

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

2002 Conference Proceedings (Raleigh, NC)

CIDHAL: Case Study of a Feminist Organization

Susan J. Bracken

The Pennsylvania State University, USA

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Bracken, Susan J. (2002). "CIDHAL: Case Study of a Feminist Organization," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2002/papers/9>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

CIDHAL: Case Study of a Feminist Organization

Susan J. Bracken
The Pennsylvania State University, USA

Abstract: CIDHAL, a feminist community education organization, located in Southern Mexico, has been a critical participant in the feminist, labor, and urban popular movements in Mexico and Latin America. By exploring an overview of its history and social context, adult educators are left with important questions and reflections about the issues this type of organization experiences.

Introduction

The purpose of this historical study is to explore the inner workings of a feminist, activist community organization. The research was conducted during five months of residence, spread out three visits. Data was collected through the in-depth review of organizational archives, records, and documents. In addition, the author conducted twenty-five interviews with current CIDHAL staff members, and spent two months observing the day-to-day workings and community programs. The research project was conducted in Spanish.

History of CIDHAL

Betsie Hollants, an expatriate born in Holland and raised in north Belgium worked actively in World War II resistance and published vocal pieces about the rising Nazi regime. She was known for her outspoken radical views and devoted her life's work to social activism. Eventually, she left Europe and worked with Cesar Chavez as a fellow labor activist. It was from California that she sent a letter to Ivan Illich, asking Illich if she could join with him in Mexico, as part of CIDOC, the *Centro Interamericano de Documentacion*. Cuernavaca, and CIDOC, Ivan Illich's center, were logical choices for someone with Betsie's background and interests. Cuernavaca, located in the state of Morelos, south of Mexico City and the Federal District, is known for its long history as a gathering place for thinkers, intellectuals, artists, entertainers, politicians and expatriates. (Suárez and VanRemmen 1996)

Betsie relocated to Cuernavaca, México in 1961. She was the first woman to participate in the Conciolito Vataciano II, attending a 1962 conference in Rome, to talk about the Catholic church and popular education for missionaries. From 1962-65 she traveled extensively in Latin America, mostly with popular educators associated with the church, studying and learning about issues of religion, poverty, and social consciousness.

Over time, she became frustrated because her work in CIDOC and with Ivan Illich was rewarding, but had very little focus on women's issues, something she was increasingly interested in. So, after 8 years, in 1969, she spoke with Ivan Illich and decided the time was right to found CIDAL, *Coordinacion de Iniciativas para el desarrollo humano de America Latin*, now known as CIDHAL. (Suárez and VanRemmen, 1996).

Initially, she organized her personal library within her home, which was an extensive collection of literature, sociology, political and economic writings and journals. The doors of CIDHAL were open as a space for community women to gather, in conjunction with the popular movements, the church, and groups generally perceived to be from the left. CIDHAL was the first ONG, or nongovernmental organization, devoted to women's issues to be founded in Cuernavaca, and the first official documentation center for women in Latin America. The

context of the late 1960s is familiar to most feminists and others who followed the radical feminist movement: it was a time of great energy and protest, with attention on the rights and equality of women in society, within Mexico as well as many areas of the world.

Working in small groups, the CIDHAL team developed *carpetas*, or folders with detailed information and literature on what they perceived as the most pressing issues for women in their communities—health, nutrition, gender roles, relationships, working conditions, reproductive rights, and more. Community women who agreed to host small meetings invited 4-10 friends or relatives to their homes, and the CIDHAL team facilitated discussions aimed at identifying issues, stimulating the women’s belief in their own capacity, and building the skills and knowledge necessary to collectively solve community problems. CIDHAL’s early activities included the publication of a feminist journal, the *Bóletin*, and the sponsorship of numerous small conferences and ‘matchmaking’ efforts among other interested activist groups.

Eight years after its founding, 1975 proved to be a huge year for CIDHAL. In broad terms, it marked a shift for CIDHAL from more intellectual, “think tanks” and activist groups talking amongst themselves and dispensing information via workshops and brochures, and small meetings, to increased outreach, work with grass-roots level community initiatives and increased interest in direct services (as opposed to advocacy and information). Up until this time, CIDHAL’s main audience and group of participants were educated, middle-class feminists and activists. Increasingly they redirected their focus to popular movements in *colonias*, the poor, the disadvantaged.

