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# Of Heroines and Victims: Women and Economic Development in Medellín, Colombia

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As in many parts of the world, women in Colombia participate in economic development projects ostensibly designed to improve their own lives and those of their communities. Indeed, women's development has become a huge world-wide industry, so much so that most developing countries today must demonstrate attention to women's situations in order to receive international development aid.<sup>1</sup> In fact, over the past four decades women's development has been pursued by many nations as part of an argument about "efficiency"; it is more efficient to harness women's energy for development than to allow them to "waste" it languishing in the home (Moser 1989).<sup>2</sup> As development strategies have shifted toward neoliberal approaches that involve cutting state budgets for health care, education, and other social programs, there is an even greater expectation that women will fill the gaps left by state withdrawal (Boesten 2003; Lind 2003). In this climate, women have become the virtual heroines of development, committing time, energy, and resources to help their communities and their nations.

Under circumstances where women are increasingly relied upon for development work, some important questions need answering. Are women victimized or empowered by their participation in development? This is not a new question, and obviously the answers are complicated. Clearly, women's often heroic participation in national development schemes can be both empowering *and* victimizing. However, through the examination of three case studies from Colombia, I will argue that the shift toward neoliberal development policies creates conditions under which women's participation in development is both more necessary for survival, and more difficult to maintain. These policies, slashing state budgets for social services, increasing unemployment rates, and exacerbating social conflict, make demands of women that are perhaps both unreasonable and unfair.

## Asking After Women's Development

The question of whether development is good for women is not a new one. Esther Boserup first introduced it in her 1970 ground breaking study "Woman's Role in Economic Development." A number of studies at the time questioned the impact

of development around the world, but Boserup specifically asked whether *women* were doing better or worse after a decade of development. She showed that in fact, women's economic status in many developing nations had decreased: many women who had previously had some economic independence (through participation in the market for instance), had been shunted into subsistence agriculture while their men entered the cash economy through small-scale production or wage labor.<sup>3</sup>

Importantly, Boserup believed that women's marginalization from development was not only devastating to women, but was also disastrous for developing countries. Integrating women into development would ultimately help everyone, she thought, because women who were doing better would help their families, and in turn their nations, to do better as well.<sup>4</sup> In this view, women could be the *heroines* of development, if only they could be fully integrated into its processes.

Almost immediately, Boserup's view was contested. Other feminist theorists such as Lourdes Benería and Gita Sen (1981) argued that just as developing nations were deeply integrated into world markets in ways that perpetually subordinated them, so were women.<sup>5</sup> Women had not been marginalized from development, but instead had been integrated into development processes in very particular ways. The growth of formal capitalist economies in developing nations depended upon women's cheap or unpaid labor (whether in the home, or as part-time, seasonal, or otherwise underpaid workers). Similarly, the growth of community development programs depended upon women's volunteer labor (Lind 2003). Some argue that this has constituted the "super-exploitation" of women: adding organizational work and development planning to their already overloaded "double shift" of family responsibilities and work in the formal and informal economies (Benería and Sen 1981; Sen and Grown 1987; Young 1993; Marchand and Parpart 1995; Ward and Pyle 1995). In this view, women are the *victims* of development—"integrated" in ways that fail to recognize the contributions of their labor but that nevertheless make that labor indispensable to the process.

The point of agreement in both sets of claims is that women's heroism in development can be either empowering or victimizing, depending upon the conditions of their participation.<sup>6</sup> Actually, if one views these terms as opposite points on a continuum, then participation in development can be both empowering and victimizing at the same time, but the balance between the two can be affected by surrounding circumstances.

If the circumstances in which development is undertaken are what make the difference between abject victimization and some balance between "good" and "bad," then we really need to understand the exact conditions under which women labor (Lind 2003; Álvarez 1996). In particular, as neoliberal development policies are implemented throughout the developing world, we need to understand how these policies affect women.

### **The Neoliberal Development Context and Women**

In Latin America specifically, earlier import substitution development policies that created jobs and protected local industries have been gradually eroded. In their place are neoliberal policies that revive liberal economic faith in the viability and justice of free markets, and the sole responsibility of individuals to survive by selling their goods on the market (whether these “goods” are labor or commodities). Such policies emphasize free trade on the international market, decreased government intervention in the economy, and correspondingly downsized government budgets (Rosen and McFedyen 1995). Development programs under this rubric increasingly focus on the production of goods for sale as a panacea for growing unemployment, under-employment, and associated poverty. Placing the locus of responsibility for economic development on the individual, these policies frequently fail to consider how individual capacity is shaped by larger social contexts within which people live. Indeed, in many parts of the world, neoliberal economic policies themselves create circumstances that make successful initiatives more difficult than ever. In Latin America, scholars have demonstrated that neoliberal policies have had drastically negative effects on the social fabric as the gap between rich and poor grows wider, and crime rates and unemployment soar across the region (Portes and Hoffman 2003; Phillips 1998; Kuczynski 1988; George 1997).

