-gender space is perhaps less clear. Moreover, the extent to which organisations such as the CCER have influenced reconstruction on the ground has yet to be evaluated. What does appear to be clear, however, is that the extent to which reconstruction has occurred it has occurred via the initiatives of organised civil society (CIET/CCER, 1999a; 1999b).

Post-Mitch reconstruction in practice: A gendered experience?

Existing evidence suggests two key elements to characterise the reconstruction process in post-Mitch Nicaragua; to the extent that it has occurred, it has occurred via the initiatives of national and international NGOs (CIET/CCER, 1999a; 1999b) and that women have been included in the reconstruction projects, with projects tending to favour women and children in terms of the distribution of products and service (Delaney and Shrader, 2000; ECA, 2000).

However, as pointed out by Fordham (1998: 127), the incorporation of a gender focus into projects and academic analyses post-disaster has often not advanced much further than revealing the situation of women, as happened during the initial stages of feminist studies. Despite the recent activities and publications of a small group of disaster experts (see Enarson and Morrow, 1998; Peacock *et al*, 1997), a gender focus has not become mainstream in general research on disasters (Enarson, 1998: 156). The presence of women in the reconstruction process as revealed by the studies cited above, does not necessarily translate as their participation in this process or that their needs, both practical and strategic, are met.

The following discussion is based on research undertaken by the author with Puntos de Encuentro, a Nicaraguan feminist NGO, in July 1999, which focussed on understanding changing gender roles and relations in both the public and private spheres post-Mitch (see Bradshaw 2000 *et al*).⁴ The focus of the study stems from the fact that while it is currently recognised that gender plays an important role during the period of crisis and emergency, as men and women adopt different strategies when reacting to such situations (Byrne, 1995; CAW, 1998). While the outcome of coping strategies has also been considered, less is known of how the processes of decision-making and negotiation within the household are affected in crisis situations (Byrne, 1995: ii).

⁴ Four communities were studied and in every household in the community the self-declared 'woman of the household' was interviewed thus effectively a census of the households in each community was undertaken. The research was financed by Oxfam, GB with the support of ICD/CIIR, UK.

The research results suggest that in the case of the communities studied the strategies adopted by individuals and households after Mitch did not differ greatly from their general coping strategies. In the context of permanent crisis in which the majority of the region's population is living there are not many options available. Outside interventions for reconstruction thus assume greater prominence. In each of the communities one or more organisation was present promoting reconstruction projects and the majority of these projects claimed to work from a gender perspective or to actively seek to include women. However, while half the women interviewed in the communities perceive that it is they who have participated most in the projects for reconstruction, only a quarter felt that it is women who benefit from reconstruction projects. The majority stated that it was the family that benefited from their participation.

Such perceptions are supported by evidence from interviews with representatives from a number of the organisations. For example, the representative from one organisation suggested that: *“we have positively discriminated towards women. Some of the resources to rehabilitate livelihoods we have given to the women after hurricane Mitch”*. When asked how men had reacted to this focus on women she commented that there had not been any major problems since *“the women have their cows and the men are drinking the milk...”*.

It would appear that while a large number of projects post-Mitch trumpeted their gender perspective in many cases this thinly conceals the real focus on women as efficient service providers for the family.

This increase in women's participation in community projects came at the same time that the proportion of women engaged in income generating activities declined both in absolute numbers and relative to men's employment⁵. It is not clear if the decline in income generating activities allowed women to participate in reconstruction projects, or if the fact that the projects targeted women influenced the declining proportions in productive activities. What is clear is that a larger proportion of households now rely on a single, male income earner which could have important consequences for women's access to, and control over resources, and which increases the household's vulnerability and the vulnerability of women within it. It may also suggest one impact of Mitch to be a reinforcing of stereotypical women's roles rather than a transformation and diversification.

However, that goods for the household are being channelled through women may have a positive impact, not least on perceptions of relative contribution to household maintenance, which are important in terms of women's relative bargaining position and thus ability to decide over the use of household resources (see Sen, 1987). The fact that more women in male-headed households post-Mitch mentioned themselves as joint or most important contributor to the maintenance of the household, in spite of the decreasing proportion involved in income generating activities post Mitch, may support this idea.

