

**VOLUNTEER AND PROFESSIONALIZED ACTIVISM  
IN THE SAO PAULO WOMEN'S MOVEMENT<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents part of the findings of a research designed to understand the effect of the professionalization of feminist groups (through the creation of non-governmental organizations) on the deepening of democracy in Brazilian society. The research examined how professionalized and non-professionalized feminist groups contribute to social democratization, at the policy-making level and/or at the level of everyday relations and practices.

This research compared 4 feminist organizations which offer support to low-income women's groups in São Paulo, but have different organizational structures: two were non-governmental organizations (hereafter NGOs) with paid staff and international financing. The other two were voluntary organizations with smaller budget. The collective identity, internal dynamics, practices and impact of these support groups were investigated.

This paper focuses on the consequences of professionalization for the women's movement as a whole. In particular, it shows how NGOs' organizational form does not facilitate "joining" the movement, although it gives other advantages. It also points to the challenges presented by the creation of NGOs for the representation and participation of working-class and non-professionalized activists, due to the fast working pace of professionalized activists. Finally, it raises some preliminary questions about the way organizational forms and practices can impinge upon groups' collective identity and strategies, on the way social movements achieve change, and can constrain or contribute to feelings of belonging and solidarity.

## **Introduction**

The Brazilian women's movement, like other women's movements in Latin America, reflects the great diversity of the region regarding race, class, sexual orientation, and generation. The movement has brought together self-declared feminists, originally mostly well-educated, white middle class women adopting a long range strategy focusing on gender equality, and women, who do not refer to themselves as feminists, from the poor and working-class, who organized around family and community survival issues or in urban and rural trade unions.

However, Amrita Basu (1995) warns us not to limit our reading of feminism to its middle class Western expression, or to fail to recognize it when women for one reason or another refute the label but not the ideas or the practices. The boundaries between feminism and other components of the women's movement are not clear-cut, for some of the issues dealt with by "non-feminist" low-income women, such as contraception and childcare, also address gender inequality (Radcliffe and Westwood, 1993). The distinction has become even more blurred as a number of women from all walks of life have started to acknowledge their feminist identity, often times radically redefining what it entails (Alvarez, 1994; Soares et al., 1995). Thus, overcoming the theoretical notion of a "unitary woman" has started to become, although still timidly, a practical reality for Brazilian feminism. It has "gone plural" as Sonia Alvarez (1996) cogently puts it.

Since their emergence in the 70s, Latin American feminist groups have sought to work with low-income women offering support in their organizing activities as well as services (Alvarez, 1990; Schmink, 1981). Yet class, and racial, differences which have received attention only in recent years, often have led low-income women to regard feminism as a white middle class women's creation which has little relevance to their own lives (Garcia Castro, 1992). As I just noted this is changing, if only gradually. In most cases, feminists were offering support voluntarily, as activists. My research shows that the feminist movement has professionalized partially, i.e. that a number of feminist activists are now earning their living through movement work, thus combining activism and professional career.

In particular, the last 10 years witnessed the creation of numerous NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) within the feminist movement, just as within other sectors of Brazilian civil society. I define NGOs, as legally sanctioned civil organizations engaging in research and advocacy activities and/or providing services and support to local grassroots groups in disadvantaged communities, a concept derived from Carroll's Grassroots Support Organizations<sup>2</sup> (1992:11).

NGOs have a permanent, paid staff and are accountable to some degree to their donors, most often international agencies or private foundations, for the research, consulting, service-providing projects or support to local women's groups they are granted funding for. Their structure is fairly formalized, usually with a coordination heading the organization, and a division of labor, especially between administrative tasks and the "technical" work done by specialized staff. However, NGOs differ according to organizational histories and the political and personal characteristics of their members.

Some non-professionalized feminist groups perform similar activities, although in a more spontaneous manner, responding to demands as they arise rather than following projects. They have a voluntary, fluctuating membership of activists. They are more likely to be accountable to their constituency, or to grassroots groups, since they are less dependent on donor funding. They also dedicate some activities to the needs of the members of the group itself.

