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Tabitha Lazenby
Utah State University

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**“Our Sweat, Our Struggle, Our Success”: The Women of the
COMAMNUVI Cooperative.**

by

Tabitha Lazenby

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree**

of

**HONORS IN UNIVERSITY STUDIES
WITH DEPARTMENTAL HONORS**

in

**International Studies
in the Department of Political Science**

Approved:

Thesis/Project Advisor
Dr. Susan Mannon

Departmental Honors Advisor
Dr. Veronica Ward

Director of Honors Program
Dr. Christie Fox

**UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, UT**

Spring 2009

Tabitha Lazenby

"Our Sweat, Our Struggle,

Our Success":

The Women of the

COMAMNUVI

Cooperative.

Author's Biography

Tabitha Lazenby is a recent graduate of Utah State University majoring in International Studies and Public Relations with an emphasis in Economic Development and a minor in Sociology. Tabitha has studied and researched abroad in Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Uganda, Rwanda, and Kenya. As a result of her study abroad experience she was able to research at the world's first worker-owned cooperative operating in the Nicaraguan Free Trade Zone and initiated an organization called Women For Change in Uganda, which supports urban refugee women. Lazenby also has presented her research at conferences in Scotland, Chicago, and was invited to present at USU's Campaign Continuation Gala. Tabitha has been awarded the Utah State University Lily-White Scholarship, Hansen Scholarship, Presidential Fellowship, Gilman International Scholarship, Multicultural Student Scholarship, ASUSU Outstanding Greek Award, and Service Achievement of the Year. Tabitha was recently awarded USU's highest honor, The Bill E Robbins Memorial Award. The award is based on an individual's overall educational experience at USU. Lazenby received the award for having created a successful, well-rounded college experience through her dedication, volunteerism and hard work. She also impacted the campus community as a volunteer in the Val R. Christensen Service Center, various multicultural student organizations, the Utah State Service Learning Scholars program and the Honors program. Her plan is to further her research on cooperative movements in Latin American and Africa, to obtain a joint-PhD in Law and Sociology and to develop a non-profit organization that will provide alternative markets to clothing and artisan cooperatives in Latin America and Africa. Eventually, I hope to encourage the formation of such cooperatives among immigrant communities in the United States and to foster cross-cultural understanding of these communities and their plight as workers and immigrants. More immediately, her goal is to further establish the refugee organization of which she established in Uganda, "Women for Change."

Project Abstract

On October 30, 1998 Hurricane Mitch swept across the shores of Nicaragua leaving countless Nicaraguans homeless, hungry, and unemployed. 14,000 of these refugees were relocated to a municipality in *Ciudad Sandino* called *Nueva Vida (New Life)*. In the year 2000 a small group of women began working with Jubilee House Community's Center for Development in Central America project and Maggie's Organics to initiate the industrial sewing project of the *Cooperativa Maquiladora Mujeres de Nueva Vida Internacional (Comamnuni)*. The project started with 50 women and men, but due to harsh economic conditions and the necessity for workers to find paying jobs, the group quickly dwindled to 11. These 11 people are the 11 members that currently manage the factory today. In 2005 the FIA donated 10,000 dollars to the cooperative so that they could become the world's first worker-owned free trade zone, allowing them to import and export without paying taxes. They are fighting for their autonomy, their cooperative, and their future. They face financial problems, a rocky relationship with their founding NGO, and interpersonal communication problems that have been the root cause of many of their biggest mistakes. This paper will explain and analyze how a group of former internally displaced women came to run an international business revolving around an alternative trade model particularly looking at the question of how involvement in the cooperative has influenced their lives.

Project Abstract in Spanish

El 30 de octubre, 1998 Huracán Mitch barrió a través de la costa de Nicaragua dejando nicaragüenses innumerables sin hogar, hambrientos, y desempleado. 14.000 mil de estos refugiados fueron trasladados a un municipio en Cuidad Sandino se llama Nueva Vida. En el año 2000 un pequeño grupo de mujeres empezó trabajar con el Jubilee House y el Centro de la Comunidad para el Desarrollo y Maggies Organics para iniciar el proyecto de coser del Cooperativa Maquiladora Mujeres de Nueva Vida Internacional (Comamnuvi). El proyecto empezó con 50 mujeres y hombres, pero debido a condiciones económicas duras y la necesidad para trabajadores a encontrar los trabajos que pagan, el grupo rápidamente menguado a 11. Estas 11 personas son los 11 miembros que manejan actualmente la fábrica hoy. En 2005 el FIA donó 10.000 dólares al cooperativo para que ellos puedan llegar a ser la primera zona franca trabajador-poseído de mundo, los permitiendo importar y exportar sin pagar los impuestos.