Women are particularly burdened. While women’s labor has long been crucial to the development process, neoliberal development programs make that labor especially difficult as women are increasingly expected to provide care and services that the state had earlier supplied (Bakker 1994; Benería and Feldman 1992; Vavrus and Richey 2003; Lind 2002). For instance, under neoliberal emphases on privatization of the economy, women have been laid off from government employment and expected to rely on male partners’ wages, or targeted for small business loans that allow them to pursue activities such as selling sodas and ice cream out of their front parlors. In Colombia, as unemployment rates soar, women are expected to fill income gaps, or even support entire families, on the monies they might receive through such small business enterprises. This makes often unjustified assumptions about family structure, as over one-third of Colombian families are headed by single females (Bonilla 1985). Such a policy also makes unrealistic demands on women forced to rely upon the precarious informal economy, defined by the lack of guarantees such as a minimum wage, insurance and health benefits, and healthy working conditions (Babb 2001; Isserles 2003).

The Colombian case is especially interesting because it has only recently undergone some of the structural adjustment programs that have ravaged much of Latin America over the past twenty-five years. Moreover, Colombia suffers the effects of a very complicated armed conflict. As a result of both circumstances, poverty and violence are endemic issues that women participating in development must face. Under these conditions, women find that their participation in development can be “good” for them in that it often strengthens their sense of capability and personal worth; at the same time, it is “bad” for them in that, as development

participants, they are often exposed to greater violence and even greater poverty than they might otherwise be. Development is a paradoxical practice for women in Colombia, one that makes them both heroines and victims.

### The Colombian Cases

#### *Political Economy and Women's Development*

The particular historical moment in which I began this research was an especially difficult one for Colombians. The country's development strategy of import substitution and the protection of local industry had begun to erode earlier, but it had retained a fairly stable economy even through the debt crisis of the 1980s that so affected other Latin American countries (Sánchez 2001). However, in September 1998, President Andres Pastrana announced an "economic and social emergency"<sup>7</sup> and instituted austerity measures that cut state budgets for health care, education, and development programs, as well as subsidized food, utilities, and transportation for the poor. By 1999, the country was in "full recession" and the "official unemployment rate reached 20%" (Reina 2001: 75).<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the economic troubles, social problems also worsened. Colombia had enjoyed a period of relative respite from violence following the signing of the new 1991 Constitution and the death of the infamous drug-trafficker Pablo Escobar. However, when President Pastrana went forward with plans to negotiate for peace with the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia ["Las FARC"] in 1998, Colombia's conflict reasserted itself. In order to strengthen their position, or in some cases, to demand a place at the bargaining table, both the FARC and other armed actors escalated the violence (Bergquist, Peñaranda and Sánchez 2001).

The working poor were especially hard hit by these events. On the slopes located at the northern end of Medellín, one-half of the city's 2 million inhabitants lived in what were collectively known as "the communities" ["las comunas"] (Naranjo-Giraldo 1992).<sup>9</sup> Stereotyped as poverty-stricken and violent, these areas have been plagued by drug-traffickers, guerrilla groups, paramilitaries, and self-appointed vigilantes, all of whom have contributed to the creation of numerous gangs, over 200 of which operate in the northeastern communities alone (Salazar 1990, 1993). During 1999, unemployment in these areas reached 60% and by 2000 when I left the field, 42% of the population had decreased its food consumption in order to survive (Departamento Administrativo 2001). Gangs helped to assuage the crisis through illegal money-making schemes including the drug trade, black market in alcohol, cigarettes, clothes, etc., and through extorting protection money from busdrivers, store-owners, and other entrepreneurs.

Refugee families fleeing the rural violence exacerbated already-existing pressures on poor communities.<sup>10</sup> In particular, they not only competed with long-term residents for jobs and state funds for development, but also tapped into utility lines feeding nearby homes thus driving up costs for all. In general, these parts of

the city were not well-equipped to receive the influx of refugee families, and tensions abounded.