Much of social movement research has focused on their emergence. Indeed, little research has been done on social movements' development and maintenance either by European, identity-

focused, new social movement theorists (Melucci, 1984) or by strategy-oriented North American resource mobilization theorists (MacAdam et al, 1988; Morris and McClurg Mueller, 1992). My research is one of the few which focuses on their professionalization. I know of only 3 other such studies, on movements in the United States (Kleidman (1994); Oliver (1983); Staggenborg (1988)), as well as McCarthy and Zald (1987 [1973]) early attempt at theorizing social movement professionalization in the United States. These studies reach conflictive conclusions as to whether professionalization inhibits or facilitates volunteer activism and what it means for the life of movements. Hence, more research is needed.

This paper presents an overview of the origins and characteristics of the women's health movement in São Paulo, in particular of its organizational diversity which includes, but is not restricted to, differences between professionalized and non-professionalized organizations. It offers some comments concerning the consequences of the professionalization of the Brazilian feminist movement for the working class women they interact with, and for the women's movement as a whole. In particular, it shows how the organizational form of the women's NGOs I visited does not facilitate "joining" the movement, although it offers other advantages. It also points to the challenges presented by the creation of NGOs for the representation and participation of working-class and non-professionalized activists, due to the fast working pace of professionalized activists. Finally, I raise some preliminary questions about the way organizational forms and practices can impinge upon groups' collective identity and strategies, on the way social movements achieve change, and can constrain or contribute to feelings of belonging and solidarity.

### **The Story of the Brazilian Women's Movement**

By the late 70s, in Brazil, as throughout Latin America, women organized around their identities as mothers and wives to resist authoritarian military regimes, with the help of the Catholic Church and leftist-oriented parties (Alvarez, 1990; Safa, 1990). At the same time, it became evident that the Brazilian military regime had failed to transform the "economic miracle" into a reality for all Brazilians. Grassroots organizations and popular movements sprang up in a collective effort to deal with the increasing difficulties of the working masses and to oppose the repressive regime (Alvarez, 1990; Kowarick, 1985).

Recently, it has been acknowledged that women represent the majority of participants in many of these grassroots movements not only in Brazil but in Latin America in general (Caldeira, 1990). Women took to the streets to defend the well-being of their families, threatened by the wage-squeezing development strategy of the military, the economic crisis of the early 80s, and more recently by the 1989 recession, aggravated by adjustment policies which have meant further dwindling of public funding and privatization of social programs (Faria 1994).

Women have been especially affected by these hardships. As studies have shown, they bore most of the negative consequences of structural adjustment programs which cut public services linked to areas of social reproduction (such as health and education), for which women have traditionally been responsible (Barroso and Amado, 1987; Nash, 1990). Health care is a case in point as I will demonstrate in the following pages.

As for the Brazilian feminist movement, Alvarez (1990) attributes its emergence to the questioning of inequalities experienced on the job by educated, working middle-class women, as

well as to the deterioration of their standard of living as a consequence of the economic crisis. Contradictions between the traditional gender ideology of the military regime, which ascribed nurturing roles to women as mothers and wives, and its strong state capitalist development strategy, which prevented women from fulfilling these ascribed roles, fueled the growth of the movement. In addition to these structural conditions, Alvarez believes "conjunctural conditions", such as the human rights discourse, the international feminist discourse, especially after the U.N.-sponsored International Women's Year in 1975, and the discrimination suffered by women within the sexist and male-dominant political organizations of the Left, to have brought crucial ideological and organizational support to the creation of an autonomous feminist movement. The period of liberalization of the military regime after the mid-70s, known as *Abertura*, and the ensuing strengthened hope for successful protest were also favorable (Alvarez, 1990; Schmink, 1981).

Finally, the encroachment of the authoritarian state and the market into the private sphere, which is largely a women's domain, "comprising religion, the family, relations with kinfolk and social dynamics" (Arizpe, 1990:xviii), left women "empty-handed [with] few children, small families, fewer social ceremonies and religious rites, highly formalized urban customs and programmed social practices" (ibid:xv). The need arose for women to reconstruct an identity, which women did in part through their participation in women's groups. Women needed to "create a democratic public space for their collective identities and demands" (Cohen, 1985:670).