However, it is also important to highlight that not all women experienced the situation in the same way. Young women (under 25 years old) in independent households (living with their partners and children) not only were less likely to state they had been involved in income generating activities before the Hurricane, but were also more likely to name their male partner as main contributor to household maintenance, in comparison with older women. Changes after Mitch reinforce this situation: the proportion of young women who said that actually the man was the main contributor had risen, in contrast to a decline among older women. At the same

⁵ Pre-Mitch half the women interviewed in the Puntos de Encuentro study were involved in an income generating activity, after Mitch this had fallen to below a third.

time the proportions in income generating activities had shown a greater decline and less young women were participating in reconstruction projects compared to older women.

Given the low and declining proportions of young women generating incomes it is interesting to note that more than half of them reported that their partner bought the food for the household, compared to a quarter of older women. This may mean many young women are highly dependent on their male partners, even for bringing the food they eat. It could help to explain why almost half these younger women when asked if women could survive alone, without a male partner, replied negatively.

Conversely the research shows that for female heads of household income generating activities did not decline substantially after Mitch despite high levels of participation in reconstruction projects. However, while in the pre-hurricane context, the majority of women with no male partner named themselves as the person who made the most important contribution to the household, responses about the actual, post-Mitch, situation show changes in perceptions. Among female heads, more now state someone else in the household, usually an adult son, makes the most important contribution. Inclusion in reconstruction projects may be a determinant in this changing perception and more research is needed in the area to better understand the indirect impacts of such projects.

The indirect effects of reconstruction projects are largely overlooked when assessments and evaluations are undertaken. However, it is one such unplanned impact that is most clear from the research. In the communities studied 1 in 3 women felt there had been conflict between the organisations working in the community and the community itself over needs and priorities. It is important to note that this perception was equal among those included in the projects and those excluded. The women who suggested there had been such problems were also more likely to report that women's participation in the projects and the resultant decisions over the use of the resources obtained had caused conflict between men and women within households. Moreover, these women too more often stated that levels of violence against women had risen post-Mitch. Interestingly, while the relationship between perceptions of conflict between couples and those of increases in violence is positive, it is not significant.

Thus while problems with projects may promote conflict within households, this does not necessarily translate into violence. On the other hand, a lack of conflict over women's participation should not be taken to mean that violence does not result from this participation. The research further suggests that, perhaps not surprisingly, projects with a more 'practical' needs focus may not result in conflict between men and women but may be related to violence against women, while projects with a more 'strategic' focus ie those that focus more on training and awareness raising, may provoke greater levels of conflict within households which does not necessarily translate into violence against women (see Bradshaw, 2001b).

The evidence presented here would suggest that the positive affects of reconstruction projects for women are far from clear. It is not even assured that women have benefited personally in a material sense from their participation. Assessing the impact on women's 'vulnerable' position, then would not suggest an improvement via reconstruction, let alone a transformation of the underlying factors that influence their unequal access to resources and thus their supposed vulnerability.

Moreover, more recent research highlights that there may also have been a trade-off between vulnerabilities within the reconstruction process (Bradshaw, 2002). When women living in a new community constructed post-Mitch were asked about changes in their well-being since

hurricane Mitch, many noted the positive benefits of the new community; that now they had better houses, built further away from the river, yet at the same time they noted the lack of work opportunities and opportunities to grow their own food the move had brought. The women noted that they felt safer but hungrier. Thus while physical vulnerability may have declined, economic vulnerability may have been increased. Policies designed to reduce the poor's vulnerability to disasters therefore may not necessarily be pro-poor in the longer term.

Concluding comments

While the evidence presented would suggest that policies and projects post-Mitch appear to have been pro-women, at both the national and local levels, to what extent they have been pro-gender is highly debatable. Moreover, to what extent they can be said to have reduced women's vulnerability; social, economic and political, is also questionable. Indeed the lack of attention to the possible indirect impacts of reconstruction activities may result only in a trade-off of vulnerabilities rather than an overall decline. Women have felt the indirect impacts of reconstruction processes at a macro level too, both those women that have participated in national level initiatives and those that chose to remain outside of them. It is these secondary dimensions of reconstruction processes as they evolve over time and space that perhaps should be the focus of gender analysts in the future.

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