1975 was also the *International Year of the Women*, and CIDHAL was one of the feminist groups that participated heavily in the planning and execution of the high-profile events in the nation’s capital. CIDHAL members organized and participated in an international feminist conference in Costa Rica, attended by women, feminists, and grassroots leaders from more than 18 countries. CIDHAL collaborated with the Boston Women’s Health Collective, working on a publication, *El Cuerpo y la salud de las Mujeres*, *The body and women’s health*. This is critical in appreciating the extent and depth of CIDHAL’s relationship building and influence in the arena of international women’s health. For most western feminists, the Boston Women’s Health Collective is common knowledge and respected. How did CIDHAL members become involved during this time? One long time member tells her story (paraphrased interview, June 2001):

“I was finishing medical school and not sure what I wanted to do. I was finishing my residency and unhappy with my experiences in the hospitals and clinicals. I also had experience working in social projects – with the incarcerated, via the radio, on literacy projects, and those types of things. A friend of mine, also a doctor, who knew that I was interested in women and women’s health, contacted me and told about CIDHAL’s work and that CIDHAL was considering opening a health clinic with affordable, alternative woman-centered health care to be made available to women and their families, although the focus would be on women. They didn’t have a lot of money, but promised the chance to make a difference in women’s lives, to do interesting and important work for women’s health. My friend and other CIDHAL members offered to distribute a voluntary pay cut, and literally share a part of their own stipends to help me with an allowance for living expenses, even though there wasn’t an actual salary at the time. I could stay with them if I needed to. I thought it was a great idea to work with health promoters, especially with political themes like contraceptives. That was more than 20 years ago, I said yes and I ‘m still here, providing health care from a feminist perspective for women in our

community. If someone cannot afford to pay me a standard fee, they can offer to do a service, such as washing our sheets or helping with the office or cleaning. Women should have information about their own bodies, make choices about what kind of care they will seek out and receive. To me, CIDHAL was and is a ‘mirror of the country’ and the popular health movements that are so important to women.”

Most often, involvement with CIDHAL stemmed from personal relationships and contacts, often with family and friends from a variety of backgrounds – medicine, sociology, and other disciplines.

Often, activists in the feminist and other movements experience burn-out or go through periods of introspection and questioning. CIDHAL was no exception. Several times throughout its forty-year history team members worried about issues of burn-out and internal political conflict. According to an internal report, CIDHAL members often worried about internal processes, wanting to promote autonomy, respect for each other’s identities, and tried to wrestle with the pressures of maintaining an activist, grassroots space for reflection at the same time as ONG funding and structures were increasing moving CIDHAL towards professionalization. As one team member stated, “ONGs have to make strong social compromises,” (Pisano and Loria, 1987: 8). Women who participated heavily often experienced personal conflicts, role overload, and conflicts within their personal relationships with families, spouses, and children as a result of their changing expectations as well as workload demands. In a period of introspection, the group also wrote about the difficulties of doing collective, social justice work. For example, they wrestled with issues such as: 1) How do you develop a political process for a large group of women? 2) How do you develop specific strategies to alleviate social conditions? 3) How do you overcome obstacles of diversity and geography? 4) How do you take into account unique demands and needs of workers? 5) How do you avoid parallel efforts, connect small groups with similar interests, together? 6) How do you rapidly develop new materials, flyers, and pamphlets? And, 7) How do you deal with the “strike process? (pp. 61-62)

CIDHAL’s history is marked by a few pivotal events. In 1984, the health clinic and educational center were raided and closed down by the police. The 1980s were particularly difficult for social activists in the state of Morelos, and there were widespread crackdowns on social organizations, especially activist and grassroots groups of the left. The director of CIDHAL had recently been publically accused by the state government of being a professional agitator due to her involvement in helping the citizens of a local community, Tetelcingo, to organize and resist the seizing of their lands in order to build a new airport. The town was literally under siege, surrounded by the army.

The government accused CIDHAL’s health clinic of providing illegal abortions, and cancelled their license. Concerned citizens, other ONG groups, and feminists began a letter-writing and publicity campaign and in a few weeks, CIDHAL was reopened, but only after being cautioned to stick to providing services, rather than causing trouble. Internally, interpretations of the event were mixed. While some staff members felt that CIDHAL’s community involvement was appropriate and within the bounds of its mission for social equality, others were less eager to be associated with “radical” groups. In the words of one former member, “We were feminists, not militants...” and another member stated that she believed CIDHAL was never radical –its work with women and a handful of men meant that they were working for women and men (not against men) and she stated frustration with the societal structure—in her opinion, it was easier to work with academic and the middle class because they did not view gender equity as a radical

concept, and she found that working with the lower classes, while important, meant that they encountered obstacles due to the perception of their views in comparison to more conservative, normative Mexican culture.