Women seeking help with these problems from government agencies were sorely disappointed when funding for women's development was also drastically cut. This was especially devastating given the earlier commitments various governments had made. In 1992, Governor Juan Gómez Martínez had founded the Women's Department ["La Consejería Para la Mujer"] of the state of Antioquia in exchange for electoral support from the region's women's organizations. This Governor envisioned the Women's Department as part of the overall "modernization" project of the state. Under the leadership of this agency, the state launched a series of wide-ranging projects that encouraged women's participation in the region's economic development.<sup>11</sup>

However, by the time I began fieldwork in 1998, changes were afoot. The new Governor of Antioquia, Alberto Builes Ortega, facing budget restrictions, was less committed to the agency. As a result, the Women's Department faced a budget crisis and staff were reduced, programs disappeared, and the once-influential Women's Department appeared to be limping along, hoping to hold out long enough to survive into the next administration.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, the City Agency for Women ["La Casa de la Mujer," literally the "Women's House"] was suffering under overall budget restrictions and decreased spending on women's development. The City Agency had opened in 1994 with the explicit goal of decreasing working-class women's reliance upon state agencies to resolve their economic and social problems. By promoting women's self-esteem and involving them in small-business enterprises (often involving the sale of cooked foods), the agency hoped to foster women's participation in development, and their ability to improve the quality of their homes and communities. In 1998, its staff was continuing to work in these areas, but with less money to help a population facing cutbacks in government services, growing unemployment, and worsening violence.

### *Methods*

It was in this context that I began my research. From September to December 1998, I hired a research assistant whom I had first met in 1996 when he was still employed by the Women's Department. As one of the founding employees of this agency, he had numerous contacts with government officials as well as with women's organizations all over the city and state. He introduced me to a number of women who had been involved in development programs organized by both of the central agencies I have discussed, and was invaluable to my research in these arenas.

During this time period, I interviewed officials in both the state and city women's development agencies, attended workshops, and visited women's groups that were involved in these government programs. I also interviewed leaders of 11 different women's groups, and visited specific development projects in both urban and rural areas around the state. Of these various interviews and projects, I have

selected three that were most representative of the kinds of problems faced by those interested in women's development.

### **The Recycling Project**

About 60 miles southeast of Medellín, in an economically depressed area, the Women's Department of Antioquia helped a women's group start a successful recycling program. My assistant took me to observe the project, and as we drove through the twisty mountain roads, he explained the economic situation for the surrounding region. It had been planted in coffee, but the debt crisis of the 1980s had resulted in a transformation: small coffee farmers sold their land and moved to the city, and wealthier people bought up the land to use for cattle grazing and country homes ["fincas"] for weekends and holidays. Although the town was nestled in a small, very picturesque valley, what few tourists it attracted were drawn to the countryside and rarely ventured into town. As a result, the 13,000 people in the town lived primarily from the declining coffee industry and were frequently unemployed. In an effort to generate income in this difficult economic climate, a small women's group picked up recyclable materials from participating households, then cleaned, repackaged, and resold the stuff to businesses in Medellín.

During our day-long trip, I was able to interview the group's leader, attend a group meeting, and also visit the processing center where materials were prepared for shipping. I learned the history of their organization, and the kinds of work they were presently doing. I was impressed by the pride the group showed in their accomplishments, and at the same time distressed by the wide variety of obstacles they faced.

The group had originally formed in 1994 with 40 members interested in pursuing some kind of income-generating development project. During their first two years, the Women's Department was one of many agencies engaged in social development projects for women, and provided the group with training in women's economic and political rights in relation to their families and the state. They were also put into contact with the smaller agencies that eventually funded them.

They were successful in making these contacts in part because their president had a particularly conducive social situation. Her husband, a college graduate with a degree in Sociology, was very interested in supporting women's development work, and encouraged his wife's participation. Moreover, they owned a wood-working shop and had no children, so in addition to her husband's emotional support, the president also had the free time and financial means to travel across the state meeting development agents, attending workshops, and drumming up support for the group.

In 1996, the group decided to form a recycling business and received funding from two different state-sponsored sources. This funding enabled them to access training and equipment for the collection of recyclable materials, and to start educating the public about their project.

Education was a big task, as the town had never participated in a recycling program before, and townspeople did not understand how it was supposed to work. For instance, it took the women 2 years to teach townspeople to sort their own trash. They accomplished this in part through flyers, but also through the local radio station which allowed them to broadcast in 10-minute slots 3 times a week.