### **Emergence of Women's Health Movement**

Traditionally responsible for the care of the sick, the young and the elderly, Brazilian women's burden became heavier as malnutrition (Barroso and Amado, 1987), and unsanitary and crowded housing conditions increasingly affected family health. The situation was aggravated by diminishing government investment and further privatization of public services throughout the 80s and 90s. For example, between 1989 and 1993, federal health expenses plummeted from 11.3 to 7.5 billion dollars (Berquó, 1995:7). As a result, low-income women have had to travel longer distances and wait longer to obtain health services of poor quality for themselves or their family, despite a major decline in the fecundity rate, from 5.6 in 1970 to 2.5 in 1991 (Berquó, 1995:1).

High rates of sterilizations --in disproportionate numbers among Afro-Brazilian women (Roland & Carneiro, 1990)--, extremely high rates of caesarian sections, and reproductive tract cancers (responsible for 30% of all total cancer deaths in Brazil) are the major reproductive health problems faced by Brazilian women (Berquó, 1995:23). Obviously, women's health should not be limited to their reproductive health but considering that this is the area which receives the most attention from the authorities, the bleak picture provided above gives an idea of how neglected other women's health issues might be.

Considering the grim situation of health care for the large majority of Brazilians, and especially for low-income women, it is understandable that people have been organizing to make claims on the State for better services. Women also have searched ways to make the medical establishment more respectful of women's rights and needs and to give women more control over their own bodies and health. This was originally more a concern of middle class feminist groups than of low-income women's groups, whose priority was to obtain health posts and hospitals in their neighborhoods. Nonetheless, feminist groups have been working with low-income women in health movements, offering them ideological and logistical support. As noted earlier, the nature of this

relationship has changed as some feminist organizations have professionalized. This trend is part of the larger phenomenon of emergence of NGOs in the South.

### **Emergence of NGOs**

Southern NGOs emerged, in the 60s, from a shift of northern NGOs' funding policies towards supporting indigenous efforts, from new thinking of Third World intellectuals on development theory, and from Liberation Theology, all of which emphasize the need to work from the ground up. The removal or resignation of professionals from the public sector after government policy changes by authoritarian governments also played a part (Carroll, 1992; Clark, 1991; Landim, 1993).

In Brazil, NGOs have multiplied in the 1980s (50% of Brazilian NGOs were created between 1980 and 1990) due to the expansion of international cooperation and to the emphasis on privatization by neo-liberal governments starting in the Reagan years, which resulted in a move away from the financing of government efforts towards the financing of the private sector; The increased associativism in democratizing Brazil and the return of exiles after 1979 were also important factors (Clark, 1991; Fernandes & Carneiro, 1991; Landim, 1993). The classificatory term "NGO" has been used only recently to identify these organizations, including by themselves, creating a social category which spans widely differing realities, as Leilah Landim (1993) brilliantly demonstrates.

The emergence of these NGOs in the feminist movement, was the result of a conjunction of factors including (1) the recognition of the "women's question" nationally and internationally, as indicated in Brazil by the creation of the National Council for Women's Rights and of police stations specialized in cases of violence against women; and internationally by the funding available for women's projects, which led to (2) the creation of jobs around such issues (in the State women's councils or in NGOs); (3) the economic crisis which prevents middle class women from engaging in activism while holding one or two jobs, and creates greater needs among the poor; and finally (4) a strong desire from feminist activists to integrate feminism into their every-day lives through their jobs (Lebon, 1993).

In the 1970s most NGOs embraced a new understanding of development as a political process, according to which self-help initiatives would be useful only if accompanied by a change in power relations (Clark, 1991), hence entailing a deepening of democracy. However, in the 1980s NGOs have been perceived as a panacea for development by bilateral and multilateral development agencies. As a result, Northern aid agencies are increasingly shaping the NGO community and NGO objectives. Yet, most NGOs do not question their dependency on donor funding (Landim, 1988; Moura, 1994) since it might threaten organizational survival. Critics have claimed recently that NGOs' performance has been overstated and that they are becoming part of the "pact of domination", along with states, global development agencies, and private firms and thus compromising their social change potential (Clark, 1991; Helzner and Shepard, 1990).

