

Susan Telingator 0:02

Welcome to Focus on Gender: Bridging Research and Practice. I'm Sue Telingator. In this episode, we speak with experts from Mexico and the United States and the topic of gender data.

Monica Orozco 0:18

Hi, my name is Monica Orozco, and I live in Mexico City. I used to work with academics and civil society. I am part of Red de Cuidados in Mexico, which is a network in charge of analyzing, and promoting policies in the care sector.

Emily Springer 0:38

Thanks Monica, it's a pleasure to be here and to be in dialogue with you. So my name is Emily Springer. I'm a postdoctoral scholar in social justice and human rights. I'm currently at Arizona State University. I'm trained as a sociologist, as an interdisciplinary sociologist by my choosing. And I actually have a really broad research background. My research was actually about how gender officers, gender professionals working in the international development sector view and understand the value of data in their work lives.

Monica Orozco 1:22

Maybe I will start telling you that some of my initial work was especially related to processing data in order to create policies. That work was around 1997, something around, when I had the chance to participate in work groups that was in charge of the Conditional Cash Transfer Program for Mexico. So that was a very exciting experience and I will tell you a little bit about the use of data that we did for that, and also how everything was evolving in order to gather more data, construct follow up surveys, and the evaluation service using our controlled trial time for one of the first programs in the world that used this kind of evaluation in a large scale which is the program Progressa, then called Oportunidades, then called Prospera and now disappeared but by the actual Mexican government. Well I will tell you a little bit about the data use. At that time, information was not as available as it is right now, even national service official service from the National Institute of Statistics was not in the wide access that we have right now, so many surveys were very useful for the design of this program. And that was a very, very interesting experience because we had the convergence of policymakers coming from different disciplines. So I had this chance to participate with demographers, sociologists, economists, and myself, a statistician, with a speciality in the analysis of data for the design of policies, but it was very, very exciting. Then, this kind of information was very useful to construct statistics on the behavior of the population in different segments of the socio economic structure, but specifically to construct poverty measurement. So that was one of the first steps to try to construct an income standard, as well as multi dimensional standard, and then try to administrate those with a very, very clear objective. Along the years, I think that that is one of the most important experiences I have had. And I was very fortunate, because that experience occurred at the very, very, very beginning of my professional life. Then some years later I had the opportunity to start looking at the gender sector but with wider vision that I used to have from the social development areas. What I can say from my background is that data is always necessary to scale up any intervention that you can make. People should be involved in this kind of discussion, because these two perspectives, quantitative and qualitative are absolutely complimentary, most of the scientific and rigorous evaluations are done in other topics that may not necessarily incorporate the gender views of the problems.

Emily Springer 5:06

Yeah, so this question about how do we actually bridge academic researchers and applied practitioners, I think is a fascinating one and I like to think about it at a couple different scales. So, at a macro level I'm interested in understanding the different incentives researchers are under and applied practitioners are under, and speaking from the research perspective, particularly as a young scholar and someone who's trying to establish my career, I am socialized by the Academy to care about my ability to publish. It's a maddening constraint and it's a maddening incentive. And I've had loads of feminist theory, and there is very little in the academy today that reinforces the ability to do feminist research that is really grounded and engages research participants or is co production of knowledge with research participants. And so there are all these constraints within the academy that are asking us not to break the mold, essentially, and I've literally been told at different points that you wait until you have tenure, to go and do the work that you want to do, and you sort of keep plugging away. Now that's a tragedy and I would argue that the academy needs to work really hard to change their ways, but change is hard because if a single individual goes for it or tries to push it forward, they often bear negative consequences. And so it's like that slow plod forward, of how institutional change happens. Certainly there are people in the academy that are fighting the good fight and trying to push back around that. So Monica, as you were talking and you were saying, you know, there was this wonderful coming together of researchers and practitioners and they were working together to move from sort of a technical perspective into an operational and applied project, sounds like speaking from an academic perspective, that sounds like a dream project to get to be part of. And it's this sort of effort to be able to bridge.

