



Construction-deconstruction of the roll of gender in women from Las Segovias¹

There is nothing impossible in life

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Introduction

In gender relationships -between men and women- collective memory settles in the personal and social identity, where there are precepts or rolls that are considered “natural” ; that define and differentiate each sex, and that are also mediated by the division of labor, social classes, religious traditions of the family, and in the context where life is developed.

These variables become complex in different spaces of peoples relationships, and accumulate a personal and social experience that influence the construction of

peoples’ attitudes , values, working styles, and their philosophy of life.

This way, if the construction of roll of gender is complex, the process of deconstruction is more complex. Regarding women, it is necessary to be conscious that the established and socially accepted precepts are not always the ideal ones, and that it is necessary to spread them and build a new image for women and society. In word, it means to change.

In the present article the objective is to examine the problematic of construction of the roll of gender for women, trying to discern in the process of transformation of

¹ The present article was griten don the research entitled: “El proceso de construcción-deconstrucción de la identidad de género en mujeres líderes segovianas. EN LA VIDA, NO HAY NADA IMPOSIBLE DE REALIZAR”. Beverly Castillo and María José Barrantes. Carried out by SINSLANI and financed by ADESOS “Las Segovias”. March, 2003.



the assigned and ideal rolls. Then we try to delineate some possible elements that limit or make possible the process of reconstruction of their rolls in the different stages of their life, and finally, the question about what to do regarding these elements is tackled.

Transformation of the assigned and ideal rolls

Starting from the universal division of labor between men and women, society offers to women an image of themselves, a stereotype, and simultaneously a roll that embraces two linked aspects in societies: the roll assigned by society or group to which he or she belongs, and the ideal roll, that embraces the hopes and desires of the group.

The assigned roll defines specific patterns of behavior for women. In rural communities, for example, women must be housewives and producers of household support, backyard farming, domestic animals, in addition to the family support; and in several occasions, in certain moments of the process of production, she must help men in agricultural labor if it is required, experiencing this way, a tough load.

In urban areas, on the contrary, women who work out of the house are relegated to the roll of producers considered instruments of work, their situation as woman and mothers is narrow, and their exclusively feminine function is performed with an overload of work, a reduction of incomes, or unemployment. Hence, there is a tension between her two rolls.

When women have a better economical situation and do not need to work out of the

house they have a perfectly defined roll as wives, mothers, and housewives; they are assisted by a maid, this way, they can address and coordinate the chores in the house. They are also decorative objects that represent the social level of life with their elegance and fine manners. Their roll is strictly feminine; it does not interfere in masculine activities, at least in order to give advices or to inspire.

The ideal roll represents an indication of what women should be, and above all, what they have to do in order to satisfy the hopes of group. Actually, in society there is a tendency in women to minimize the differences of sex in the society; nevertheless, they are still used to think of themselves on behalf of men; and to be considered "the second sex", that is to say, a second category sex. In the family, the ideal roll refers to what they have to do together or individually, there fore, it should be established with equality, collaboration, and based in common agreement. Men still boast a superior authority and women are concerned to fulfill their duty of mothers, wives and professionals.

Despite that, women, day to day show that they are not simple passive subjects, or victims of stereotypes, and of assigned rolls; many of them have become social actors who live and face their successes or disappointments.

The decision to stand against the generality of social and cultural patterns has produced a kind of drama and crisis in each woman, between the value of an obligation as a mother (what constitutes a normative objective), with her hopes and personal qualifications.



Then, the existence of discordance between stereotype, roll, and personal identity is almost unavoidable. All this because women’s vital function is considered, to give life, to take care of it, to reproduce, and to make sure that those who are around them be as fine as it can be possible.

Soon or later, many women face unanswered questions about the formerly mentioned functions: what is my roll as a woman or in my family or in the society? What do I live for? What do I want? What do I want to do? What hopes do I have? What do I like or what do not? This kind of questions are generally considered as attitudes of rebelliousness before themselves and before the people whom the right to diminish, humiliate, maltreat and even deny them their roll in society has been given.