There was also a great deal of prejudice against trash collectors in the town. Many members of the original group quit over the recycling project because they felt it was “denigrating work” [“un trabajo denigrante”]. In Colombia, as elsewhere in the world, the very poor regularly visit garbage dumps and trash heaps in search of food, clothing, items to sell, etc. It is quite common to hear these people referred to in unambiguously negative terms such as “disposable ones” [“desechables”] or “garbage-pickers” [“basuriega”]. In 1998, workers said that they were recognized as “recyclers” [“recicladoras”]; however, many people in the community still failed to understand the value of the recycling program. They continued to believe that they were doing women a favor by “allowing” them to pick up their trash and sell it. In other words, residents who recycled their trash believed that they were engaged in charity work rather than being provided with a service!

It was true that recycling was performed by very poor people. By the time I met the recycling group in 1998, their numbers had dwindled to 18, and only 8 of the very poorest members of the group actually did the recycling labor. Colombia’s public utilities companies assign every household to a particular economic stratum, ranging from “stratum 1” which is the lowest, to “stratum 6” which is the highest.<sup>13</sup> These assignments are quite familiar to almost everyone, and people readily speak about economic status in these terms. Most development projects target only members of strata 1 and 2, and in this case, funding specified that only women in these economic strata could benefit from the project. The president and other members, occupying strata 3 and 4, were not eligible to receive a salary from the project proceeds.

The project had been successful from a financial standpoint; in 1998 the women were earning enough money from the sale of recycled materials to pay their own salaries and were no longer dependent upon financing agencies. In part, this was the result of savvy investing. When they still had financing, they had agreed to keep their wages low so that surplus capital could be invested, and they then paid wages out of that investment. At the suggestion of the president and her husband, the laboring women had agreed to continue to receive very low wages in the hopes of building up more capital for future investment.

They were also successful in that the project had grown more respectable and townspeople seemed to better understand the process. Residents were finally sorting their own trash so that organic (or solid kitchen) waste went into 5 gallon black buckets, while bottles, plastics, paper, and cardboard went into separate plastic bags. On collection days, every other Monday or Tuesday, the 8 women walked down the streets with wheelbarrows yelling “recycling, recycling” [“reciclaje, reciclaje”] and people brought their trash out to them.



The rest of the work-week, the women spent their time sorting and processing the trash. The processing center, on the outskirts of town up a small dirt road, was an open-walled brick shed with a large storage room and several sinks along one end. There, women cut open, washed, and sorted plastic drink bags by color. Plastic bottles were washed and sorted by color and type of plastic. Paper and cardboard was sorted and then repackaged by type. Glass bottles were sorted by color, and then smashed up against a wall so that the pieces fell into a bricked-in space. Once the trash was sorted, cleaned, and re-bagged, it was taken by truck to Medellín where businesses bought recycled materials.

While the project was successful, women continued to face several obstacles that made their participation more difficult. First, the 8 women worked five days a week for 8 hours a day, earning about US\$64 every *month*. This was considerably less than the Colombian state's mandated minimum wage of US\$119 per month. Worse, the actual cost of living—food, health services, housing, transport, education, and entertainment—for a family of five had been calculated at more than twice that amount—roughly US \$286.<sup>14</sup> This meant that more than 2 minimum salaries were required for sustaining the average household, while these women earned less than one.

I asked the president why women were willing to work for so little compensation. She shrugged her shoulders and answered, “their standard of living [“condiciones de la vida”] has not improved substantially. Perhaps they are assured of sugar and rice that they did not have before, but their conditions have not improved!” Then I asked, “So why do they do it? What did they live on before?” She answered with a laugh, “from the weather! [“del clima”].” Then more seriously, she admitted, “This is a question that I have asked myself, because they have now worked under these conditions for two years, so this must represent an improvement. . . . It must be that before, they were actually hungry.” I then suggested that perhaps the women had partners who helped support their households. She said, “Yes, some of them have partners who work and earn a little money, but there are several who do not have any other income.” After I had turned off the tape recorder, she added that perhaps they continued in the project because their only alternative was prostitution.