I think that it's important that we increase linkages between organizations and universities, and that we create platforms similar and building on the great energy of the Society for Gender Professionals that actually link, academics and practitioners. Anyone who works in international development knows that your network is really important and it takes you a lot of places and you get to learn about new projects and meet new people. I would say that we're just not talking to each other very much right now. And part of that has to do I think with the constraints that academics are under. I think it's important for us to analytically separate out development programs, and the people who are meant to benefit from those programs. And then what happens inside the offices of development organizations or governmental organizations that are committed to gender programming in some way. Oftentimes I think academics have tended to focus on creating research about development projects, or how to make them better or researching the current experiences of people around the world and so they're, they're looking really at the sort of the lives of the people who are meant to benefit from development and social policies. And then we also have the office, and I would say that so much that organizational dimension gets missed, and that's a spot where practitioners have very little ability to get time budget and resources to study what happens in the organization. And I think that's an important piece, particularly when it comes to gender, because what's happening in offices...we often, in development organizations, I find we often talk about gender as something that happens at the project. But as all of us know, as good feminists, it's all around us, power dynamics are all around us and gendered relationships are happening with our co-workers constantly, and it is shaping the way that decisions get made within organizations. So I think academics have a really big role to play, particularly looking at the organizational level. And then I think there are ways

that we could partner, if we get stronger platforms so we can communicate and sort of, I mean the world is really big. There are loads of projects, loads of organizations. And if we could potentially have even some sort of a, I almost want to say like a crowdsourced Google doc. We've seen sort of how radical those can be when you look at what happened in the #metoo movement, crowdsourcing documents can be amazing. And if we just started to create and throw things together and have a place where people could go. Monica, you mentioned the energy and need and a personal drive of individuals to opt in. And when we start crowdsourcing documents, we're inherently pulling together the people who are choosing to opt in and who want those experiences and providing them an opportunity to connect.

Monica Orozco 10:27

Well, no I think that all what you're saying is very important. I would say that practitioners and academics, speak different languages. That is the point of departure, if we want to...

Emily Springer 10:40

Fair criticism.

Monica Orozco 10:42

Right. So, we do need our like translations so in order to try to start reducing these kind of gaps. I think it would be it would be very important, more than having access to shared platforms, which is very important. I think that the possibility of universities to open their doors to practitioners in order to listen to them, try to study the problems in every sector would be a good strategy because otherwise when students are not in touch with reality, they are not going to be able to choose thesis topics, or research programs that are devoted to solve real problems. What I have had as a good experience in Mexico for example in Mexico City, which is one of the, of the most important centers of research and universities in Mexico, is that you have this kind of seminars, in which practitioners come, they talk about their responsibilities on the problems they have there. And that is a way, when talking one to each other, that maybe from the point of view of the academy to solve problems of the governmental agenda. And while this is only one one way but maybe there can be some others.

Emily Springer 12:24

So, so when you say for universities to open their doors to practitioners do you mean not in the sense of getting them, actually, in programs, or as like guest speakers to talk about what is quote unquote, the real world which we have sort of an assumption underlying here that the academy is not the real world, which I agree with that criticism. Certainly, in, in some aspects. But so, it is to expose people within the academy,

Monica Orozco 12:56

right,

Emily Springer 12:56

to sort of the complexity of real life problems, the difficulties of moving social policy forward and understanding what meaningful evidence would support the development of those policies, is that correct? Yeah, it's interesting that you say that the sort of people are out of touch. I have found again this goes back to the incentive structure of academia, I found actually that a lot of

programs are interested in students who can move very quickly through the different sort of levels of the academy. So a lot of students in at least sociology PhD programs are coming right from a bachelor's degree, and they've often been a research assistant on a project before, but it means that we're sort of moving people through the education system, who don't have real world experience and haven't worked a regular job and don't know what it means to try to execute a program or see a policy in action. And so I think that can actually and departments have an incentive to do that because usually those folks are very narrowed in they're sort of laser focus on being researchers and becoming researchers and publishing a lot.