For example, Clark (1991) argues that as national and international development agencies from the north are increasingly funding NGOs, the less radical among the latter have been tailoring their programs to the directives of the former, thus reflecting the donors' mainstream ideology and methodology. Moreover, pressured to demonstrate results for the funds they are granted, NGOs might also seek more immediate, concrete or more visible results, at the expense of time-consuming grassroots participation, which might limit grassroots' consciousness-raising and empowerment. These are essential for the long-term improvement of their well-being as well as for true social change and democratization.

Nonetheless, NGOs still represent some of the most promising attempts at democratizing development, to use Clark's phrase, especially when they work with and/or foster local groups. These groups can provide the spaces needed for alternatives to development suggested by Escobar (1995). He emphasizes the role that local organizing in the South should play in the future of their own societies by allowing people to define their own needs and strategies as they negotiate/resist cultural and economic domination by the North. Therefore, a more balanced picture of the NGO world is needed, in particular of their relationship with the grassroots.

As I have mentioned earlier, numerous NGOs have been created recently in the Brazilian feminist movement. I will now focus on why this change in organizational form is an important issue to consider and point to some of the ways I believe this process of organizational diversification (in this case professionalization) has affected the São Paulo women's health movement.

### **Social Movement Theory, Organizational Forms and Collective Identity**

Social movements and grassroots organizations have struggled to, and in a certain measure, have succeeded in providing low-income populations with better housing and infrastructure (Kowarick, 1985), better health services (Cohn, 1994; Jacobi, 1983), food programs etc. They have all been significant participants in the redemocratization of Brazil, as in other Latin American countries. As a result, formal democracy was reinstated in Brazil in 1985. However, Brazilian society remains characterized by a social authoritarianism which permeates all social relations: hierarchy and inequality pervade the cultural practices through which people relate to each other in everyday life. This pattern is reflected in severe economic, racial and gender inequalities (Dagnino, 1994; Lovell, 1993). True forms of cultural, economic and social democratization remain to be achieved for a "deepening of democracy" (Alvarez, 1993). Many scholars have documented the long-term potential of social movements and grassroots organizations to bring about such social change (Jaquette, 1994; Escobar and Alvarez, 1992). In part, this potential stems from their participatory nature and from their relative autonomy from mainstream institutions and from micro-level changes they entail for participants.

In this respect, three questions seem important: 1) what happens when these movements become dependent for funding on mainstream institutions such as foundations and international aid agencies; and more interestingly for organizational research, how do changes in organizational forms and practices impinge upon 2) the solidarity and collective identity of these groups and 3) the way they bring change about. The following section will focus on these last two issues.

Although issues of solidarity and collective identity have been explored since initial work by the early social scientists, especially Durkheim (1974 [1906]), the issue of how organization influences solidarity and collective identity remains a frontier in social movement theory (Morris and McClurg Mueller, 1992). New social movement theorist Alberto Melucci (1984) considers the form of new social movements as being a goal in itself since it is a "challenge to the dominant patterns", opposing "the operational rationality of apparatuses" (1984:830): movements' informal network-like forms, with multiple leaderships, submerged in society, embody the anti-hierarchical, anti-bureaucratic principles of their participants, as they redefine and practice new forms of sociability. However, his analysis pays limited attention to different forms of organizations.

Resource mobilization theorists have done a better job at examining different organizational forms but they do not consider the influence these different arrangements have on

collective identity, solidarity and ideology (MacAdam et al., 1988), although they have recently turned to but not fully addressed some of these issues (Morris & McClurg Mueller, 1992). Yet, organizational arrangements, institutions and practices are likely to influence the collective identity of the group, the consciousness and the solidarity of members as well as the group's actions (Fantasia, 1988; Tarrow, 1992).