Ellos luchan para su autonomía, su cooperativo, y su futuro. Ellos encaran los problemas financieros, una relación rocosa con su ONG fundadora, y con los problemas interpersonales de comunicación que han sido la causa primordial de muchos de sus errores más grandes. Durante años, sus historias y las experiencias han sido dichas por su ONG fundadora, y su tentativa reciente separar a sí mismo de la Jubilee House ha alentado discurso interno y externo acerca de sus propios defectos personales y la presión del exterior de su ONG fundadora y sus consumidores a crear e idealizar su identidad. Este papel procurará analizar los conflictos de este cooperativo y explicará y analizará cómo un grupo de refugiados anteriores vino a correr un negocio internacional que trabaja alrededor de un modelo alternativo del comercio y sus luchas de la corriente.

Tabitha Lazenby

“Our Sweat, Our Struggle, Our Success”:

The Women of the COMAMNUVI Cooperative

On October 30, 1998, Hurricane Mitch swept across the shores of Nicaragua leaving countless Nicaraguans homeless, hungry, and unemployed. 14,000 of these Internally Displaced Peoples were relocated to a municipality in *Ciudad Sandino* called Nueva Vida (*New Life*) (Interview with Mike Woodard, 14/11/2007). In the year 2000 a small group of these internally displaced individuals, mostly women, began working with Jubilee House Community's Center for Development in Central America project and Maggie's Organics to initiate the industrial sewing project of the *Cooperativa Maquiladora Mujeres de Nueva Vida Internacional* (Comamnuvi).

The project started with 50 women and men, but due to harsh economic conditions and the necessity for workers to find paying jobs, the group quickly dwindled to 11. These 11 people are the members that currently manage the factory today. In 2005, a donation of 10,000 dollars to the cooperative allowed them to become the world's first worker-owned free trade zone. The cost of registering the free trade zone with the Nicaraguan government is \$10,000 and thus provides a guarantee against any future fines. This free trade zone status provides a number of benefits. A) Exemption on local purchases of the 15% value added tax exemption from all Nicaraguan taxes, except for payment of employees' social security and health care. B) Lower utility rates on public utilities (water) C) and allows them to import and export without paying taxes (Renk 2005:49). The women worked

and struggled for two years without pay to build their own sewing cooperative, and although they have been running the business for eight years now, the cooperative is still riddled with struggles. These founding members are the *socios* or members of the cooperative. The workers are new members of the cooperative who are expected to become members of the cooperative within a specific period of time. The women of the Comamnuvi Cooperative have struggled to be where they are today, and their fight continues. They survived a devastating hurricane and have become the first of their kind to develop a sewing cooperative that revolves around a very unique alternative trade model.

As this study shows, these women are fighting for their organization's autonomy, their cooperative, and their future. They face financial problems, a rocky relationship with their founding NGO, and interpersonal communication problems that have been the root cause of many of their biggest mistakes. For years, their stories and experiences have been told by their founding NGO, and their recent attempt to separate themselves from the Jubilee House has encouraged internal and external discourse about their own individual and personal faults. There has also been outside pressure from their founding NGO and their consumers to create and idealize their identity. This paper will explain and analyze how a group of former internally displaced women came to run an international business revolving around an alternative trade model particularly looking at the question of how involvement in the cooperative has influenced their lives.

The Free Trade Model and Its Discontents

Comamnuvi Cooperative claims to operate as a fair trade cooperative in a free trade zone. In order to analyze the cooperative in such a unique context we must first understand women's position in the global economy and the ideals behind the fair trade and cooperative movement. Three decades ago, women were almost invisible in the

scholarship of development, but today feminist scholarship plays a vital role in understanding women in a globalized world. Drawing from neo-Marxist critiques of the world system, researchers in the Gender and Development (GAD) tradition question whether economic development is an appropriate aim for women. GAD researchers explore the ways integration into the world economy leads to increased exploitation of women. GAD scholars critique the idea that educating women or giving women access to jobs will erase gender inequality (Hall, 2000). GAD also stresses the need for organization but more in terms of women's self organization so as to increase their political power within the economic system (Young, 2002).

