

# Women & Social Economy

*Is Quebec's "Third Way" gender-sensitive?*

BY DENYSE CÔTÉ & DANIELLE FOURNIER

For some time, authors and journalists have been writing about the "Québec model" in reference to a governance model, developed during the *Parti québécois'* reign (1994-2003), that includes a sustained relationship with civil society (Bélanger et al, 2001; Vaillancourt et al, 2000). It enabled this social-democratic government to address the vocal social movements whose support it required to realize its separatist project, while at the same time reducing the government's size through community economic development (CED).

This "Third Way," known as "social economy"<sup>1</sup> in Québec, has been funded by the provincial, regional, and local governments since 1996, after the *Sommet de l'économie et de l'emploi* (Economy and Work Summit) and the *Marche des femmes "Du pain et des roses"* ("Bread and Roses" Women's March) of 1995.

How do we determine if this Québécois model of social economy is "gender-sensitive," that is, if it ascribes importance to differences in gender? To answer this question, it is necessary to consider both how this model addresses women's *strategic* needs (transforming unequal relationships through measures relating to women's rights, pay equity, the control of resources, etc.) and their *practical* needs (immediate responses to women's urgent needs in terms of housing, health, employment, etc.) (March et al., 2000).

Remember that at this time the government of Québec, like that of Canada, formally committed at the 1995 Beijing International Conference to apply a gender-sensitive approach in policy formulation. What follows is a quick review of some of the progress and some of the setbacks in this regard in policies in support of social economy.

Let's be clear that CED projects are not new to Québec and that women have always featured prominently in them. The types of project and the structure of government have varied over time, however. We are now rediscovering women's participation in co-operation in the 19th century; that of women in community groups from 1960 to 1980 is known, but little has been written on the subject. Furthermore, the social economy paradigm emerged in France at the same time as the liberalism thesis.

Social economy initially referred to a social project opposed to budding capitalism, a collectivist rationalism that advocated the liberation of the marginalized by means of businesses and institutions that they controlled and that supposedly would ensure their economic and social independence (Gislain and Deblock, 1989). Like liberalism, social economy was a utopia whose role it was to influence the development of capitalism, although social economy's point of departure lay in the collective, rather than the individual. Co-operation and mutual benefit have been its central tenets while the accumulation of individual riches has been that of economic liberalism.

The social economy paradigm experienced two intellectual defeats in the 19th century that relegated it to the rank of a minor



movement or philosophy: it was knocked to the mat by Marxism, that rose to dominate the 20th century; and it was revived by the social corporatism of the conservative wing of the Catholic Church, especially in Québec before the Quiet Revolution.

The social economy thesis made a comeback in France and Québec after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and brought about a transformation in the paradigm of intervention practiced by Québec's community groups. From this point forward, some of them have been associated with social economy (daycare centres, for example) while others have been excluded (women's groups, for example). This change occurred between 1996 and 2002, when this research was carried out.

We studied seven of Québec's 17 regions, collecting information from the promoters of projects in receipt of public funding, and from the women and men hired to carry them out. Over and above the question of women's representation in the social economy sector (we know that women formed the vast majority of promoters, employees, and volunteers), we analyzed the capacity of social economy support mechanisms to integrate a gender perspective and address women's practical and strategic interests.

## Addressing Women's Strategic Needs

Québec's women's movement articulated women's strategic needs in its advocacy of "social infrastructure" in 1995. So when the funding of regional social economy projects was devolved to Québec's regions in 1996, regional women's groups took it that the intention was to fund social infrastructure as they had requested and as the government had finally promised.

Not for long. To be sure, with the establishment of the *Centres locaux de développement* (CLDs – local development centres) came a clear directive regarding the place of women in local development.<sup>2</sup> Yet as early as 1999 they sanctioned a gender-neutral entrepreneurial vision. How did this happen? What were the consequences?