Consensual decision-making, in particular, an organizational feature essential to participatory organization, has been shown to heighten group members' commitment to the decisions made, and hence to increase solidarity (Hechter, 1987; Uphoff, 1986). Similarly, certain practices of social movements such as demonstrations, mass rallies etc have a ritual-like quality which acts as a solidarity builder due to psychological factors: participating with a large number of people boosts people's sense of self-importance, as participants are "on parade" (Kertzer, 1988:68). This is particularly strong for women since they have traditionally been confined to the home. Participating in a demonstration is declaring publicly one's acceptance of the movement's position, hence reinforcing one's identity with and one's commitment to the movement; it also engenders feelings of belonging reinforced by the "paraphernalia of ritual", ie "slogans, songs, cheers, expressive gestures, and uniforms" that symbolize "feelings of common identity and sympathy" the movement fosters (Blumer, 1974:9-11 in Kertzer 1988:72).

In the case of the São Paulo women's movement, examples of this paraphernalia are the color purple, such as in the purple paper flowers which blossomed at many women's gathering, as well as songs, in particular the "Maria, Maria" sang by popular artist Elis Regina, which turned into a true women's movement hymn. Finally, participating in a demonstration creates a strong emotional impact on people as they jointly participate with so many other people in a particular struggle (Kertzer, 1988:119).

How likely are such movement practices to be affected by professionalization? The case of the São Paulo women's health movement might shed some light on these issues: I will detail the organizational forms it takes and the activities groups engage in.

### ***Organizational Diversity***

The women's health movement in São Paulo is characterized not only by ethnic and class diversity, but also by a high degree of organizational diversity.

Organizational forms range from informal networks of neighborhood women to professionalized organizations (NGOs). Hence, the level of formalization, institutionalization and professionalization of the groups vary widely. Professionalization is related to, but different from, formalization and institutionalization. Formalization refers to the process by which the structure of the organization acquires more established procedures, stricter membership requirements and a clearer division of labor (Staggenborg 1988:590). Institutionalization refers to the process by which social movement organizations increasingly engage in activities in the traditional political arena.

Class and race influence the level of formalization and professionalization of the groups: it is educated, middle class women who have formed professionalized organizations. They are mostly of European descent, with the exception of one group which is an Afro-Brazilian women's group. Most voluntary support group members are more heterogeneous in terms of education and income levels, but they are mainly of European descent as well. Afro-Brazilian women are found in greater numbers in the grassroot groups of the city's periphery.

The most loosely structured informal groups are women organizing a pharmacy for disadvantaged communities, or participating in a course on health with a women's health component, or women from local Mothers' Clubs mobilizing whenever they deem necessary. These groups do not consider themselves feminists although they work with women's issues and share many feminist ideas. The Catholic Church's Christian Base Communities (CEBs) or its pastoral commission for health are at the root of each of these organizing efforts.

By now there are also a number of low-income women's groups in which at least some members identify themselves as feminists. Some of them are fairly informal, others are more formal, some represent an effort by feminist organizations to bring together the leadership of various groups of a region. Two popular groups who acknowledge their feminist identity, are now well-established, receiving some funding which allows them to rent or buy their own space, where they offer workshops either for practical skills or for consciousness-raising. They are not professionalized in the sense that their members are not permanently employed by the organization, although some members receive compensation fees (*ajuda de custo*). The ideological and logistical support all of these groups have received from feminist organizations has been essential, in some cases although not in all, in getting them to focus specifically on women's issues, and in some cases to emerge altogether. Most of these women were originally active in Church linked organizations.

São Paulo also hosts two federations of women's groups dealing with various gender issues, not limited to health. Both consist of an active, centrally-located group, which brings together the leadership, and of various groups in the periphery of the city, and in one case in the entire state of São Paulo. These two federations are/were linked to the Communist Party of Brazil (PC do B). One of them has been expelled from the party five years ago. Neither one is interested in professionalizing, although the issue has created tensions among members in one of them.

Finally, feminist academics or former public health care workers have organized in several professionalized non-profit organizations (ie. NGOs) and one semi-professionalized organization to conduct research, documentation, training and publish written and audio-visual support material on gender and health issues; provide gynecological, juridical or psychological services; influence national and international policies regarding women's health; and provide support ("*assessoria*") to local women's groups.