The critique of development posed by GAD scholars has become increasingly important as developing countries have turned to a free trade export model of development.

Developing countries have tried to further develop by attracting business investment in export production and participating in the world economy as exporters of manufactured goods.

Export production increasingly relies on women. GAD theory distinguishes three tendencies in the relationship between the emergence of factory work and the subordination of women: a tendency to intensify the existing forms of gender subordination; a tendency to decompose existing forms of gender subordination; and a tendency to recompose existing forms into new forms of gender subordination (Elson and Pearson, 1980). In all cases, the GAD approach concludes that women's factory work is equal to women's labor exploitation. Based on the early example of women's employment in export-oriented industries on the U.S.–Mexico border, as well as other sites of such production, many scholars have concurrently concluded that this type of employment exploited women workers (Lourdes Arizpe and Josephina Aranda 1981; Helen Safa 1981; María Patricia Fernández-Kelly 1983; Jorge Carrillo and; Susan Tiano 1994). Others argued that the rapid growth of export-oriented production would benefit

women by providing them with formal, well-paid employment (Lim, 1990). Yes indeed, these factories do provide women with better job opportunities than would most likely be available in community businesses found within the modern or traditional sector. There are also further limitations to this job opportunity. These employment efforts are based on patriarchal exploitation and the elimination of this type of exploitation could very well bring an elimination of the job itself due to the fluidity of the organization and global availability of cheap exploitable female labor (Lim 1990:225). “A job may give a woman a degree of economic autonomy and loosen the bonds of a patriarchal family, but it also exposes her to a new form of capitalist exploitation and state control” (Safa 1981:431).

Particularly, many studies have exemplified how neo liberalism has an adverse effect on poor and working class women, given the traditional roles that they must feel as primary caregivers for the family (Bose and Acosta-Belen, 1995; Safa 1994; Beneria and Feldman 1992). Many scholars seem to be addressing this connection between traditional family structural transformations, gender, and a neoliberal economic structure, coupled with the social impacts of privatization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996; Castells, 1997: Ch. 7; Folbre, 1994; Macinnes, 1998; Moore, 1994; Radcliffe, 1991).

The ideology behind cooperatives and fair trade differ from the prevalent export model now popular in the developing world. And to understand how the women of Comamnuvi have been influenced by their involvement in the cooperative, it is important to understand the literature behind the ideology of fair trade and cooperative movements. Cooperatives refer to associations of people. Cooperatives are actors on the market, trying to correct it in favor of its member-shareholders. Fair Trade, in turn, is a process. It is one particular mechanism designed to modify the operating system of a particular market. In this case, the fair trade market. We find cooperatives active in fair trade, indeed, but also associations, non-governmental organizations, and businesses

(Develtre and Pollet 2007:10-15.) Cooperatives, as economic enterprises and as self-help organizations, play a meaningful role in uplifting the socio-economic conditions of their members and their local communities. Over the years, cooperative enterprises have successfully operated locally owned people-centered businesses while also serving as catalysts for social organization and cohesion. With their concern for their members and communities, they represent a model of economic enterprise that places high regard for democratic and human values and respect for the environment (COPAC 2008:1).

Although there are many types of cooperatives, the type of cooperative at-hand would be defined as a worker cooperative. Worker cooperatives involve employees rather than users of the business. However, people need a working scenario that provides opportunity, stable employment, and justifiable pay which, can be provided through self help. They began in France in the 1830s, and by the 1860s had spread to Italy, and the most successful were labor cooperatives working through public works contracts. They suffered from recurring problems caused by the internal conflicts between members as employees and members as owners. Often their success led to a restricted membership and ultimately they become traditional small businesses (Smith 2003). They had problems in allow their managers to manage without interference and, because only workers could be shareholders, had difficulty raising capital. The exceptions are clusters of worker cooperatives in Italy and Spain. The La Lega cooperatives of North Central Italy employ nearly 80,000 members, account for about one eighth of Emilia-Romagna's GDP, and a far greater share in areas where they are even more concentrated. The Mondragon Cooperative Corporation in the Basque region of Spain employs around 40,000 members, is now the largest business group in the Basque region (Birchall 2004:11-12). Therefore, this coop offers a unique model and a unique context to examine the experiences of workers in a fair trade model.