## Representation on Regional Social Economy Committees

The first governmental directives in 1996 concerning the distribution of local and regional funds in social economy were unclear. It was the mandate of 17 regional funding committees (CRÉS), each equally comprised of representatives of women's groups and provincial government employees in the region, to determine the criteria for funding projects in social economy. For two years the regional roundtables of women's groups<sup>3</sup> participated (voluntarily) in the joint management of these local measures in social economy. It was certainly an ideal occasion to put women's strategic needs forward to the regional authorities. In these years, projects involving chiefly the social, rather than the economic ends of the "social infrastructure" were funded.

But in 1999, with the introduction of the *Politique de soutien au développement local et régional* (local and regional development support policy), the responsibility for local budget allocation in social economy was transferred to the CLDs (Government of Québec, 1998). Conceived as permanent multi-service agencies for small and medium-sized local businesses, the CLDs inherited the mandate to support the creation of social economy businesses. Regional women's groups were excluded from the CLDs' management boards and lost all form of public legitimacy in social economy matters. The gender perspective was excluded *de facto* from the local social economy funding process.

<sup>1</sup>Note that the terms "community economic development and "social economy" refer to paradigms and social movements that are somewhat different.

<sup>2</sup>The fifth policy directive on the status of women concerned the place of women in local development.

<sup>3</sup>Provincial roundtables of women's groups (women's centres, emergency housing for women victims of violence, etc.) are among the best known and most influential structures in Québec. Each of the 17 regions also has an intersectoral roundtable of women's groups. (photo array) World March of Women in the Year 2000 in Outaouais, QC. Photos courtesy of Denyse Côté.



*Paradoxically, the entrepreneurial direction taken by the CLDs did not lead to large-scale job creation. On the contrary, the CRÉS period in which the more “social” & less “economic” definition of social economy was applied, generated more jobs in absolute numbers, more jobs for women, & jobs that were more secure & better paid.*

### Defining Social Economy

Women's groups also lost the opportunity to insert women's non-marketable (and often unpaid) social contribution to the economy into the budget allocation criteria. In 1996 the debate over the definition of social economy had made it possible to elaborate gender-sensitive selection criteria for project selection. Social economy was seen as an alternative to the social and economic inequalities with which women live; it recognized the importance of work that strengthens the social fabric:

*We are therefore speaking of social economy, of quality in human relationships rather than the overconsumption of manufactured goods, ... an alternative to the marked exclusion of many women from the market economy. (Du pain et des roses, p. 2)*

This gender-sensitive definition was discarded in 1999 and the government's definition of social economy was adopted: social economy now refers to economically profitable activities as well as identified *businesses* and *organizations*, rather than *initiatives emanating from communities* and established by formal or informal groups or by individuals:

*The concept of “economy” refers to the concrete production of goods or services, taking the organizational form of business and contributing to the net increase in collective wealth. (Gouvernement du Québec, 1998, p. 8)*

This has had important consequences for the types of project funded under this program.

### Funding Criteria for Social Economy Projects

Indeed, the new project selection criteria adopted in 1999 were in most cases drawn up without reference to the preceding ones, and addressed more economic than social considerations. In all the regions included in this study, starting in 1999, projects that did not charge fees to pay for a good or service were excluded from funding, the social economy now having to *generate own-source revenue* (Government of Québec, 1998). This monetarization of the social economy excluded all the support services that entail no exchange of money (or fees), thereby excluding the majority of activities of women's groups concerned with the “social infrastructure.”

Almost all of the CLDs in these 17 regions also imposed on projects a criterion of “self-sufficiency” or “economic profit.” They had to demonstrate that they would achieve financial self-sufficiency in one year, that is, that after a year they would no longer need CLD funding. This once again excluded projects by

women's groups (except for a few revenue-generating projects) and prevented social or individual support projects from getting funded under this program.

Finally, the CLDs obliged community groups to use tools appropriate to the business sector: business plans and financial arrangements are the best examples. Introduced very rapidly and sometimes even in a cavalier fashion, these tools, so familiar to private sector entrepreneurs, are ill adapted to the reality, the needs, and the organizational culture of women's groups and of community groups, and require an investment disproportionate to the size and duration of the projects and to the funding. They had a demoralizing effect on independent women's and community groups.