Poor working conditions were also a problem for the group. The collection work was especially difficult as women walked several miles in the hot sun (or pouring rain) with many pounds of trash piled high into wheelbarrows. Once they arrived at the processing center, its structure was not designed to protect them from the elements. They worked in the open patio area even in the heavy rains that fell in the afternoons and had nowhere to sit and relax except on plastic bags full of recycled materials. Breaking glass bottles by hand was obviously hazardous business and one admitted that she cut her hands frequently as glass bounced back off the walls. They had recently bought heavy uniforms in the hope of protecting themselves from the dirt and cutting edges of the materials they worked with, but some refused to wear them because they were too heavy or too hot. In addition,

the project was too poor to provide health care or retirement benefits—so getting sick or injured on the job was a serious problem.

Another problem was that of transport. The town loaned them a truck a couple of times a month to get materials to Medellín where they could be sold, but there were often days when the truck was not running, or when the roads were washed out.<sup>15</sup> When I arrived, it had been 5 days since they had been able to use the truck, and their processing shed was overflowing. If the truck were not repaired soon, they would have to stop collecting materials until they could get some things to the city. This was a serious problem as it disrupted the flow of goods and capital, and could potentially endanger women's paychecks for weeks at a time. Further, it could damage the fragile reputation they had worked so hard to establish with the town's residents. Undoubtedly, they needed a more reliable source of transport.

As I left the town that night, I reflected on both the successes they had won, and the continued challenges these women faced. These women were clearly "heroines" in the sense that they provided a genuine service that under different circumstances would have been provided by the state. Their participation did seem to deliver on some of the "empowerment" promises; women were clearly proud of their labor and of the project's successes. At the same time they were victimized by the process in that they labored under very difficult circumstances and on top of that, were still perceived as the recipients of charity despite their ingenuity and hard work. Like so many development projects for women, this one seemed to be relying upon women's back-breaking labor to provide a community-wide service in exchange for minimal remuneration. The conditions, at least at that moment, seemed to tip the balance from empowerment toward victimization.

### **The Bakery Cooperative**

Back in the city, I was anxious to observe one of the City Agency's more successful projects, a women's restaurant and bakery cooperative located in a northwestern neighborhood. My research assistant and I took the bus up the hill to visit them one warm, sunny morning. We spent the day talking with the group's president, touring their premises, and hearing the history of the group's development.

The Bakery and Restaurant Cooperative was formed in 1994 originally as a neighborhood organization with some ties to the local Protestant church. Although much larger in the beginning, they had gradually dwindled down to the current 21 members. When they first started, most of the women worked as domestic servants during the day, and at night worked as a group cooking sausages and tamales, and creating Christmas decorations for sale in their neighborhoods.

At this same time, the City Agency was conducting programs for ex-guerrilla members ["reinsertados"] in the area. Urban guerrillas ["milicianos"] operated in many of the city's poor neighborhoods, and the state from time to time offered alternative employment and development schemes to these areas in order to control or dampen guerrilla activities. As part of an overall effort to establish a positive

state presence, these programs often extended beyond the guerrillas themselves to other members of their communities, including women's groups.

As part of such a program begun in 1995, this women's group was contracted by the City Agency to provide meals the city fed to the homeless. The group worked "night and day" to provide 500 sandwiches a day for the city. After five months, the city gave them money to buy equipment and receive training in bakery and restaurant management.

In 1998, they were still running strong, and their circumstances attested to the success of the program. They had a contract with the City Agency to provide breakfasts for the homeless, and also lunch meals for the city-wide workshops often held for women involved in other City Agency programs. They rented a large building with a covered patio for outdoor seating, a counter from which they sold candies and pastries, a large kitchen area with space for stove-tops and baking ovens, and several large storage rooms. They prepared the food on-site, and then transported it via taxi or private car to the workshop sites the City Agency had chosen for particular days.

The president was very proud of their work, adding, "I am very pleased with my good fortune." In fact, she had invested a great deal of time and effort in the project. It was because of her efforts that the cooperative was able to buy food on credit from the grocer down the street. She and the grocer had reached an agreement that the cooperative would not have to pay him for groceries until they had received payment from the City Agency. She had also been responsible for the development of their food menu. Although she consulted with a nutritionist from the City Agency, she designed her own menus to be "more filling and more tasty." She said these were better for the homeless who were unlikely to get other meals, and designed to keep clients (such as the state) coming back for more.