Ten of the 18 groups I visited in São Paulo are now participating in an innovative organizational form, a national network, called *Rede Nacional Feminista de Saude e Direitos Reprodutivos* (National Feminist Network for Health and Reproductive Rights). These 10 groups are among those who define themselves as feminist and present a minimum level of formalization. The *Rede* was created in August 1991 and its São Paulo chapter is strong and influential, capitalizing on the long history of the feminist movement in that region and on the political clout of its participants at the national level.

### ***Activities of the organizations***

Non-professionalized groups, in particular grassroots groups linked to the health movement, are involved in mobilization and in making demands on the State for the better functioning of health posts and public hospitals and lately for better gynecological/obstetrical services. These activities involve organizing and participating in "*atos publicos*" and other forms of protest demonstrations. Most members of the health movement in São Paulo also participate in the *conselho gestor* of their

local health post (management council which brings together representatives of civil society, of health workers and of the management team), or in the municipal health council.

On the other hand, the demand-making work of São Paulo's NGOs is now located mainly at the national and international levels, lobbying to modify the laws and policies which affect women. A successful example of this type of activities is the participation of members of these organizations and of the *Rede*, the national Network, in the 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, which influenced the official Brazilian delegation and hence the document issued by the conference. In São Paulo, NGOs' demand-making activities at the local level are very limited, except for one organization.

Another important set of activities are the educational or training activities of the groups. These comprise consciousness-raising workshops. All support groups are offering a variety of courses/workshops. NGOs, with the help of the international cooperation community, also produce written and audio-visual material on gender and health which they use to train health professionals, to distribute to grassroots groups and the general public.

Inversely correlated with NGO's interest in lobbying, training and new forms of networking, such as the *Rede*, interest and energy for protest marches, such as the traditional 8th of march demonstration (International Women's Day), or for national *encontros* that bring women together without a specific goal, are dwindling. The purpose of *Encontros* was described as follows "*a metodologia dos Encontros Feministas tem mesmo essa funcao de quebrar, romper as estruturas rígidas de outros eventos, de proporcionar alegria, trocas em todos os níveis, esse é um exercicio de aprendizagem para todas nós.*" (*Memoria do XI Encontro Nacional Feminista 1991:36*). The last *Encontro* was held in September 1991, while these events had been organized annually from 1979 until 1987 and then another one in 1989. By 1995, plans for the organization of the XII *Encontro* had not yet materialized.

Few feminist organizations, and only one NGO, actually participated in the preparation of the 1995 demonstration for the International Women's Day, although some members of two other NGOs were present at the actual demonstration. In fact, any street activity proved difficult to organize, such as in the case of the Latin American Day for the decriminalization of abortion (28 september 95).

Revisiting our earlier discussion of the role of solidarity-building activities, it seems that as professionalized organizations are turning more towards lobbying and research activities than towards micro-level conscientization or protest activities, as they are moving away from "*atividades de rua*" (street activities), they might loose some of this solidarity building element which eases the maintenance of a strong social base for the movement and provides an avenue for new participants. Yet, enhancing solidarity is all the more important for the feminist movement today as it is growing increasingly diverse and heterogeneous.

### ***Professionalization and movement-wide activities***

It seems that activities of middle-class feminist organizations in the periphery of São Paulo have lost intensity to the point where some informants expressed a feeling of abandonment and isolation.

Some grassroots women I interviewed in the Southern periphery lamented the fact that there no longer were *encontros* for them to go to --regional versions of the ones just mentioned--. They

said that participating in these women's meetings gave them the strength they needed to continue their daily struggle. Other grassroots members said that there was more material available now on women's health and women's rights but that there was less personal involvement on the part of feminists from the "center" of the city than in the past. One informant argued that this was in part a result of the lack of influx of new participants in feminist support organizations. Indeed, the majority of the women participating have been activists for a long time and a majority are now in their 40s. This informant explained that the women who had been participating for a long time and thus had gained a great deal of experience, were traveling a lot to participate in national and international events. The problem she said was that there was not enough people left to do the work at the local level. There were no new members entering to do the work locally.