Free and Fair Trade in Nicaraguan History

In Nicaragua, 45 percent of all income goes to the richest 10 per cent of the population, while only 14 per cent goes to the poorest (UNICEF). Nicaragua is the third poorest country in the Americas, with a per capita gross national product of \$453 (UNICEF). These harsh economic and social conditions affect women and children the most. One of every three children has some degree of chronic malnutrition, and 9 percent suffer from severe malnutrition (UNICEF). Women in Nicaragua not only live the startling realities of the country's economic situation, but are usually faced with the grim reality of raising their children as single mothers, with one out of four households headed by a woman (UNICEF). Many of these women end up working in an export processing zone to try and provide for their families.

Nicaragua is not a typical of most developing countries in that it has attempted to overcome poverty through the attraction of foreign investment and business. However, Nicaragua's path to economic globalization has been unique in the Central American context as it has experienced a transition from an authoritarian to a revolutionary regime to and then to a neoliberal democracy. In this new context, Free Trade Zones have been established to attract such investment, although they generally provide low-paying jobs and feature poor working conditions. The Free Trade Zone in Nicaragua was born in the 1980s when women made up 70 percent of the textile workers employed in state-owned factories (Perez Aleman, et al. 1987: 5-7). When the Sandinistas were defeated in 1990, the textile industry was liquidated as part of a new development strategy. Thus, 85 percent of them were lost by mostly women and were subsequently forced into unemployment (Renzi and Agurto 1993:41). The skilled and mostly female workforce was now unemployed and many women were searching for jobs. This provided the perfect setting for the arrival of transnational assembly factories in Nicaragua (Renzi 1996: 34-44). It is estimated that between 80 and 90 percent of workers in the free trade zone are

women (MEC, 2007). In 2007, free trade zones in Nicaragua employed about 75,000 workers in 85 foreign owned factories or "maquilas" (NSCAG 2007). Free Trade Zones (often called *Maquiladoras* in Spanish) in Nicaragua do not differ significantly from others around the world. The working conditions are demanding. Women are often discriminated against and are subjected to sexual harassment, health hazards, and harsh working conditions.

Ligia Jiron, a 26-year-old mother of two, had worked in the export processing zone called Milcolores for four years. Apparently, the owner of Milcolores produced goods for Greg Miller, an American company. One day she went to work just as she usually had on a daily basis. This day the factory was empty. There were no managers, no ability to work, and thus, no pay. The company had left. This is a common practice amongst maquiladoras to avoid paying taxes. Therefore, Ligia the sole provider of her family of five along with over 800 women who were unemployed took turns guarding the maquiladora. The women would sleep at the maquiladora with the hopes that they could garner some pay from the sell of the sewing machines. "If they refuse to give us our pay, we will take their sewing machines," she said (Interview with Ligia Jiron, 11/03/2007). The Minister of Work had issued an embargo of the business, and the court was asking for 2 million pesos, 4 weeks of salary, and retribution paid to three unions. It was unlikely that anyone would get paid.

Often women working in the export-processing zones are also victims of sexual harassment. Lesdy Cruz worked in the FTZ for 2 years:

"Often women who work in the maquilas are called vagas (tramps), immoral, delinquents, and prostitutes. The first few days of work were the worst! Tension between my son's father and I increased. The individuals working as managers in the cooperative are very harsh. The problem is that Nicaraguans that get just a little more power like to exploit others. The men that I worked with in the FTZ often said, "Why

do I work here if I am doing the same work as a woman!” Working in the FTZ helps you to value life and see a lot of single women that do it. I don’t want the life of the free trade zone. You are forced to abandon your children because of all the hours wasted” (Interview with Lesdy Cruz, 11/02/2007).

Women working in maquiladoras are often subject to serious health hazards. Lesdy became a manager and was constantly on her feet. Due to this trauma, she aborted her first child. She was also constantly in the hospital. She mentioned that the relationship with her son’s father became very strained. He started to drink because he felt that she was more than him. She held a higher position than he did and subsequently she earned more than he did. He couldn’t handle it (Interview with Lesdy Cruz, 11/02/2007).