Like all development success stories, this one too had its problems, most of which were economic. Of the 21 members of the cooperative, only 7 (including the president) actually worked in the restaurant preparing food. This was in part because there was only enough money for an honorarium ["*bonificación*"] of about US\$20 a month for each worker. Even for these small sums, they often waited weeks to be paid by the city. As a result, they lost working members who could not afford to wait long periods for cash. Moreover, there were many months when the debts for groceries, transport, utilities, etc. were such that all the money went to pay debts, with nothing left over for the honorariums! This meant that many of the workers were either women whose husbands' salaries could support the household, or they worked elsewhere and labored in the restaurant during their "off" hours. The restaurant was actually open from 5:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and a few workers, along with the president, were there every day. In fact, the president worked so many hours that she only saw her two sons on Sundays when the restaurant was closed; the rest of the time, they stayed with her mother.

In addition to wage problems, the group faced a precarious situation in terms of their building. They had rented it from the nearby Protestant Church without any problem until 1997, when the church changed pastors. That year, they had had to work hard to convince the new pastor to allow them to stay in the building. In an effort to avoid such difficulties in the future, they had unsuccessfully tried to get a loan to buy the building. They were turned down by several lenders in part because as a cooperative of women with little property to offer as collateral, they had trouble qualifying for small-business loans (usually made to individuals). The president had heard that sometimes the leaders of such cooperatives had put up their own homes as collateral for the group, but she had thus far been dissuaded from that strategy by City Agency employees concerned for her long-term welfare.

Their business was also rather severely affected by the reduced subsidies to the poor initiated by President Pastrana. For instance, the cuts in government subsidies for electricity meant that they had to shut down the electric bread ovens, so the bakery section of the business was closed for the time being. Other daily necessities were also more expensive, such as groceries, water and sewerage, and telephone services, all making it more difficult for the cooperative to make ends meet.

Lastly, without the ability to secure a loan, they were also unable to buy their own transport. In order to get the cooked food to the workshops, they had been using a private truck that they rented from a local man who worked for them while seeking more lucrative employment. He finally found a good job and his truck was no longer available. They were on the lookout for another driver, but in the meantime were using taxis that apparently jostled the food so badly that city workers had complained. The group worried over this because, as part of neoliberal privatization of government programs, there was growing pressure on government agencies to use local private restaurants rather than cooperatives to provide food for city functions. The group did not want to give the City Agency any excuse to terminate their contract.

Despite their difficulties, the president clearly felt that her participation in this project had been tremendously empowering; the women had learned how to run a small business, and were convinced that they were capable. She said she worked "night and day" because she loved it so, despite the hardships it created for her family. Her children in particular complained to her, "You are being a fool. Go back to where you worked before, you were doing better there." She had worked as a maid, and earned more money there, but said, "I know that I do not have any money, but I feel good about what I am doing." She explained that some people "do not understand what a cooperative program is. This is not for getting rich, but rather to offer a contribution, this is a contribution that one makes." She indicated a sense of eventual personal gain as well, saying, "One day this cooperative will succeed and I will be able to take better care of my children." For the other women, also working only for honorariums, one might suspect that they too were similarly motivated.

As I said goodbye to this group, I began thinking about how to evaluate the project. I was struck by the fact that the City Agency relied upon these women to provide cheap cooked meals for the city's homeless and other populations in need. In exchange for their long hours of dedication and hard work, women received minimal compensation, and were also prevented from expanding their operation by certain government policies ostensibly designed to decrease the dependency of the poor upon the state. Clearly, neoliberal economic policies created conditions that hindered, rather than supported, women's entrepreneurial activities. Mandated cutbacks in state spending made it difficult for women to maintain daily operations. Restrictions on lending that favored the individual entrepreneur rather than cooperative enterprises made it hard for women to access small business loans. Additionally, with little provocation the City Agency might turn from state-established cooperatives to private industry to supply their needs. In this case, the state exploited (and benefitted greatly from) women's willingness to become the "heroines" of development.

### **Refugee Women's Organizations**

The last set of projects I want to look at are women's organizations that the City Agency has helped to establish in refugee neighborhoods. My research assistant was working in these neighborhoods at the time, helping women's groups to organize so that they could qualify for development funding from the state. He had good relationships with women in these areas, and as a result, I was able to travel with him to visit them.

Groups fleeing the rural violence founded these neighborhoods. In some cases, they had advance warning that guerrilla or paramilitary were going to attack their town or village and could pile their belongings together onto a truck. These families arrived with beds, televisions, refrigerators, stoves, and other material goods that made setting up house a bit easier upon arrival. In other cases, people fled in the middle of the night and came to the city with only the belongings they could gather as they ran. When they arrived in Medellín, they had to begin rebuilding their lives from scratch. At first, they got very little help from the state.