Nevertheless, many women consciously or unconsciously reassume the assigned roll and step by step, with great efforts start a process of deconstruction of traditional conceptions in respect to themselves and their place in the society. In this process they are becoming actors of their own transformation, and they are outstanding in different spaces: family, neighborhoods, communities, organizations, institutions, and meetings or assemblies.

Social identity should not be considered static, because it is a result of relationships. The identity can change and take new meanings according to historical conditions, personal experience, context or the position that people have within a net of economical, political, social and symbolical relationships.

De la Torre (1995:32) tells us: “Being the identity a relational concept, the classifications operate at different levels of space and time. For example, the identity in a relationship of couples will be defined by the rolls of men and women; within the family operate the classifications of: mother, father, son, daughter, grandchild, nephew, uncle, grandfather, etc; in the social organization, place of origin, age, sex, profession, social class, religiosity, political party, profession, labor union, social groups, clubs, etc. And this way our frames of identity gather to define according to our levels of appreciation in regard to those of another, whose origin adjust to macro and micro social levels.

An aspect that motivates these changes or readjustments of the generic, or social identity, is found in moments of crisis where the person reevaluates, and gives a new meaning to his or her biography with the collective history that identifies him or her within the society. For example, moments of economical crisis in a family, oblige women to find new strategies of survival; the domestic experience of violence that women face may give a new meaning to their struggle for their identity as wives, or mothers.

The same way, other moments of the deconstruction of the assigned generic identity may be present as women get other knowledge about their rights, recognizing their capacities, widening their horizons of action, getting access to material goods, or interchanging with other social characters.

Power and autonomy



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Since the generic identity is influenced or measured by relationships between actors - men and women – it is necessarily constituted through relations of power versus other social identities.

Because of modern society characteristics, the vision of power prevails as “something “ Imperative, vertical and violent; The population has a vision of “power” as a kind of sickness or curse that affects men or women, when they have access to resources, to relations with groups of power. The popular saying “Se le subió el poder a la cabeza”, which means that a person is inflated because of the power he or she has, represents the most typical example of this belief.

Rodríguez (1991: 79-85) expresses: “power is not a characteristic that people may own; it is a feature of a relation between people. Loneliness has no power... there are no powerful people by themselves, they are powerful when others are their subordinates”.

From this point of view, the power is relational and it is created and recreated in the interaction. In this research we consider Foucault’s definition about the exercise of power² (1985) as fundamental, which expresses:

“(The power) is a set of actions on possible actions; it operates in the possibilities on which the behavior of the actors is registered”; encourages, leads, misleads,

² “Foucault, Michel. 1995 La Cultura en México” No. 1204. Como se ejerce el poder en suplemento de siempre. ; México, DF 13 March 13.

makes possible or difficult, widens or limits, makes things to be more, or less possible; at last, it obliges or impedes definitely; but it is always a behavior towards one or several active individuals; all this happens while these individuals act or are susceptible to act. It is an action on actions”.

This way as women interact with other individuals through actions, they will define the way they will perform an outstanding roll in their fields of action.

The practice power becomes more complex while poverty and wealth, more powerful groups, people sectors, workers, unemployed, etc.; men and women experience it in a different way.

Groups of power, almost always led by men, conceive women, and provoke them to think of themselves as dependent human being, unable to rule, unintelligent, and without creativity.

There fore women, in order to succeed in society have to deconstruct this limited vision about their physical, mental and intellectual capacities; even though, many of them do it by practicing power, the way men usually do, that is to say, by imposition and toughness; they can also have more maternal attitudes, attitudes of protection towards the others; others are more democrat and deal makers; others are behind of those who have the power.

Lagarde (1988) suggests that it is important to redefine, from women’s point of view, the narrow concept of power that is closely related with the need of autonomy for the decision making, not to depend on the “others” in order to live think or act.