Although it has recently pursued an export production model, Nicaragua also has a long history of cooperative development and state socialism. The general cooperative movement in Nicaragua has a long history dating back to when Augusto Cesar Sandino formed Nicaragua’s first cooperative in the 1920s. Later, the Somoza regime occasionally developed cooperatives to maintain elite control of the agricultural export sector, which would help to eliminate threats of “communism.” The Sandinista revolution had a significant influence on the number of cooperatives that developed in Nicaragua. Most of the cooperatives were agriculture cooperatives and were initiated when the Sandinistas gave land to former farm workers. After the Revolutionary party was voted out in 1990, many cooperatives collapsed. Between the years of 1993-2001, the total number of cooperatives decreased by 40 percent. Due to the emergence of niche markets, cooperative membership actually increased by 11 percent as some cooperatives began forming direct connections to European Fair Trade and the US specialty roasters. These cooperatives realized the need to unite even more to be able to focus on specialized commercialization practices and meet the increasing demands of the changing global

coffee economy(Chammoro 2005:9) The fair trade sector in Nicaragua today consists of the production of agricultural products, mostly coffee. One coffee cooperative in Northern Nicaragua is run specifically by Nicaraguan women.

The world's first worker-owned free trade zone, exemplifies a grass roots effort to create an advantageous environment from within a neoliberal export-production strategy. COMAMNUVI took years of sweat-equity, the assistance of a U.S.-based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), and persistence to navigate a host of domestic and international institutional barriers to achieve modest export success (Suchmeir and Snider, 2008). Because as a cooperative they are excluded from free trade zone benefits, COMAMNUVI pursued a strategy of creating a wholly owned limited liability corporation, the Zona Franca Masili, operating under the commercial name of "Fair Trade Zone," a deliberate play on the implications of the name (Renk 2005: 50). Internally the cooperative operates as a cooperative and externally the cooperative operates as a free trade zone.

Methodology

The data for this study were collected during November of 2007 at the Comamnuvi Cooperative in Nueva Vida, Nicaragua. My experiences growing up in a working class family fostered reciprocal communication with the women of Comamnuvi, and many of the women referred to me as "part of the family." At the same time, I recognize that my identity as a young, white woman from the United States impeded my ability to obtain information from individuals with whom I had not developed close relationships. Due to my identity as a feminist, I applied feminist methodology to my research. Feminist research practice requires a critical stance towards existing methodology in the social sciences. While an attention to the responsibilities, rights and particular knowledge of those studied, and a recognition of gendered relationships in the conduct and process of research may not be unique to feminist methodology; they are an

essential component of it. The use of feminist methodology implies a commitment to the empowerment of women (Helen Roberts, ed.. *Doing Feminist Research*, 2nd edn (London, 1990).

Research questions focused on how the cooperative was organized and how or if involvement in the cooperative has changed women's lives.

I divided the research into four complementary stages. First, I had the opportunity to integrate myself into the Comamnuvi Cooperative as a researcher and individual interested in the life experiences of the women at Comamnuvi. I was able to access this cooperative through the connections of the School for International Training. I stayed in the same community where the cooperative was located and researched at the cooperative for eight hours each day. Participant observation was used as a technique to broaden my understanding and deepen my familiarity with the operations performed by a cooperative operating according to an alternative trade model. By working with the women in the cooperative and participating in workshops, I was able to develop relationships and friendships with many of the women, which strengthened my interviews. The credibility of my interviews was thus strengthened as more in-depth responses were provided due to the aforementioned relationship established.

Some archival materials were also collected from my advisor Gladys Manzanares, and other union activists and former fair trade zone workers. This information was necessary to develop and understand the singularity of the alternative trade model of Comamnuvi and the unique experiences of women working in such an alternative trade model.

Participant observation was complemented by 21 hours of ethnographic recordings derived from conversations and interviews between myself and the women working at Comamnuvi. I was able to interview all but two of the 11 founding members working at the Nueva Vida Cooperative and four of the workers. As previously

mentioned, members and workers are two distinct groups. When an individual applies for a job at the cooperative, they are a worker, and according to Comamnuvi's constitution, they must go through a process to become a member and owner of the cooperative. Interviews were always conducted individually in a private space. After initial contact with these women, I began to visit them at their homes, go to lunch, and have light-hearted conversations. I also was able to learn a variety of information from the two-kilometer walk to and from the Comamnuvi cooperative every day. These conversations were a copious reservoir of attitudes, struggles, and descriptions, which are incorporated into this work.

