

# Gender mainstreaming lessons from a Mexican NGO

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In the 1970s, the relationship between gender and environmental issues began to receive increasing attention in the development context. The literature started to analyse the impact of environmental change on gender relationships, as well as the role of women in natural resource management. In 1984, these issues formally became part of the international agenda, when the United Nations Programme for the Environment supported a move to strengthen the participation of women in environmental planning. Likewise, both at the Earth Summit of Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and at the International Women's Conference held in Beijing in 1995, explicit references were made to the need to design environmental programmes with gender focus, in order to increase women's access and control over resources. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have played a very important role in the process of designing and implementing such programmes. Sustainable development with gender focus has become an important challenge for Latin American NGOs.

"Gender mainstreaming" means that all activities conducted by the NGO must have a gender dimension. In other words, every programme and project should be aware of different gender needs, and target them explicitly. For example, projects related to family health and nutrition are usually targeted at women, but with no consideration of their individual needs. Thus, the gender approach has been incorporated in a partial and fragmented way, if any, and the social transformations required to achieve gender equality are not encouraged. Women should not be seen as a resource for development, but rather as subjects of their own development.

## **EDUCE**

EDUCE (Education, Culture and Ecology) was founded in Mexico in 1989 and was legally registered as an Asociación Civil (non-profit organisation) in 1992. EDUCE defines itself as a non-profit institution with no political affiliation, which is mostly devoted to the promotion of sustainable regional development. EDUCE works in several geographical areas of the country. In this article we will focus on the region of Los Chenes, located in the Municipality of Hopolchén, Campeche. This municipality has approximately 31,000 inhabitants, most of them Maya speakers. They are engaged in subsistence agriculture (corn and beans), domestic animal production, apiculture and the extraction of chicozapote latex (a resin obtained from the chicozapote tree *Mamilkara zapota*, which has now largely been replaced by plastic).

EDUCE Campeche is formed by an interdisciplinary team, consisting of a group of specialists in the fields of communication, economics, rural development, agronomy, environmental studies, education, anthropology and accounting. Their goal is to foster regional development and to improve the quality of life of the local people through the implementation of productive, environmental and educational projects. The team uses a participatory methodology that promotes community involvement and project generation and implementation at grassroots level.

## **Working on gender issues**

In Campeche, EDUCE has five programmes in 14 communities of the Municipality of Hopolchén. The projects resulting from the programmes are developed with the community through

**Woman planting  
vegetables and herbs.  
She is participating in  
a project called  
"Manejo Integral del  
Solar" (integrated  
garden management)  
promoted by EDUCE.  
Photo: María de las  
Mercedes Rocha**



participatory methods. In some communities, there is more than one project. This article will discuss three of the five programmes that EDUCE operates in the region.

The first programme is Sustainable Management of Natural Resources (SMNR), which takes an agroforestry approach. The major purpose of this programme is to train and organise people for sustainable production, so that produce can be locally consumed or sold, thereby promoting regional development. 393 men from 13 different communities participate in this programme.

The second programme is called Integral Backyard Management (IBM). This programme has three components: vegetable (home gardens); animal (chickens and pigs); and technological (dry toilets and alternative water management systems). The programme is designed to encourage food self-sufficiency and contribute to disease prevention and environmental protection. Among the programme's specific objectives is the empowerment of women. 220 women from six communities participate in this programme.

Rural Agro-industries with Women (RAIW) is the third programme. It works with five groups of women, all at different stages in their training. These groups are engaged in honey production, bread making, preparing jams and marmalades, making handicrafts and handling a community corn mill. These projects have been designed to offer women some income-generation activities as well as productive, organisational, administrative and commercial skills. The programme also attempts to empower women through these activities. 34 women participate in these projects.