Monica Orozco 14:19

But that's what, what I was saying, I mean, government sectors, or practitioners in general in the private sector too and academics have their own dynamics and their own incentives, and problems. That's why I was saying that in order to improve this contact to reduce this gap you need like a translator. Civil society makes good good part of translators, because in civil society, you also have people involved with Academy, as well as with activism. What is very important with, with civil society, for example, is that they have a topic in which they are very very expert on this topic. They have been following the issue for several years. So there's a lot of expertise there about things that are not written or are not in the books, or are not in the academic programs, which says, Well, this government made this, on this other with that. And at the end, none of them have done this a specific thing that they have to do in order to reduce gender violence, for example, and there is a lot of knowledge there. I think, civil society can be very helpful in order to make these kind of translations between Academy and practitioners. Also I would say that we need to have something like, and a strategy to construct intellectual capital around specific topics. And then, the possibility to vote, that knowledge. And I think that in general, we don't have that kind of thing. Not in academia, not not in in government. So, that is something that is like, I don't know I think Academy can help to construct that kind of a framework, of strategy, and because it will be very difficult. From the point of view of a government.

Emily Springer 16:31

So I've had this idea: one of the things that I see a lot, I would say probably the most common document coming out of a project would be any evaluation. And sort of different evaluations, maybe a midterm and a final. There's a strong skepticism about evaluations, they just sit on a shelf. And yet, we have an entire industry and sector. We... money is flowing for monitoring and evaluation, I think it will increasingly continue to flow. So I'm really interested in trying to change how we build evidence around gender in everyday international development projects. People who work in this field will will see this instantly. We have a section in evaluations about gender, we don't weave gender throughout all of the different sections of the report. So when I look at data from one of the sections, I don't actually know if that data includes both men and women farmers, for example, I study agricultural development projects. Because all of a sudden you have a chapter that's quote unquote on gender, and now suddenly, you're talking about women farmers, and you're giving me some numbers about the women who were involved. Now that calls into question some of the data that you have in these other sections because you haven't been specific about who it applies to. Oftentimes we see in evaluations, success stories, or sort of a presentation of a single beneficiary. Evaluators have this wonderful ability to go out and do interviews and focus group discussions with participants. But I noticed that in the reports, the

data isn't presented in a systematic way. So I feel like qualitative data is getting a bad rep and I interviewed chiefs of parties and project leads for my own research. You know, they themselves are like qualitative is too anecdotal. And I think there are ways that I really liked your term intellectual capital, like if the academy could be involved in that. I would love to be able to work with practitioners who are doing evaluation and work on how we can enhance the rigor and systematic use of qualitative data in something as commonplace as an evaluation document. And we also need to get skilled in how to do things faster. And there are all these sort of different techniques that I think if practitioners and researchers came together around gender, we could both be skilling each other around how to produce more rigorous yet faster data to build an evidence base around gender in development projects. Do you have any thoughts on that, is there anything in particular that you feel like an academic could help with?

Monica Orozco 19:26

Training is fundamental, because the world of of practice is very heterogeneous, so Academy needs to put in a different way the knowledge. If you want to reach practitioners in all levels, you need to translate that kind of knowledge in words that are meaningful for them. I think that is very important, and I think the Academy, needs to work together with practitioners in order to start linking language, ideas, and dialogue. Otherwise, it's going to be very difficult. Even if you have the best of the best of the best service, it is very hard but a huge audience is going to be rich.

Emily Springer 20:10

Yeah, that's wonderful and that makes me think too, there are, I think there is a bigger embrace in the Academy in the last couple of years of people doing public outreach and knowledge mobilization around their research findings. So I think there are some really big trends that we could build on and if within this community we could try to grab hold of that that would be wonderful. I'll just say as a, as a small plug on the other side, academics, often, as you've said, we don't know what's happening on the ground. The Academy work moves at sort of a glacial pace and development projects are moving forward much faster and so if anyone knows of academics or researchers, please tell them what you think is important to have research done on. What do you want research done on but you don't have time or money or the skill set to execute. Tell somebody, tell a researcher, reach out to a local university, tell uh the department that you're interested in this. There are graduate students, there are postdocs, there are tenured professors who are looking to be able to do meaningful research but we don't always know or have those connections. That's also on us to be cultivating that I don't mean to put that onto practitioners in any way shape or form. Academics at the same time, need to be cultivating those relationships, but generally we want to be doing meaningful work. And so it's, it's really about that communication piece and then as Monica also mentioned sort of that translation piece.