Third, I lived with Andrea Calderon Zeas, a founding member of the Comamnuvi cooperative, for the duration of the two-week study. My experience living with Mrs. Zeas in the community of Nueva Vida was challenging, but I gained a wealth of knowledge during this period and was able to develop an enduring friendship. Many of my more in-depth interviews were provided from Andrea. Our friendship allowed her to feel comfortable sharing her brutal experience with domestic violence, poverty, and her desire to make something of herself. Each day the power would go out at 6 pm, giving us ample time for in-depth discussion.

During the time that I was at the cooperative, the organization Puentes de Paz conducted a series of workshops for the members Comamnuvi and the neighboring cooperative Genesis. I was able to attend five workshops and meetings with Comamnuvi, the newly founded Genesis Cooperative, and representatives of the Jubilee House. I learned a wealth of historical information from these meetings and it opened my eyes to the power dynamics between Comamnuvi Cooperative and the Jubilee House. In the sections that follow, I review the birth of Comamnuvi Cooperative and its establishment as a fair trade model. As I will show, this establishment was imposed by outside organizations. Once established, however, the founding members of the

cooperative – all women – wrestled control over the cooperative. Their story is one of empowerment, but also one of conflict. Finally, I review the women and men workers who have chosen not to become members. In this sense, I suggest that the cooperative has achieved its fair trade agenda, but failed to be a true worker-owned cooperative.

The Comamnuvi Cooperative as a Fair Trade Model

Many cooperatives rely on some sort of outside catalyst to facilitate the start of the process and to support the growth of the process in its early phases (Burkey 1993:73). In the case of the Comamnuvi cooperative, The Jubilee House was the outside catalyst that initiated the project. The Jubilee House, based in the United States, was formed in 1979 as a non-sectarian religious community. In 1993 the Jubilee house was invited to Nicaragua by a priest and officially established the Jubilee's project in Nicaragua, which came to be called the Center for Development in Central America. Jubilee House came to Nicaragua to work in five areas of sustainable development: sustainable agriculture, corporate technology, economic development, healthcare, and education (Interview with Mike Woodard, 14/11/2007).

When Hurricane Mitch hit in 1998, there were many families living along the shore of Lake Managua. The lake flooded and these poor families were forced to leave. Andrea Calderon Zeas, a founding member of the cooperative, tells her story:

When the hurricane came, I was not in my house. I was visiting a brother in Granada. I turned on the television and saw the news talking about the hurricane. I immediately left Granada and went to my house in Managua and when I arrived no one was there. The house was alone. I grabbed my two children that I had and I asked my neighbor to help me get some of my things out of the house. For me, I couldn't believe that the lake was going to fill up. For me, it was like a dream that I was living. I didn't want to leave, but my friend insisted that I go. I

was asking, "but when is the water going to rise?" As I was leaving, I ended up stopping near my house and I could see that the water was rising. There was a moment that the water was up to my chest. It was horrible. Everyone was screaming, because the water was up to the chest of all of the people. I only managed to get the clothes that I had on my back out of my house. Our houses were destroyed so we went to live in a college for two months. The food was horrible. I was very sick and my stomach always hurt. My feet were like raw meat because of the water being contaminated (Interview with Andrea Calderon Zeas, 14/11/2007).

The refugees were soon moved to an area about 7 km from *Ciudad Sandino* called *Nueva Vida* or New Life. *Ciudad Sandino* has the largest population density in the country: it houses over 4,500 people per square mile (Renk 2005:32). The local government can do little to help the 230,000 residents that live there—even today, the mayor's office has \$2.30 per individual to provide all city services including health and education support programs (Renk, 32).

