

ALDEAS DE PAZ MAGAZINE

Gender Equality



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The New Magazine

In this new version of the Aldeas de Paz magazine, the Multimedia team will take one topic of importance to the Dominican society and explore it in detail.

In this first edition we will take a closer look at the topic of gender equality, or the lack of it, in the Dominican Republic.

Previously, Fundación Aldeas de Paz had a program dedicated to this topic, called "Fortaleciendo la igualdad y equidad de género y creando una nueva masculinidad" ("Strengthening gender equality and creating a new masculinity"). Sadly, the project has been terminated. However, the topic of gender inequality in the Dominican Republic is crucial and it is affecting many women. We hope the foundation can reinvigorate its previous efforts in helping the women of its community.

Gender inequality can take many different faces in Dominican society. It ranges from the daily struggle of women being treated as lesser than men and the violence against women, to under-representation in policy making. We think it is crucial to talk openly about these issues without attacking the local way of life. By doing this, we can try and lay the basis for a more equal society, from which both men and women would benefit.

Considering that the topic of gender equality is not widely discussed in the Dominican Republic, we thought it important to start a conversation.

In order to do this, we researched online and talked to local people to find out how the problem manifests itself, whether the issue is even seen as problem locally and to try and find sustainable solutions.

One of the biggest traps when trying to disentangle a societal problem is assuming that the problem is in fact seen as one by that very community.

Firstly, we must identify whether what we consider a problem is seen as one through the eyes of the local people.

In order to do this, it is best to conduct interviews or simply have conversations with locals. If one goes into the conversations already sure about the fact that there is an issue and what the right way to solve it is, (or even worse, one does not even have any conversations) the result will most likely be a form of colonisation. In that case, one would drum a different way of life into the local community, which cannot be the answer and is not sustainable. The interaction with local people is therefore essential and any solutions borne from these interviews would be both culturally sensitive and evoke a sense of community effort. This, of course, does not mean that you cannot propose an alternative. Even more so, if you have lived in a more equal society and have certain

experiences because of it. Also, it is important to be critical of the fact that the issue might not be seen as one because it is in fact so deeply embedded into a society.

To come back to our topic, this meant finding out whether gender inequality is seen as an issue in the Dominican Republic. Furthermore, we wanted to figure out possible solutions through interaction and exchange with the local community. We wanted to talk to as many women and men of different ages as possible, to have a reliable sample group.

In the following articles these questions about gender equality in the Dominican Republic will be explored.

How Does Gender Inequality Manifest Itself?

There is a plethora of ways in which the issue of gender inequality is seen and felt by women in the Dominican Republic. However, the problem also affects the lives of men.

The main ways in which the inequality manifests itself are repeated by a lot of the interviewees. Violence against women is one of the biggest issues and can range from being beaten to sexual abuse, rape and even femicide, which are at a very high rate in the Dominican Republic. With 2.2 cases for every 100,000 women in 2016 and 2017, the Dominican Republic has one of the highest rates of femicides in the Central American and the Caribbean regions.¹ In addition, the Dominican Republic tops the list of intimate femicides, femicides "committed by intimate or former intimate partners"² in Latin America in 2017 with 1.98 cases per 100,000 women.³

Teenage pregnancy is a further problem in the Dominican Republic. 22% of women between 15-19 years of age have become mothers. This means that the teenage pregnancy rates are still 34% higher than the Latin American and Caribbean average.⁴

Prostitution of teenagers and adults, women putting an end to their education early and the complete illegality of abortion, are additional problems.

These prevalent issues in the Dominican Republic significantly decrease the well-being of women and hinder their chances at becoming equal to men in society. Moreover, the macho-culture predominates in Dominican life. This brings with itself the notion that "men still think they own women", as Ángel, a 21-year-old Dominican, puts it. This machismo is still an integral part of the daily life of people in the Dominican Republic and the women, of course, feel it in a strong way. It can include sexist language and the idea that men are "superior" to women. Also, the machismo can be seen on the streets, where a woman cannot pass by a group of men without being commented on her appearance or being subjected to certain noises.

These forms of catcalling also show the dynamic among men. If everybody in a group is commenting on a woman, there is enormous pressure for all men to participate because it is seen as weak not to do so. A young man told us that he sees the catcalling as affectionate and not discriminating. This shows how deeply embedded the machismo is in Dominican culture.



The gender roles in the Dominican Republic are still very clear and traditional. In many cases the woman is meant to stay at home and look after the children, clean and cook, while the man earns the money. Ángel goes one step further and says: "Men see women as objects, as something that is under their property. Something that cooks for them, that cleans the house." One of the people interviewed, a 72-year-old local woman, says that the men are the heads of the households, make the decisions and have to agree if a woman can work or not. Another female interviewee of 32 years blames the way boys and girls are educated and brought up differently as the reason for the gender roles and therefore, for the inequality. While sons are not required to do chores at home, she continues, daughters are taught everything. "Their parents educate them with this difference," she concludes.