### Social Profit & Economic Profit

The CLDs' adoption of a more classically economic conception of social economy had immediate repercussions. After 1999, projects emanating from women's groups are no more to be found on the list of projects funded by this program. The notion of social entrepreneurship is relegated to oblivion: all projects must be financially viable (that is, generate their own revenues) and demonstrate thereafter, if need be, that they are socially “profitable.” For women's groups, however, “social profitability” remains crucial: first and foremost one must *work with and for members*, with a view to achieving *social change*. But this vision is now considered as secondary to the choice of projects to be funded.

### Addressing Women's Practical Needs

Did social economy funding by the CRÉSs (1996-99) and by the CLDs (1999-2002) address the immediate needs (“practical needs”) of women? Did it give them access to jobs and to quality jobs?

### Job Creation

With this program of financial support for local projects in social economy, the Québec government aimed to create jobs through businesses that are economically profitable and socially responsible. Paradoxically, the *entrepreneurial direction* taken by the CLDs did not lead to large-scale job creation. On the contrary (and to our astonishment), the CRÉS period (1996-99) in which the more “social” and less “economic” definition of social economy was applied, generated more jobs in absolute numbers, more jobs for women, and jobs that were more secure and better paid.



## Terms of Employment

Although the jobs created during the two periods studied offered higher than minimum wages, they remained insecure (part-time or short-term) and poorly paid (generally below \$10/hour). The hourly rate for the inventoried projects generally corresponds to the hourly rate standard among community groups.

To the workers we interviewed, the most satisfying aspects of their jobs related to the values conveyed by the workplace (respect, consideration, support, freedom and self-sufficiency) and to the social mission that gave their work meaning. They thus accepted more willingly their precarious terms of employment.

## Conclusion

The new Liberal government elected in April 2003 has made important changes to the structures and the philosophy of local and regional governance as well as social economy. It has sanctioned the absence of women's groups as regional political players in social economy. The short experience of 1996-99 however illustrates that it is possible to develop gender-sensitive mechanisms in regional and local governance.

After a short period, regional women's groups lost their decision-making power as well as all influence in matters of funding allocation, the opportunity to determine the nature of the criteria and to participate in the analysis of projects. In many regions, the leaders of women's groups had assumed real leadership in social economy – leadership that is now forgotten. They had even trained provincial bureaucrats in the art of working in collaboration with community groups and on the nature of social economy.

Even after 1999, many of these leaders continued working (without pay) to raise people's awareness: giving training sessions on social economy to the new CLD managers, making suggestions as to the integration of social economy with the CLDs, helping to conceptualize action plans, training new CLD agents in social economy. In the meantime, however, the expertise developed between 1996 and 1999 was ignored and then lost.

Nonetheless, certain projects in social economy from that first generation (1996-99) enabled regional government representatives and private sector persons to discover and weave new links with women's groups and community organizations with whom they previously had had little contact. An integration of the "women's dimension" into regional strategic plans commenced. This experience has created favourable conditions and encouraged the representation of women in local and regional decision-making bodies.

The implementation of gender-sensitive policies is a long-term undertaking. Contrary to preconceived ideas, this type of policy can be more economically "profitable" than the classical policies based on a gender-neutral understanding of the "citizen." Furthermore, our research has shown that a feminist concept of social

economy, based on the recognition of "social infrastructure" or the synthesis of social fibre by voluntary (and often women's) labour, facilitates the achievement of objectives in job creation.

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DENYSE CÔTÉ is professor in the Department of social work and social sciences at the Université du Québec en Outaouais. Please send all correspondence to denyse.cote@uqo.ca, 819-595-3900 ext. 2268. DANIELLE FOURNIER is responsible for training periods at the School of social services at the University of Montréal and is President of the provincial group Relais-femmes.