The Jubilee House was one of the initial organizations that responded to the Hurricane relief efforts in 1998. After the hurricane, the emergency relief that was being taken into the community by governmental organizations was often stripped from the trucks by poor citizens of the neighboring city of *Ciudad Sandino* before it reached the refugees in *Nueva Vida*. The Jubilee House first became involved with emergency relief when they created a color-coded system of organization which helped to better disperse latrines, construction supplies, food, and medical care to the actual victims. Red cards were passed out for the materials to construct the house and green cards were for families to receive disbursements of food. As the trucks passed, the refugees would hand them their card and each individual family would receive their allotment of supplies (Interview with Mike Woodard, 14/11/2007)

During the emergency relief efforts, the Jubilee House began thinking of ways that they could develop a sustainable development project, in that the project would be economically viable now and in the long run, to help female refugees in *Nueva Vida* improve their current and future economic situation. According to Mike Woodard, the founding director of Jubilee House Nicaragua, “It was clear to [Jubilee House] from the beginning that it was about starting from nothing and building a sustainable community (Interview with Mike Woodard, 14/11/2007). During the process of dispersing hurricane relief supplies, the Jubilee House realized that leadership was naturally evolving within the community. Community members were taking on the responsibility of passing out supplies and directing people. Next, the Jubilee House went into each block of the community and held elections that turned out 57 representatives, which has been the “only elected leadership that has ever come out of Nueva Vida (Interview with Mike Woodard, 14/11/2007).

Mike Woodard, the Jubilee House’s director, said at this point they asked the subgroup of leadership to think about what they needed. He remarked that, “Of course they said they needed food, shelter, clothes, etc., but then they asked them to think about six months down the road when everyone had forgotten about Nueva Vida.” The Jubilee House asked the victims “how you are going to meet all these needs when you don’t have someone handing out all of this stuff. “ This is when the victims started thinking about schools, housing programs, sanitation and jobs (Interview with Mike Woodard, 14/11/2007). The Jubilee House came up with five priorities in no particular order to assist the refugees living in Nueva Vida: housing, healthcare, education, sanitation, and jobs and members of the elected leadership were assigned to each different area.

In February of 1999, Mr. Woodard was at a meeting of the Organic Crop Association when he began speaking to Peter Murray, the Production Manager for

Maggie's Organics, a US vender of Organic Clothing, whom Woodward had known for a number of years. When Mr. Murray enquired about Mike's work in Nicaragua, he replied, "well at the moment, we are trying to help 14,000 refugees make a life in the middle of a muddy cow pasture(Interview with Mike Woodard, 14/11/2007). Peter became interested in the refugees that Mike was working with and asked if any of them knew how to sew. Mike assumed that because there were many export processing zone jobs in Nicaragua, some people would know how to sew. Thus, he ended up working out a deal with Maggie's Organics, to give the cooperative all of their sewing contracts if they could create a non-sweatshop entity and a socially responsible business. The idea was later presented to the employment commission that had recently been organized in Nueva Vida, and they liked it.

The initial idea was to bring five members in from each different area of Nueva Vida that knew how to sew and five that did not know how to sew. The group started out with 50 workers and quickly dwindled to 14 because many could not support their families while working without pay to initiate the cooperative. Only one of the 14 knew how to sew (Interview with Mike Woodard). The women took a sewing course in Managua, quickly learned the basics, and soon found another client, an Irish Folk singer, Billy Bragg, who insisted on fair trade t-shirts for his first show. The cooperative began to attract a few other clients and slowly moved ahead (Interview with Marini Perez, 14/11/2007). The cooperative was set up specifically as an alternative to free trade problems.

The Cooperative Founders and their Struggle

Andrea Calderon Zeas was a founding member of the cooperative and thus she had some sense of ownership over the cooperative. Her responses varied greatly from the responses of the "workers" who had no sense of ownership within the cooperative and thus hadn't toiled for its prosperity. Her upbringing often mirrored responses of

other workers in general. “When I arrived at the cooperative,” she said, “I didn’t know anything because I had been married and my husband provided for me (Interview with Andrea Calderon Zeas, 14/11/2007) However, her outcome was very different. She was a founding member of the cooperative and although she had endured domestic violence she would no longer tolerate it. She had more control over her situation. “The cooperative is something that I constructed with my own hands, it’s something that I have lived...I have tolerated hunger...I had blisters on my hands. My husband did not have the same experience that I did. I never thought that I would be where I am today (Interview with Andrea Calderon Zeas, 14/11/2007).