She goes on to describe that the education of children does not only enforce the female gender role, but also the male one: "When a mother tells a son not to cry, it is a way of turning him macho." These very conservative and set gender roles are deeply embedded into the Dominican culture. It becomes clear when one sees that often women also accept and encourage their condition, by saying that the constant catcalls improve their self-confidence and that men may have affairs, while women cannot. It is of great importance to offer these women an alternative

and ask them if they would feel more safe and appreciated in a more equal society. A story, which was told to us, succinctly summarises the set gender roles in Dominican society: A young girl wanted to become a "guagua" (local bus) driver, but the mother of the girl told her that she should give up her dream as this job is only for men.

The gender roles in the Dominican Republic, in turn, promote the above-mentioned problems, like violence against women, teenage pregnancy and women often terminating their education early because they have to do chores at home.

However, the issue of gender inequality does not only affect women, but also the men in Dominican society. The gender roles force upon men to be strong which leads to an inability to show emotions and affection and can directly lead to violence. Ángel once again bluntly explains that the concept of being a man in the Dominican Republic means: "I am not gay, I am not a woman and I am not a child." He expands by saying that, in his critical view of Dominican society, if men show affection it makes them gay, if they show emotions it makes them like a woman and if they are not independent they are childlike. All of those three categories are to be avoided and the characteristics, which come with them, are frowned upon.

Moreover, the inequality between men and women can also be seen in jobs. Women still get paid less than men for the same work and it is often very difficult for them to both work and do all the household chores. The division of the household chores is not common in the Dominican Republic and the chores are not even seen as work. A female interviewee tells us that women who work, end up doing a lot more than men because the chores at home are still widely seen as a woman's job.

Women also often have to take a decision between having children and working. A lot of places do not appoint women because they "represent pregnancy and paid vacations". Because men often make the decisions, the women's point of view becomes obsolete.

Finally, the disparity between men and women in the Dominican Republic becomes clear when one looks at politics. Women are still hugely under-represented in policy making. With 18.2% of women in executive power, the Dominican Republic is in the lower fourth of countries in Latin America, the Caribbean and the Iberian Peninsula. The average of these countries is 25.7%.⁵ This brings with itself the fact that issues mostly concerning women do not get enough attention. One of these issues is abortion, which is still completely illegal in the Dominican Republic and greatly diminishes the reproductive rights of women. Issues concerning mostly women can also take more "mundane" forms.

For example in Las Terrenas, a city in the province of Samaná, there are very little streetlights. This means that walking alone at night is dangerous for women. Changing this would hugely improve the lives of women but the changes are not implemented because of the under-representation of women in politics.



Demonstration in favour of a partial legalisation of abortion in the Dominican Republic.⁶

In conclusion, there are many ways in which the gender inequality manifests itself in Dominican daily life, such as violence against women, insufficient education and the machismo-culture. Also, set gender roles, the wealth gap, injustices in the work place and inequality in politics show the diversity of the problem. These ideas are transmitted through education and up bringing to a lot of Dominicans, both men and women. It is crucial to raise awareness about the problems to try and improve the situation for women in Dominican society.

Is Gender Inequality Seen as an Issue by Dominicans?

As mentioned before, one of the greatest challenges of our little investigation was to find out whether the gender inequality in Dominican society is even seen as a problem by local people. This is the most important step to try and find solutions, to raise much needed awareness and to start a conversation about the topic.

When asked this question, Alena (a volunteer who worked at the Aldeas de Paz project dedicated to the gender issue) points out straight away: "Men do not see it as a problem because the women are the ones who suffer." This argument again points to the fact that the majority of people in policy making are men, which is why problems concerning mostly women are neglected. Also, the argument shows the influence of the machismo culture in the Dominican Republic.

It was pointed out to us that arguments like the following ones are used to legitimise violence against women: "Why is she dressing and acting like that?" "Why is she walking in the streets so late at night?" Men are "superior" to women and therefore only what they perceive as an issue is actually one.

However, as it was showed before, the women often do not see the inequality as a problem because it is so embedded in their culture. Here, Ángel points to the fact that the emancipatory feminist movement in the Dominican Republic has not reached poorer communities, where the problems are most prevalent. Therefore, those communities have not had the chance to access the reflections and critical questioning of the movement. The challenge is therefore to bring those reflections to poorer communities, like Samaná, to try to find sustainable solutions whilst being very respectful of the local culture.

While talking to local people, it became clear that the problem is in fact seen as one by a lot of people. However, only the extremes of the issue are accepted, while the daily and systemic challenges are not. Violence against women, for example, is widely seen as a problem. In addition, the reason for those violent acts is interpreted as being due to external factors, such as drugs or alcohol. However, the fact that the violence is just a symptom of a larger issue, the machismo culture, is not noted by the public. This, again, shows that the very culture that creates the inequality is reproduced and legitimised in the minds of the people who suffer from it. This means that the catcalling, the way men look down on women and the repressive gender roles are just seen as part of the culture and not as part of the problem, which produces violence against women. Here, the Aldeas de Paz program "Fortaleciendo la igualdad y equidad de género y creando una nueva masculinidad" ("Strengthening gender equality and creating

a new masculinity") tried to make a difference by raising awareness through workshops within the community. Sadly, the project was ended due to the fact that the impact on the community was not efficient enough.