In 1985, there was a major earthquake, known now as *19 de Septiembre*. It damaged central Mexico and left more than 40,000 garment workers without a place to work. The workers were outraged about the factory owners' responses, which appeared to be directed towards the rescue of equipment, rather than workers. The response to this event was the first industry-wide movement and led to the formation of the only trade union in Mexico that was led entirely by women. (Jacquette, 1994). Further, the women involved used traditional women's resources to stimulate funds for the movement, relying, for example, on the sale of handmade dolls to generate money. Another unique and important aspect of this event, was that it united feminists and those interested in women's issues across the social classes – with upper class women selling jewelry to donate to the cause and the various groups collaborating together to organize a strong and strident response including legal advice, marches, demonstrations and a process for garment workers to gain power (Escandón, 1994: 211). One CIDHAL staff member recounted that she has never seen anything quite like it and was quite proud that their fellow members were integral collaborators and insiders, working within the garment union and the women's groups to achieve social change and collective power for the women workers.

Stemming from this intense work within the labor unions and the urban popular movements, CIDHAL opened a second satellite office in Mexico City (referred to as CIDHAL, D.F. or *distrito federal*). The CIDHAL, D.F., office was markedly different than the Cuernavaca office with a focus on labor and also took risks by tackling issues such as female prostitution, an issues largely unpopular with mainstream feminists due to ongoing tensions and class issues in the Mexican feminist movement. Eventually the level of intensity spun out of control and the CIDHAL, D.F., staff broke off from the main organization, barricading itself into the house which served as offices and initiating a public dispute over activist methodologies, money (how to spend international grant monies) and organizational styles --- 16 ONG organizations attempted to mediate the dispute, which was too deep to be repaired. In 1993, the CIDHAL, D.F. office was permanently closed and the CIDHAL Cuernavaca team was forced to return a portion of the grant monies that had been associated with the Mexico City projects and office. (Coatlicue, 1993)

Since that time, CIDHAL Cuernavaca has continued to evolve –over the last decade its efforts are markedly less activist and more professionalized. Staff members attribute this change as a response to the issues of accountability and political conflicts raised during the CIDHAL D.F. crisis, and also to the changing international climate for ONGS. The center is currently divided into three areas – communication, health, and the documentation center.

Within the communications area, CIDHAL published a weekly women's supplement in a regional newspaper as well as hosted two weekly talk radio programs. In addition, they worked extensively in developing materials designed to impact 'gender awareness' and to support the other functional areas of CIDHAL. They coordinate and lead a state team of government and nongovernmental representatives on *Maternidad sin Riesgos*, or Safe Motherhood, working together to draft recommended public policy as well as social programs to meet direct needs of state's citizenry.

The health area is comprehensive, with ongoing projects such as peer sexuality education in secondary schools and the training and networking of midwives to assist in the detection and treatment referral for women with breast, cervical or uterine cancers. Both projects extend to the

southern portion of the state and include many rural, poverty-stricken areas. In addition, CIDHAL's definition of health and well-being includes environmental work and they currently sponsor working teams in the *maquiladoras* and targeted *colonias* that are struggling to cope with the invasion of big industrial complexes – polluted water, loss of land, poor or no infrastructure and services such as garbage pickup and disposal, sewage treatment, or even paved streets.

The documentation center has expanded to include electronic cataloging, internet access, inter-library loan and an extensive 3-room library on feminist topics and publications that include international writings on women's issues as well as archival materials collected on the Mexican feminist, labor, popular, and environmental movements. It belongs to an international consortium of 6 sister documentation centers dedicated to women's health and feminist documentation. (Tapia, et.al: 1999)

Discussion

While international feminist discourse played a strong role, CIDHAL's inner workings were substantively driven by the politics, economics and living conditions of the local communities, combined with the state and national context. CIDHAL staff members did not hesitate to make decisions based upon their perceptions of their own reality and situations. CIDHAL has chosen to develop their own 'praxis', and developed a reputation for consulting, or working to establish autonomous community groups that eventually function without CIDHAL's long-term direct support. CIDHAL is frequently referred to as "the mother of" other feminist groups or as *hormigas*, the worker ants behind the scenes.