“Autonomy is historical, in the sense that it is part of historical processes, but it should be analyzed according the conditions of every individual in society, in culture and power; in social spaces as well as in symbolic spaces. The autonomy is also a symbolic fact that is based in the speech as the need for autonomy is suggested. Symbolically speaking, the simple enunciation of need of autonomy is already a principle of autonomy”. (Lagarde; 1988:6)

This concept is important, meanwhile, women who succeed and socially contribute to the development of Las Segovias have acquired some autonomy in the family; sons, daughters, friends, and even with themselves. It is important to ask the question: How can we realize that women have gained some autonomy? Methodologically, the aid of biography and ethnography is necessary; this allows us to analyze and to reinterpret the lived experiences, and to recognize women as historical subjects.

Testimony of successful women from Las Segovias

In the research: “the process of construction - deconstruction of identity of genders in female leaders from Las Segovias” (SINSLANI-ADESO; 2003)³, There is a record, through the personal testimony and through an individual reflection of the way women have been able to combine their personal, and social experiences, on the process of construction of their attitudes, values, working styles, and of a philosophy that gives their lives a new meaning and that permit them to succeed in their neighborhood and community.

The 30 testimonies of women state that in Las Segovias there are women who undertake the historical development of their town, neighborhood or community. Many of them succeed in politics as majors, members of the city council, and leaders of parties; in the economical field they are business women, who have set up their own businesses and that they are excellent merchants; In the cultural field they are natural leaders who work patiently for the recovering of the cultural identity of Las Segovias, through the rescuing of the local folklore, dance, theater, literature, or art; In the social field they are promoters, midwives; at professional level they are engineers, teachers, social workers, that have management positions at different levels; others are single mothers who manage to support their families; there are also outstanding athletes who are not acknowledged the way outstanding men are.

Women show that their field of action is much wider than that in which they were enclosed by most narrow differentiations of sex. Now a day, many women from Las Segovias choose their professions and express their interests with more freedom, showing skills that were ignored even by them.

In this research, women describe themselves as thinking human beings, with a historical memory, and with rights to success in society. Women tell by themselves the experience they have had in different fields of their everyday life, and also the crisis and difficulties that they have faced to recognize themselves and to reconstruct their own vision of gender.



As one of the women who have shared with us her testimony of life points out:

"When we speak with such strength about how our life has been, how our sons and grand children behave, there, the testimony of transmission of family and teachers values is present. Here we see the example of life. The transmission of values, solidarity, respect, and work, are emphasized in these testimonies, because these values give us our personal development. A very important aspect of each testimony is the importance of the transmission of positive values for the development of a society". (Martha Adriana Peralta. Ambito político (political field).

This research was made together with the 30 women and was carried out starting from the design in five methodological stages: 1) Design of instruments and identification of outstanding women; 2) Work in the field in eleven towns of Las Segovias; 3) process of devolution and validation; 4) issuing and analysis of the information; 5) elaboration of final results. All these stages were carried out in a complementary way, in logic of action – reflection – action.

Through these testimonies it is possible to understand the lived experiences; it is to look at herself as the child girl, the teenager, the mother, or the adult woman; and to recognize those aspects of her life that have allowed her to succeed, to attract, and agglutinate other people in order to interchange opinions, solidarity, creativity, or suggestions.

Elements that limit, or that make possible the process of reconstruction of gender identity in women from Las Segovias.

From the experience of work with this group of women the main aspects that have been fundamental in every stage of life for their advance in the process of construction-deconstruction of a traditional identity towards an identity of genders in equality, are taken.

This process has not been easy. It meant the individual initiation of change and the decision of promoting spaces of communication and negotiation with their couple, sons, and daughters, relatives and the society. The change has not ended; there is a long way to go.

Childhood

Childhood (0-12 years) is important because it directly influences the behavior and the concept of life that a persons will have in the future.