Fundación Aldeas de Paz Workshop in Las Terrenas

While talking to a young local man, it became clear that it is difficult for people to decide whether gender inequality is indeed a problem. He clearly sees issues within the society, such as a certain amount of violence and different standards between men and women. However, he changes his mind several times as to whether he believes it to be a problem. Also, he tells us that he would rather be served by waitresses than waiters and that he would rather have a female doctor. This begs the question, if that is what he sees as gender equality. The systemic problems, like machismo, which cause the bigger ones, such as violence, are often not seen as issues and it is therefore very difficult to change these mind-sets.

In conclusion, the diversity and complexity of the topic of gender inequality is not accepted by a majority of local people. This means that, because the machismo, which produces the different symptoms, is so deeply embedded in Dominican culture, people fail to understand how far the problem goes, what the different influences are and how it affects the daily life of people. This, in turn, impedes politicians and people in general to see the different solutions, some very simple, one could implement to help improve the situation. These possible solutions and how we could reach them will be explored in the following article.

What Are Possible Solutions to Create a More Equal Society?

After having described the problems concerning gender inequality in the Dominican Republic, it is crucial to think about possible sustainable solutions. As mentioned before, one of the biggest challenges is carrying the critical questioning and reflections concerning gender roles and gender inequality to the poorer communities. Our aim should be to try and find a way to redevelop the community's perspective, for example regarding the set gender roles, in order to improve the situation for women.

Another very popular solution is "New Masculinity". It starts from questions such as: "What is a man?" "How can we live our lives being a man in this society?" It focuses on reflections that the feminist movement created, and how men can learn from them in order to improve the lives of both men and women. These reflections can include thinking about what women live day-by-day and start questioning the gender roles ("Why do women clean? Who told you that they need to clean your things?").

In addition, "New Masculinity" aims to improve the lives of men by helping them question why it is that they were told not to show emotions. It aims to provide men positive alternatives to machismo without leaving them devalued and humiliated. "New Masculinity" essentially tries to change masculinity from machismo to a more healthy masculinity through examples of daily life.

It is exactly these struggles of daily life that should be brought to light to show that the violence, which most people see as a problem, stems from the internalised machismo culture men were brought up with. The problem is that within communities such as Samaná, "you are fighting with the essence of machismo and patriarchy", says Ángel. Many people see the need for change, but cannot articulate it. This is often the case when the extremes, such as violence, are acknowledged, whilst inequality in day- to-day struggles, are not. Ángel is convinced that the "New Masculinity" approach can change the attitudes of men towards women. Not only to see women as equal, but also to improve their own lives and in doing so, creating a basis for political change and a more equal society.

However, the attitudes of men towards other men also need to change. It is crucial for men to speak up on behalf of women, if they hear about another man abusing or harassing a woman.

The Fundación Aldeas de Paz project dedicated to gender equality also tried to implement "New Masculinity" in their workshops.



Workshop: "Fortaleciendo la igualdad de género y construyendo una nueva masculinidad."
("Strengthening gender equality and creating a new masculinity")

A new masculinity will make it obvious that more women need to be in policy-making and that more issues concerning mostly women should be talked about. However, it is also clear that just because the mentality changes, which will be a huge challenge in itself, problems like the total illegality of abortion will not just resolve themselves. A clear political message, which improves the rights of women, is also needed.

This political message, containing very simple reforms, could massively improve the lives of women in the Dominican Republic. For example streetlights in poorly lit streets and better pavements would make it safer for women to be outside at night. These small changes are important to create a basis on which one can build on and tackle the bigger issues.

In addition, better sexual education is also crucial to enhance the sexual and reproductive rights of women. The topic of sex and contraception should be openly talked about and not seen as taboo.

One female interviewee sees a clear connection between the education of young people and femicide and violence against women. If boys are brought up with the

machismo culture and the notion that they are superior to girls, machismo will reproduce itself and result in violence and inequality. She explains succinctly that families and schools should pay this topic due attention and raise awareness: "When it is understood that men and women are the same, that they have the same rights and the same duties, the situation changes."

According to members of the community, the lives of women are improving. For example, more women are working and earning wages, sometimes more than the men. However, it is paramount that men do not feel humiliated and devalued because of that. This is also one of the aspects, which is tackled by "New Masculinity". Men should feel proud and happy about women living prosperous lives because it also helps them. The idea that men are weak, just because the woman earns more money is very damaging both to the chances of gender equality and to the psychological well-being of men.

Finally, the best way to bring about actual change is to bring ideas like "New Masculinity" to the poorer communities, where gender inequality is widely spread. This needs to be done in a respectful and sensitive manner. With a change of mind-set, more women could be involved in politics, which would mean that more problems concerning women would be talked about and violence against women would decrease. In general, there needs to be a change in the education of children to move past the set gender roles in order to create a more equal society in the Dominican Republic, which would benefit both men and women. Although there have been some improvements, the road to gender equality is still a long one for Dominican society.

Sources

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