Refugees built their neighborhoods on squatted land located on some of the most precarious terrain in the city. The evening news was frequently filled with stories of yet another squatter settlement that had been destroyed by landslide, or moved by police for fear that such an event would occur. Refugees began to petition the state for the right to build on squatted land as soon as they arrived, but while awaiting legalization, they built houses, stairways, sidewalks, community centers, schools, and even roads with the bits of money they were able to save as construction workers, night watchmen, or domestic servants (Naranjo-Giraldo 1992).

Visiting these neighborhoods involved climbing steep, curving roads up through the northeastern communities until finally we reached the peak and the road ran

out. Sprawled on the hillside below the road, we reached the houses by climbing down vertiginous stairways carved literally out of the side of the mountain. Shacks ["ranchos"] built of found wood, cardboard, tin, and sometimes brick if the families were lucky enough, protected families from the elements. Ugly snaking electrical lines were strung haphazardly between the houses, tapped illegally into the official grid further down slope.

Gaining legal recognition for their neighborhoods, and thus access to all the amenities that came with that recognition—sewerage, electricity, water, telephones, schools, roads, garbage services, etc.—was one of the main goals for neighborhood women's organizations. Women whose husbands had the best paying jobs did not work outside the home, and thus had time for organizing, garnering official support and recognition, and participating in community development. They engaged in activities that benefitted the entire community, including poorer families and those women left widowed with children by the war.

In Medellín, it was necessary for women's groups to have a legal structure in order to be eligible for government funding. My research assistant worked with the City Agency to help women get through this process. It involved the election of a Board of Directors, the construction of By-laws, and participation in a series of workshops covering a variety of issues. I had the opportunity to attend the workshop during which women in one neighborhood adopted a formal legal structure. The process was complicated and revealed a serious obstacle to women's organizing in this manner.

Unfortunately, although Colombia reports an official 98% literacy rate (UNDP 1999), many people still found it difficult to attend school in the late 1990s.<sup>16</sup> In particular, people living in isolated rural areas were often quite far away from the nearest schools and had to be boarded during the school year. This could be expensive, and families were especially reluctant to send daughters away to school. The result was that many of the adult women in refugee women's organizations were functionally illiterate. Instructions for preparing By-laws had to be read aloud to them by development workers, and the details painstakingly explained over and over again. Even the election of Board members was made difficult: women could not read a ballot nor write out individual names. Voting was thus conducted by having everyone close their eyes and raise their hands when development workers called the names of women for whom they wished to vote.

There was another, more serious obstacle that made this kind of development participation difficult. There was little state presence in these communities other than the few development workers who ventured up the slope, and gangs of all kinds proliferated. Perhaps not surprisingly, armed groups were displeased by women's organizing strategies, especially when they tended to increase the state's interest in their neighborhoods. Women in many organizations reported being threatened by gang leaders who told them that they would be killed if they continued their activities. Development workers reported being caught in the middle of gunfights between rival gangs while trying to conduct empowerment workshops.

I knew from personal experience that state officials were careful to leave refugee neighborhoods before nightfall. In short, women and development workers sometimes risked their lives in order to galvanize state interest in community development.

Despite the difficulties, women also clearly felt empowered and were pleased by their participation in these programs. After the meeting when women elected their first Board of Directors, the group brought out a surprise feast of Christmas treats that they had collectively prepared for the City Agency workers who had been helping them. The president of another group had become a very familiar face at City Hall demanding that the state recognize and provide services for her community. She had braved her husbands' displeasure and risked violence at the hands of gang members to do so, and was very proud that government workers were beginning to recognize and respect her.

In this last example, once again women appeared to be both the heroines and the victims of development. Their efforts were heroic given the circumstances under which they struggled to rebuild lives torn apart by violent conflict. Forced to flee their homes by a war that the state had failed to resolve, and forced to rebuild those homes under a neoliberal economy that prided individual initiative but would not easily support it, they were both empowered and victimized by their own heroism.

### Conclusion

In the forty years since Boserup started the wave called "women's development," we have learned that questions about women's participation in development have complicated answers. Clearly, development can be "good" for women, and conversely, women are "good" for development. In fact, women make obviously heroic efforts to contribute to their communities' and their nations' development projects. In the process, they learn skills, garner supports for their organizational labor, and gain a profound sense of accomplishment.