While their original community outreach subscribed almost exclusively to Frierian concepts, over time they incorporated a variety of approaches including but not limited to marches, protests, publicity campaigns, talk radio and newspaper, serial 'comic' strips on social issues, and more. They cycled through periods of intense activism, usually in response to state or national crises, and then to periods of relative calm. During the 1990s, CIDHAL collaborated extensively with governmental organizations to address issues in a multi-pronged fashion, tackling public policy and legal issues, cultivating awareness and public discourse, as well as working to provide alternatives and build community capacities to alleviate egregious conditions for women. The strong intellectual overtones that were evident under the founder, Betsie Hollants, leadership has gradually shifted –while CIDHAL continues to publish about it's work, the publications have become increasingly more practioner-oriented (Suárez and VanRemmen, 1996)

Ideological differences were (and are) a source of organizational stress and occasionally impeded their efforts or drew public criticism. CIDHAL members constantly navigate a balance between process and product. Staff interviews revealed a wide range of individual feminist and political views, but the collective organizational identity was the guiding philosophy for program development and implementation. A recent issue that is slowly coming to the surface is a trend to hire 'non-feminists' who have professional community education or other skills, to lead CIDHAL's projects, which are clearly and explicitly labeled as feminist works. One long-time staff member revealed that she thought the short-time impact was negligible because existing underlying philosophy still pervades the organization. On the other hand, she worried that over time, as more and more professional educators who were not necessarily personally committed to feminist ideology entered CIDHAL leadership, the impact would be a gradual watering down or loss of their feminist identity.

Class issues have been a difficult terrain. Founded by an intellectual expatriate and staffed by committed, yet primarily middle-class women it has occasionally fallen under scrutiny for being inaccessible. As an example, the documentation center collection, while vast and substantive, primarily serves an educated and sophisticated audience – leaders of other ONGs, government workers, social workers, and university students. In the words of one volunteer, “they are preaching to the choir”. When other women’s groups at the time were unwilling to do so, CIDHAL deliberately differentiated itself from the Mexican feminist community and crossed the invisible line, tackling women’s issues within the urban popular movement and labor groups, working with some of the poorest regions of the state and beyond, and adopting a public stance on prostitution (Pisano and Loria: 1987).

Finally, another challenge they face is increasing professionalization, made particularly intense due to competitive funding and reporting processes for international ONGs. Staff members complained that they spend too much time trying to develop mechanisms to quantify their program success. One staff member asked me, “If I hold a workshop for 60 women who participate one time in a limited way, is this better than touching a handful of women’s lives in deep ways?” The issues of evaluation and assessment are the predominant organizational focus and it is not easy to attend to political ideologies while generating spreadsheets that quantify community and activist work.

Even the brief history in this paper raises many important questions about adult education’s understanding of how activist and community organizations do their work –it is risky, ambiguous and often understood vaguely as “social justice” (therefore we know what it is about) or in segmented studies exploring one aspect of their existence. Holistic, social histories of organizations like CIDHAL will better inform the adult education and women’s studies disciplines.

References

(no known author). *Borrador: Historia de CIDHAL*. Internal working document.

Coatlicue, Boletina Bibliografica e informativa, (1993) V 2N1, Enero-Abril, p 2-5.

Escandón, C.R. (1994) *Women’s movements, feminism and mexican politics*, in Jaquette, J.S. (Ed.) (1994) 2nd Ed. The women’s movement in Latin America: Participation and democracy. Boulder: Westview Press, p. 199-222.

Jaquette, J.S. (Ed.) (1994) 2nd Ed. *The women’s movement in Latin America: Participation and democracy*. Boulder: Westview Press.

Pisano, M. y Loria, Cecilia, (1987) *Reporte de la Evaluación de CIDHAL*

Suárez, R. y VanRemmen, L. (1996). *Hacia una nueva cultura feminista: Una semblanza histórica del CIDHAL*. Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos.

Tapia, M.P., Ramos, M.E., Ibarrolla Uriarte, M.I., Mejía Marenco, J. (1999). *El movimiento de mujeres a través de las publicaciones de CIDHAL*. NOVIB.