Many of these women, as child girls lived in a difficult familiar environment; a disloyal father, irresponsible, and alcoholic; their mother was maltreated, they grew up without father or with other relatives. But they found out elements of support, helped by their moral character and certain social conditions, these allowed them to advance in the deconstruction of traditional conceptions. They remark their mothers' education as a positive element and also the inheritance of values such as: honesty, integrity, service, solidarity, and respect to the elders. Many remind the love that they received from their father, mother, grand parents and brothers.

As child girls they used to make the chores in the house and / or out of the house beside their mothers, and saw their mother



working hard to support the house by themselves. This premature access to labor responsibilities, more than a restriction, is considered as training, to learn to be hardworking, responsible, struggler, independent and helpful.

In the same way it was useful for their mother to teach them different occupations (midwife, craftswoman, dressmaker, and baker) that would be reinforced in the following stages.

Within this problematic most of them had access to school, and some of them learned how to read and write by themselves, this fact helped them to reinforce their strong desire of personal and familiar improvement. Many of the child girls played traditional games, but also showed little timidity. They were mischievous and leaders, and played games for boys without making any difference of rolls.

Adolescence and youth

Adolescence and early youth (13-25), is the stage of maturation (physical and emotional) between the childhood and adulthood, it is the time they need to consider their autonomy and social independence. Body changes in women are shown in a sharper way, and they are joined by a process of individual and group search. Adolescent women show fear and little knowledge of their bodies, which they could overcome with help of friends and other peoples' information.

The process of socialization in this stage faces a cultural context that restricts them just because they are women; here parents and relatives remarkably control them as for friends, and boyfriend. Even though they are

allowed to participate in social events, such like parties, movies, and sport games. Many of them remind this stage as one of the most beautiful ones in their lives.

A new traditional vision emerges as they step forward relationships of couple: A decent woman should know how to behave, to have a formal boyfriend accepted by their parents and should get married in white wedding dress. Because of this, parents, control and forbid them to have a boyfriend. In order to overcome this traditional suffocation, many of them had secret dates and found their own ways of communication; letters, friends, walks, and parties. When family pressure increases and their field of action is reduced, almost half of women decide to run away with their boyfriends, because they wanted to leave the house, to change their lives, to have freedom in order to work and study, and some of them simply because they were in love.

Six out of ten young women had a couple, simply because they got married or because they run away. Five of them faced big problems with their couples, because they used alcohol drinks, because they were disloyal, because they used to leave them alone, and were irresponsible and jealous. The chauvinist tendency of their couples does not mean a lot of difference compared to what their mother lived.

In both generations women face a cultural context that states women's submission in cases of men's disloyalty, alcohol, violence, or irresponsibility, there fore, three out of ten women bore such situation because of the marriage, their sons, daughters, or because they were economically dependence from men and never defended their rights.



Those who tried to change their situation talking with their mothers were advised to be tolerant.

Two out of ten women tried to deconstruct the adverse cultural context because they controlled their money, and because they had an independent and moderate behavior. Most of them overcame this situation through the divorce, defending and avoiding familiar violence. The support of relatives and a place to live were basic aspects for them to have decided to do it.

In this stage, almost all adolescent women got pregnant, and most of them had several children during this period of time (13-25 years). The interesting thing here is that they started a process of deconstruction based on the relation with sons and daughters: They positively assumed the maternity; they had support of their families and couples, access to planning, and promoted positive values in the education of sons and daughters based on love, communication, and attention.

Half of the interviewed women faced problems to study, they did not finish primary or secondary school because they had to work, and did not have economical access to attend the university. Nevertheless, as adults they continued their studies in programs for education of adult people, and others learned occupations that permitted them to have an independent way to survive, and to be recognized by society.

Work has been always present in these women's life. In this stage, while they were single, they worked in their houses, and others assisted their mothers. Many of them

used to work with their couples in the house, and had also businesses; others used to work outside. This is considered to be a positive attitude because it is developed motivated by a personal attitude of improvement, for economical improvement and community support. In this stage, women are involved in social, military, political, cultural fields, and also in the church.

