

## **Our Light Will Not Go Out: Lessons and Proposals from Social Participation in Health**

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"We have always existed, like drops of water,  
Essential and necessary, but forgotten.  
But we believe that if we think, if we talk, if we write,  
Our words will be  
Like the blows of a fist against concrete walls  
That absorb the noise  
Only to become a hushed and deafened explosion that turns into a shout,  
No longer a cry of anguish or complaint but a loud battle cry of protest and desire to be seen  
and heard."

(From the poem "*Distintas*" by Rosa Quintanilla)

If we look back 17 years, when EPES first came to our neighborhood, we recognize that our situation today is clearly quite different, even though many of the same economic problems continue unchanged.

Most of us lived in shacks that leaked in the winter. We were unemployed. We didn't have anything to put on the table. We lived day by day, hungry, without the means to meet even the most basic needs of health and education. Many of us didn't have electricity or running water, and those of us who did often had our services cut off. We endured open garbage dumps, alcoholic husbands and, above all, overwhelming feelings of hopelessness and the inability to plan a future. Our lives were focused on cleaning and trying to be the best housewife, which would set us apart from the rest... but today I realize that I never got a medal for having the shiniest floor or the whitest sheets in the neighborhood, and for so long I thought that this was the most important thing in the world.

This was the reality of many of the women who joined the health groups. If you were to ask us now, "Why did you join a health group? What were your motivations?" some of the answers might be:

- To meet our basic, subsistence needs;
- To learn how to give injections (since this would set us apart from our neighbors and perhaps unconsciously give us greater power within the community);
- To help others;
- To care for our families' health;
- To get out of the house.

These are some of the many reasons that motivated us to join the group. But once we were there, we confronted a myriad of contradictions. We began to question our lives, our families, the environment in which we lived and the system that provided no relief from despair. Many of us believed that we were not doing enough to escape from this legacy of misery because we had been brainwashed by misquoted Scripture, such as "the poor shall inherit the kingdom of heaven," or maybe because we just didn't understand the "power of positive thinking."

This is when the process of transformation begins: when you start to learn new concepts, such as politics or the idea of rights, then you begin to understand that health isn't just the

absence of illness, being all chubby and rosy-cheeked. How innocent we were before! And how happy! Because learning, gaining understanding and awareness, well that really hurts! You get angry, frustrated, rebellious and even more eager to know and understand how everything works. You want to know how international agreements might affect us, what the free trade treaties could mean. You become aware of the need to know what all this has to do with our people and our culture.

Through this individual and collective process, we constructed a more humane concept of health, and we realized that EPES understood health in this way from the very beginning, before coming to train us as health promoters. The workshops' contents and methodologies and the commitment of those who worked with the organization were key to our development. They allowed us to discover and create many of the concepts that we currently use but using our own words and experiences.

This process also has been painful for the women who have taken part because of our different levels of training and education, power struggles, or domestic squabbles that reveal the worst of human nature. It has also been difficult for us to discover and deconstruct our own training as women, training that never prepared us to be colleagues and collaborators.

If we were asked, "What have you learned in these 20 years?" we could say that:

- We have realized that we have to prepare ourselves as leaders, and we have slowly discovered our capacity for leadership.
- We have recognized that it is possible to transform our reality.
- We have understood that we can share knowledge based on our own experiences and that official knowledge is not the only kind that exists. We have realized that together we can develop collective processes in which theory and practice become knowledge which in turn becomes power, power to serve and to fight, but not to dominate.
- We have discovered that we have knowledge and that we only needed help to recognize it.
- We have learned that the economic model which transforms our daily lives encourages individualism and results in the loss of our sense of community, our ability to show solidarity. The neoliberal model would rather we spend our time in malls, and nothing is the same.

After these 20 years, I am more convinced than ever that working in health is still important and that this implies political work as well. Our understanding of working in health means being aware, really seeing people, understanding what globalization implies. It obliges us to take an interest in the public policies implemented in Chile in recent years.

We have learned that not only do the health groups provide an opportunity for our personal emotional development, they also train us politically to become social actors able to generate ideas and make decisions about the type of society in which we want to live.

We have discovered that we are no longer the same women we once were: we are brave, and we are able to achieve goals and develop ourselves fully.

Today, we understand why those who are in power look at us from afar and seem fearful and threatened when we speak out or when we take to the streets, why in these past 11 years, the government has taken such an ambiguous position regarding how it wants social organizations to take part in this process. On one hand, we see that they are only interested in the participation of a certain type of social and community organizations – such as those which provide services for the municipalities and education in preventive care since the public sector is unable to provide these services. On the other hand, while the official

discourse applauds social organizations' initiatives, in practice the experiences of "participation" are limited to voting in elections. As a result, many of the actions of social organizations are ignored or dismissed.

Because of these attitudes, the struggles against the hardships of everyday life, the struggles for housing, for health and a dignified life, are not recognized as political issues but merely the usual survival-related agitation of the poor and therefore reduced to "domestic" issues.

### **Our Strategies**

If you were to ask me, "What should we do about this?" I would suggest that we resuscitate the dream and go back to believing in utopias. That's why we have to continue to develop methodologies that take into account our experiences, our knowledge and the creative approaches so characteristic of our efforts over these many years. We also have to keep working in networks because we are stronger when we collaborate with others. At the same time, we must continue to training ourselves and further develop our concept of participation in which our actions are understood as a continuous process of evaluation, planning and analysis of our activities.

Above all, we must always be alert. We must constantly review our common objectives. And in this effort, I invite you all to tear down the veils, to break the silence and to discover against what and whom we are truly fighting: the enemy is not here among us.

What should we do now, when our enemy is no longer clearly visible? Today, we are not fighting against a government, but against an inhumane model that pits us against one another, a reality in which we are valued for what we have and not for what we do, a model based on the fantasy that everything is just fine and that we'll be even better if each of us would just do their individual best to achieve their goals and personal success. We have seen how this model robs us of our ability to dream and to maintain our pride and dignity.

We must fight for our rights. We must create a life that is not ruled by the laws of the market. To do so, we have to preserve the history that we have forged over these many years. We must remember that when we first began this tremendous undertaking, we started from nothing. We must rescue our dreams; we must believe in our colleagues and collaborators. We must take care of ourselves and respect ourselves. We must believe in, love and dream about these utopias that the naysayers tell us no longer exist. We must create a different society.