At the same time, they often engage in these practices under extremely harsh circumstances and may be victimized by their very participation. Colombian women in the three case studies were limited by a neoliberal economy that cut social spending while raising unemployment, and by a violent social conflict that increased tensions in marginalized neighborhoods and made organizing for change more difficult.

Under such circumstances, it is important to ask after women's development and in particular, it is important to ask about the viability of a neoliberal doctrine of individual responsibility and "hard work" in world regions afflicted by violence and rising social inequality. Relying upon individual women's resources as the major means by which countries will become "developed" in today's world seems a serious overestimation of these would-be heroines' capacities. Ultimately, the Colombian cases raise questions about both the justice and long-term feasibility of

putting the burdens of economic development on the backs of the world's poorest citizens. We must ask ourselves, how likely is it that "hard work" and "self-reliance" alone will accomplish development goals—and equally important—how fair is it to ask the world's most vulnerable to put right what powerful states will not?

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### Notes

1. For instance, Ghodsee (2003: 33) reports that the World Bank "requires 'Gender Impact Assessments' for all of its development projects."

2. This particular rhetoric suggesting that women's work in the home does not contribute to national development is ironic given that women's dedication to home and family is so often deemed an essential contribution to nation-building (Radcliffe and Westwood 1996).

3. Boserup contended that women had been marginalized from economic development as a result of Western biases in major development institutions. According to Boserup, Western gender ideologies based on a public-private dichotomy (the idea that the proper role for women was in the home, doing domestic labor, while men belonged in the "public" world of politics and commerce), had informed development practitioners' views of women's roles, and had resulted in the marginalization of women from productive labor.

4. The idea was that women would share their good fortune with others, using money to feed children and send them to school, etc.

5. This is an argument from the dependency school of development (Frank 1967; Cardoso and Faletto 1979).

6. For more recent feminist development thought *see* Elson 1992; Young 1993; Kabeer 1994; and Saunders 2002.

7. All translations from the Spanish are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

8. President Gaviria's development plan (1991-94) accelerated the economic "apertura" [opening] begun tentatively in the 1950s; with a more neoliberal economic policy, foreign investment in Colombia doubled between 1990 and 1994 (Bergquist, Peñaranda, and Sánchez G. 2001: xvi), and international goods entered the country at an unprecedented rate. Reina (2001: 75) argues that the apertura "devastated broad sectors of Colombian industry and agriculture thus exposed to the competitive pressures of the world market."

9. These communities were built upon the northern slopes on each side of the central valley where the downtown area was constructed. In 1998, the northwestern slope was home to 500,000 people, while the northeastern slope was home to another 500,000. Both sides are collectively known as the most violent, poverty-stricken areas of the city, but the northeastern



communities ["la comuna nororiental"] are widely thought to be "worse" in part because the drug-trafficker Pablo Escobar concentrated his gang-creating activities there in the 1980s.

10. In 1999, Colombia had the third largest internally displaced population in the world, after Sudan and Angola (Bergquist, et. al 2001, page 230, citing 1999 World Report of Human Rights Watch, published in 2000).

11. The preceding is taken from two documents supplied to me by Women's Department staff—"Democratic Leadership with a Gendered Perspective: Projection of EPAM" and "Toward Planning with a Gendered Perspective."

12. In fact, they never received the budget they needed to function at full speed, but were still in existence when I left the field in December 1999.

13. The price paid for public utilities all over Colombia is graduated according to the value of property and housing, so that lower income persons pay less for electricity, water, sewerage, etc. (Berry and Urrutia 1976: 168-169). Stratum are determined by a combination of size of household, number of persons working, income, housing materials, durable goods, etc.

14. The exchange rate at that time was about 1.7 pesos to the dollar. On December 20, 1998, Antioquia's regional paper, *El Colombiano*, published the summary of a report produced by the National School for Labor Unions, a Medellín-based NGO that worked with the country's unionized workers, that calculated the cost of living in 1998 using figures from the Administrative Department of National Statistics ("DANE").

15. The region was geologically unstable, and landslides strong enough to wash out the roadway were quite common. When this happened, travelers could be stranded for days at a time waiting for the state to provide road crews who could repair the way.

16. Although education is more widely available today than it was in the 1950s (Puyana and Orduz 1998), there are still many people living in and around Medellín who were unable to finish high school. Even in 1995, in the northeastern communities of Medellín, attendance at high school was estimated at only 78% (Departamento Administrativo 1995).

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