During the young-adult stage

During the young-adult stage (26-39), the majority of men and women enjoy the climax of their vitality, strength, and resistance, has established a relationship of couple and has children. In general, they have good health and few acute diseases, good physical condition and self esteem.

Twenty nine women out of the group of thirty have passed through this stage and four of them are living it. Only one of them said that she faced a serious sickness (cancer in her uterus), she had a surgery and learned about the need of periodical examinations (PAP test).

For some of them, their couples still show chauvinist attitudes; there fore they decide to find new couples. Others demand respect, defend themselves or do not permit being maltreated; they also start a process of negotiation in order to change their couples' behavior. In the new context, half of them say they receive support, respect, and communication from their couples.

Even though most of them have children of a unique couple, others decide to have children of the new couple and adopt children. In this stage they continue



promoting positive values in the relation with their children, through the trust, advice and communication, and they respond by being kind, and courteous, and they help them in the house. They have concerns about studies.

In this stage, the majority of women have their own incomes, they work out of the house, own a business; they double the work in the house, work for a salary, and perform works for the community. The majority of them claim they have reasons for having a job: They have to support their children by themselves, they need to find satisfactions in their jobs, and to work for the community, they have understood that being housewives is not an obstacle to share with the community, and have learned to gain self esteem.

Young women clearly identify some characteristics that permit them to do a good job, they have discipline, methodology, responsibility, they have initiative, they do the best in their jobs, and have good relations with the people from the community. Here we can see the way they have capitalized on the values inherited by their families. They have also had academic progress thanks their own efforts.

They broaden their participation in other fields; they get involved in political and/or military life, they undertake successful businesses, and have more chances to compete, and to have access to bigger responsibilities in their jobs and communities. In this stage, they show they are outstanding women.

Stage of maturity

The stage of maturity has been defined as the age comprised between 40 to 60 years, and has been considered that it start with the advance of their work and goals, when their children start to leave the house. 25 women out of the group of 30 have passed through his stage, and 16 are living it.

One of the women faced difficult moments regarding her health. One of them happened when she had two abortions on account of blood incompatibility with her husband and the lack of information to avoid it; as a result, she did not have children. Besides, she faced a serious sickness (breast cancer), she had a surgery, and despite of the chauvinist context, her husband supported her a lot, he even assumed the domestic tasks.

It is important to notice that even against all precepts, of what is considered "normal", three women got pregnant between 41 to 51 years old.

In this stage, six out of ten women have been with their couple a considerable time, three of them are still facing a chauvinist environment, above all, due to alcoholism and disloyalty. Here, there is a change in a man who in the stage of maturity acquires an irresponsible attitude. In general, a certain reduction of the chauvinism in the couple is observed. Nevertheless, four out of ten women are alone, because they broke up, or because they got widow. The majority of them do not desire to change their civil status.

Many women say they have reduced the problems with their couple, and have gradually increased their achievements. This deconstruction has been a product of a



difficult learning, because it has meant: separation, suffering, sacrifice, loneliness, claims, fights and negotiations. As Manuelita says: “It is difficult to make a man out of clay”

The majority of women, who had their children in the former stage, are now facing a redefinition of relation with their adolescent children. Contrary to the traditions, these women have a positive relation and have been able to deconstruct the conflict through friendly relations, their children are now professionals and have got married, they support them in their jobs and enterprise, and some sons participate in their social projects, and in the domestic tasks.

The stage of maturity is also a stage of change and labor continuity, they revalue their profession, and decide whether or not to change their goals. There is even a change of career or they enter other fields; the community and political fields, for example. In this moment, the participation in the triple working day is more evident, that even though it requires bigger efforts, there is a plain understanding of their social compromise, and they count on the necessary tools: Experience, values and relations.

It is not strange that in this period of life many women who have developed in the social or professional fields decide to access to political charges such as: mayor or member of city councils.

In this process of revaluation of their goals, women find out a series of achievements, social acknowledgement and social knowledge. Contrary to what is believed, for

women from Las Segovias this is a stage of great productivity, they have experience and much energy to fulfill their future hopes.