As can be seen, there is a clear separation between the projects involving men and those involving women. This separation reflects the division between the public sphere (the family plot) and the private sphere (the backyard). Similarly, the female income-generating activities promoted are an extension of traditional female roles, in that they involve the preparation of food. In other words, traditional views of men's and women's work have predominated in project design and implementation. According to the NGO personnel, these projects were developed through participatory methods and they reflect the gender division of labour that dominate in the region. Thus, EDUCE has found

itself immersed in the dilemma of respecting the women's own processes and preferences which, from the institutional perspective, may reproduce gender inequality. This situation has arisen more than once in other parts of the world, and it is worth reflecting on ways in which NGOs can deal with it. EDUCE has responded with a variety of measures, which are described below.

Firstly, the NGO has not lost sight of the fact that the opportunities created by and for women, albeit traditionally female, also open the way to other types of processes. It is hoped that, as a result of their participation in these projects, women will become aware of their roles in society and their rights as women. In order to make this happen, EDUCE is combining the productive and organisational activities with gender awareness workshops, which focus on empowerment, citizen participation and female identities. Attendance at these workshops is voluntary. Approximately 55% of the women from the IBM and the RAIW programmes attend this type of training. The results will be described shortly.

EDUCE has also tried to involve the entire family in backyard activities and invite men to join IBM meetings. The strategy has generated greater awareness among women and some male participation. However, the idea still persists among the male population that working in and around the home is women's responsibility and that men have nothing to learn at meetings led by women. This situation has made EDUCE realise that male identities also need to be changed. This led to the organisation of a first workshop on masculinity issues, with EDUCE male personnel and community organisers. However, when similar workshops were held with community men, the process was halted by the groups themselves.

The creation of mixed groups (made up of both men and women) has also been part of EDUCE's strategy for changing the traditional sexual division of labour. However, in this case it is the women themselves who have refused to join a mixed group, because they have come to value only-women spaces. EDUCE has decided to respect such decision and allow the women themselves to come to the situation where they will be willing to join mixed groups, something which has already started to happen among community organisers. Similarly, some women's groups have moved from traditional female spaces towards the public sphere, by taking part in negotiations with the municipal government regarding a regional programme of sustainable development.



Women participating in a gender workshop of the project "Manejo Integral del Solar", promoted by EDUCE. Photo: María de las Mercedes Rocha

We now turn to the views of the Maya women themselves, on what working with EDUCE has meant for them. Those who have participated in gender awareness workshops in a regular way have started to see the workshops as a need because "they are very nice and we learn many things". These women are beginning to make decisions on their own and enjoy feeling confident in themselves. The most frequently mentioned workshops during the interviews were those dealing with women's rights and reproductive health; domestic violence; citizen participation; and self-esteem. Some of the women are clear about what they can achieve as women's collectives and are happy to know their rights: "Now we already know how to defend ourselves, (we know) that we have rights as women, we do value what we are, we know how far we can go".

It is hardly surprising, considering the working dynamics of EDUCE (where women have received gender awareness training and men have not), that the women show greater progress than their partners. This can be seen in the fact that the sexual division of labour inside the family has not been modified. In other words, the women continue to be responsible for all domestic work, despite their growing presence in income-generation activities and the public sphere. If women have to attend a meeting, their husbands will look after their children (something which men did not do previously), but they will not do any housework. However, in spite of their double working day, women hold on to their participation in public spaces. They also believe that productive and reproductive work should be shared by both men and women, although they have not been able to achieve such distribution of labour in their own homes.

Interestingly, women who do not attend the gender awareness workshops do not show any change in their perception of traditional gender roles. The differences between those women who attend and those who do not are clearly evident in their ability to express ideas. Those who attend the workshops demonstrate more ease in articulating themselves. This suggests that EDUCE is on the right track, but the need still exists to persuade more women and men to join this type of training. In fact, of the 254 women who are taking part in the programmes, only about half are attending the gender awareness workshops. If we add the number of men (393) participating, the percentage of people who have challenged the traditional gender roles is only 18.5%, and the vast majority is female.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the efforts being made by EDUCE to integrate the activities of women and men, as well as the success of the gender awareness workshops for some Maya women. More initiatives will have to take place along these lines in order to continue walking in this direction. ■

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