It is indeed difficult for women newly interested in joining a feminist organization to do so if they do not want to join one of the few remaining non-professionalized organizations, for political or geographical reasons. Although this problem existed before the creation of NGOs, it is aggravated by the fact that the possibility of membership in NGOs is restricted by professional and financial criteria. Thus, it has become more difficult for newcomers to gain the necessary experience to create their own organization. In that sense, the organizational form of NGOs does not facilitate the increase in the number of persons involved in the women's movement. On the other hand, NGOs have contributed greatly to the dissemination of the ideas of the movement and to the elaboration of policies more favorable to gender equity. They also provide space and resources for non-professionalized organizations to develop their activities. Working with volunteers (which is described in cases such as the US peace movement (Kleidman, 1994)) would palliate some of this impediment to the growth of the movement. However, the NGOs I worked with chose not to work with volunteers, in part out of a concern for equity and to avoid conflicts between paid and non-paid members, as well as in one case, out of a concern that volunteers would have legal recourse against them after having worked for the organization for a certain period of time. I also think that the growth of the number of participants in the movement is not a priority for most NGOs, because their activism is more proactive: they seek to make an impact on public policies and on health professionals.

The age itself of the women involved might push them towards activities which are less physically draining (ie less street activities, less travel to the poorer periphery). Institutional activities are quite draining too but generally offer more comfort and are more rewarding in terms of visibility.

One clear consequence of the professionalization of support groups is that some low-income women activists who participate without compensation are feeling exploited for not receiving money for their activism knowing that others do. They are all the more demoralized that it is getting more and more difficult for them to participate because of the economic hardships they have to face.

Another consequence of the professionalization of support groups is the fast pace of work required by those events involving the women's movement as a whole. In part, this is due to the fact that the feminist movement's agenda tends to be tied to the agenda of the United Nations; This was the case last year with the Fourth United Nations Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995. The groups then have to choose between their regular, local activities, and preparing for these international events. This may explain partially the decrease of NGOs' activities in the periphery.

The members of non-professionalized entities have a hard time following the pace of the preparation activities for such events. Women from a non-professionalized entity resented the

impression of running after deadlines which they had no control over. One of them complained that the process was extremely tiring and frustrating. They have difficulties following the pace because they are available to participate only in the evenings and on the weekends, while NGO activists can dedicate more time, including during the day, to these activities. As a result, NGO members do most of the work, such as drafting proposals for activities and organizing such activities, which means that it is also easier for them to participate in all decision-making. A few non-NGO activists who hold flexible jobs can also participate in the same way. But other non-NGO activists feel pressured to professionalize in order to be able to participate fully lest they lose some of their voice in the movement.

This increased working rhythm renders participation even more difficult for activists from the periphery because they have to travel up to two hours in public transportation just to come to the meetings. Most feminists from support groups are aware of this difficulty and make sure the meeting location is as easily accessible as possible. However, several meetings in a month require a considerable investment of time and energy on the part of the women from the periphery. Moreover, they do not enjoy these meetings because, partly as a result of class differences, it is difficult for them to understand the language used and to follow the swift organizing discussions of the highly efficient professionalized activists. Grassroots women need a lot of perseverance to continue participating in such meetings, as one of the few grassroots women who participated in the Beijing conference preparation process told me. I asked her what she had thought of the meeting after I noticed her uneasiness. This means that such activities run the risk of becoming the preserve of middle-class intellectual feminists despite all their willingness and efforts to enlarge participation to other sectors of the women's movement. In the case of the Beijing preparation this was done by calling a general meeting to sanction their activities and by scheduling separate activities for women in the periphery. This is an important issue because it means that low-income women's voices might not be fully represented in these international events and in the policies they influence. Afro-Brazilian women were well-represented in the preparation activities in São Paulo thanks to the presence of key members of the Afro-Brazilian women's movement in the organizing committee.