Old age

In old age (61 years and more) for many people, it is a terrible vision; there is a fear of losing energies, control, flexibility, sexuality, physical motion, memory, and even intelligence. There is also fear of being pointed out and scorned, by young people, who show beauty, and physical perfection.

A generalized stereotype about older people expresses: “elders are not useful, they are not healthy, they are less productive, they forget about things, they easily have accidents, and they are slow”. This conception is absurd, and it has been evidenced by nine women who are living this stage, and have given their testimony.

In this stage, five out of the nine women live with their couple. And the relation has experimented changes. Three women said that their husbands were irresponsible and that they used to drink alcohol, but now they have quit drinking. This change is a product of the development of the couple, the age and sacrifices that they have done in order to keep the relation. They consider that their vision about women has changed; now they have rights and they are the ones who lead the couple.

The relation with their children is good; they are already adult people, professionals, married and they are proud of them. They also help them economically.

All women participate in different fields: The church, the community, as midwives, in politics; and one of them is still studying.



Even though three of them are a little sick, but it is not enough in order to not take part in the activities they have always participated.

They have had successes and disappointments in their lives, they have had sad and happy moments, satisfactory and not satisfactory ones like every human being. In this stage, all women acknowledge important and meaningful achievements and satisfactions, they feel reborn, satisfied, and healthy, and people notice and consult them; they count on them. Mrs. Consuelo explains it "We were able to overcome some traumas, some problems, and we all had good results at the end, because we all meant to do something important. We gained self esteem and learned that we are a small group walking several ways, we have been noticed". (Consuelo Rivera, focal group Somoto).

None of them has a "classical" image of an abandoned old sad lady. All they have the spark of youth in their eyes and spirit. They have got an outstanding place in their and other peoples' life. All of them say they still have a lot to give.

Today they have reflected on the biggest knowledge they have learned in their lives. They inherit it for this and the future generations, it says: THERE IS NOTHING IMPOSSIBLE IN LIFE.

Some recommendations

The results of the research are very valuable in order to understand the way of construction-deconstruction of identity of gender in women from Las Segovias. In

account of that, the first step is to develop a process of devolution of the results of the research in different ways; Publication, public presentation, divulgation through written, television and electronic media.

To continue the study in a direct way with the outstanding women who have participated in this research and with other who would like to be part of this effort.

Women in focal groups showed a high interest to continue with the meetings and the interchange. There fore, in a second stage, it is advisable to advance in a process of group reflection on the most determining moments in the process of construction, for example: Child abuse, life in couple, communication with adolescent sons, and daughters among others.

For the organizations that take decisions and promote projects, this research is most important, because through every testimony of life we get information about women's life in different fields. And some details that are taken for granted are shown; Details that are important when developing strategies of attention towards women and their family. Says Martha Adriana:

"When you publish this research, everything will be different, in the sense that there will be organizations and people who will be interested in reading it and that will probably want to do certain things that we do not consider most important; details that we do not perceive. It is important to know every woman, the roll they have played and that are still playing. This will be a treasure". (Martha Adriana Peralta, Focal group from Somoto).



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Some of the women (focal group from Somoto) advised to organize this group of women as an assembly or a group of incidence, so they can periodically meet, discuss, and make proposals to find new candidates for the local government, as city council members or mayors of the town.

Their compromise will be to support women who are elected to governmental positions, it does not matter which town they belong to, and their goal is to strengthen their leadership and their participation in the communities; also in the design of an integral program of government for their township, where transparency, ecology and Indian culture topics be points of singular importance. The proposal emerges on account of political weakness, lack of solidarity among women, and many groups of men as candidates to be leaders of their political parties.

Finally, each testimony can be considered as a primary source, and they can be useful to develop new interpretations, or to reproduce the experience in other towns and with other women up to the point of reconstruction of the everyday history of Nicaragua, since an almost forgotten angle, women vision.



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