Professionalization seems to influence the activities and strategies groups choose to engage in, and hence it may influence their collective identity and solidarity. Another venue through which professionalization may alter the collective identity of a group is through the internal organizational structure of the group. Some scholars have shown that certain organizational forms are related to the instrumental (or formal) rationality, motivated by self-interest, driving western capitalist society, whereas other forms are more attuned with value (or substantive) rationality, in the Weberian sense (ie when individuals' behaviors are driven by moral commitments other than self-interest) (Ferree, 1992:33).

For example, Rothschild-Whitt (1979) identified the characteristics of collectivist-democratic organizations, in contrast to bureaucracies, which encourage solidarity and other substantive values. Such characteristics are authority based in the collective without hierarchical structure; homogeneity used as a method of social control, ie to limit potential conflicts; holistic and affective rather than segmented, role-based and instrumental social relationships among members; an incentive structure relying on purposive and solidary incentives, such as participating for "the cause", or for the sake of the collective, rather than on material incentives; minimal stratification in terms of pay and decision-making; minimal differentiation of jobs thus demystifying specialized knowledge.

How are professionalized organizations with their distinction between administrative and technical work, their clearer division of labor and the constraints imposed by financing agencies in reporting and accounting terms able to maintain a strong solidary collective identity? Especially when collective work is no longer construed solely as "a labor of love" as Rothschild-Whitt (1979:515) puts it, but "as a labor of love and bread". How is their alternative framework affected by these organizational changes?

While less formalized organizational forms might appear to work in favor of stronger mass-based movements and micro-level changes, a strong caveat in favor of the more formalized<sup>3</sup> structure of professionalized organizations lies in the fact that an organization with no organizational chart is not automatically more participatory and democratic. Indeed, when tasks and responsibilities are not clearly attributed, some individuals might end up overburdened, as was the case in one of the organizations I worked with, or power can be manipulated. Women's groups have been shown to be particularly prone to antihierarchical sentiments which lead to such a lack of structure (Yudelman, 1987). Thus, it is ambiguous, as yet, whether voluntary groups are internally more democratic and participatory than professionalized groups.

### **Conclusion**

As I hope to have shown, the organizational form of NGOs, as it is manifested in the São Paulo women's movement, does not facilitate building-up the movement and may undermine some of the solidarity-building practices of the movement, although it brings other advantages. Yet, solidarity among women is not a given, especially in a culture where *machismo* is pervasive, and women are often - although increasingly less so- isolated in the household. Solidarity is all the more essential today as the feminist movement is increasingly diverse. It is needed to bring all the sectors of the movement together, to help push back the very real barriers of ethnic and class differences. It is needed so that all women, including working-class women with less formal education, feel comfortable speaking up in meetings when they interact with academic feminists and other middle-class feminists. It is a necessary ingredient in a women's movement representative of all women's interests.

To conclude, professionalization was made possible by the new channels of expression opened by democratization of the regime in Brazil, as well as by the albeit limited "absorption" of feminist ideas, by the Brazilian State, and by the international development apparatus, which is financing women's NGOs.

Professionalization is also the fruit of twenty something years of experience of pioneer second-wave middle-class feminists who now believe they can achieve more for women by working at the policy level, through lobbying-type activities and in the media, rather than in micro-level changes in social relations and protest activities. Yet, both strategies are needed to obtain social change.

As professionalized activists gain more access to information on gender issues, have more time to dedicate to movement activities and more resources to do so, as well as more visibility in society than non-professionalized groups, they also tend to hold more power in the movement. As a result, the balance is tilting in favor of lobbying and other institutionalized activities, which are greatly beneficial in their own right but which need to be backed by a strong mass-based movement to allow for democratization of social relations and to ensure that legislative gains are implemented.

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## Notes

1. This paper is a modified version of an article entitled "Professionalization of Women's Health Groups in São Paulo: The Troublesome Road towards Organizational Diversity" published in *Organization* 3(4): 588-609 (1996).
2. While Carroll emphasizes the grassroots support role of these organizations, in part because he is dealing with development-oriented NGOs, my research in fact centers on the trade-offs between the different roles such organizations can play.
3. Following Staggenborg (1988) I use formalized rather than "bureaucratic" because NGOs are not as bureaucratic as other firms.