For the members of the cooperative, the gender dynamics began to change as these women started constructing the cooperative. The majority of the women in the cooperative have been single mothers, and several of their husbands left them when they started to work on the project. Ruth Garay said, “The husbands got mad when they say that we were working and that we were carrying bills. We as women are the ones that suffer most from the lack of respect out of both sexes. We as women have more responsibility. We are the ones that have to think about putting food on the table. This is why we have preference for women in our cooperative and have a few men working here in order to lift the fabric (Interview with Ruth Garay, 14/11/2007). Most of the founding members’ husbands thought they were crazy when they entered into the cooperative. Veronica Calero said, “My husband told me that I should be at home watching the kids- when he started seeing that I was making money, things began to change (Interview with Veronica Calero). “Although Veronica’s husband seemed to be content with the fact that Veronica was contributing financially; he continued accusing her of having lovers on the side. He was bothered by the fact that she had a job and he left the family. The mere independence that these women were able to achieve threatened many of the relationships that these women had.

In many ways the women's involvement in the cooperative made their situations more difficult because their achievement and positions of power challenged traditional gender role structures. "Before I entered the cooperative, said Veronica Calero, " I felt like a woman incapable of doing anything, but now I know that no woman is incapable. As women we can move forward. You just have to look for a helping hand to help and excite you (Interview with Veronica Calero). Most endured a cyclical change. The initial involvement of the women in the cooperative fragmented the relationship in some way, often resulting in domestic violence. Then, as the women became successful and were able to achieve an income that fragmentation was often mended.

The (Failed) Worker-Owned Free Trade Zone

The idea of a worker-owned free trade zone is that all workers become owners, to prevent "sweat shop" working conditions and standards. The Comamnuvi Cooperative constitution gives their workers three months after beginning work before they must solicit their membership, and then after one year, their work in the cooperative is reviewed and the existing members decide whether or not the member will be admitted into the "society," defined by a socio, Zulema Garay(Interview with Zulema Garay, 14/11/2007). Shockingly, Comamnuvi has never had a worker apply and obtain membership status, so the 11 members that currently serve in this capacity are the 11 members that founded the cooperative (Interview with Veronica Calero).

I was not able to get a consistent answer from the members as to why they had never had a new member enter into the society, but the workers themselves were very aware of their reasons for not wanting to enter. "At first, I wanted to be a member. When I entered into the cooperative they explained to me the process of becoming a member and what you have to do and I was excited about it, but after, when I saw things from a different point of view, my way of thinking started to change. I would like to be a

member for some of the members, but for others no. I have been working here for three years and I have seen how they speak, how they do their meetings and they don't go well. Sometimes, I don't understand. One wants one thing and the other wants something completely different. I imagine that a business cannot work like this. Sometimes they fight. They think that no one can understand, because they built the business. It has always been the same members from the beginning. I like how they work, the work that they do. I like that we can chill, we can joke, we are family, but the idea of being a member doesn't excite me. With some you can see the desire to move one, but with others, no (Interview with William Antonio Pais Zelaya, 9/11/2007).

The members seem to think that they do all they can to get workers to become members, but they also do not hold strict to their policy that all workers are required to become members. Many of the actual workers responded dumbfounded when asked about the history of the cooperative and did not understand or feel like they were part of any sort of vision. Yadira Vallejos' comment about members further exemplifies the lack of vision within the cooperative. "We tell them the whole story about how we suffered. We tell them everything that we had to go through so that they have an idea and are conscientious of our experience. We tell them that they have the opportunity to be members, but when they start to talk, the doubts come out and they don't like the idea (Interview with Veronica Calero). Despite these internal struggles, it is within this bondage that the founding members of the cooperative share that distinguishes them from the workers. On countless occasions members of the cooperative would simply say," they just don't understand what we went through," in regards, to the lack of desire for workers to become members. This would signify the importance of a common bondage for cooperative members and the further importance of sharing that bondage with potential members.

All of the women and men interviewed that had previously worked in a free trade zone before they began working at Comamnuvi. And they state that their work in the cooperative was a lot less stressful in terms of working conditions, hours, labor conflicts, and sexual harassment. At the same time, all of them said that they were paid less at the Comamnuvi cooperative. Each interviewee said they were paid more in the traditional free trade zones because they were paid by production, even though they were often required to work 12-14 hours a day. Every interviewee expressed that the loss of pay at Comamnuvi is worth not having to work in such conditions. Gregoria Zoriano, a 29-year old woman working in the cooperative said:

“I have worked in three maquilas; Chosin, chapris, and Masili. In Chosin I worked from 6 a.m to 9 p.m. I had two thirty minute breaks during the day. My pay is less but my bills have increased, since I now have a child. I think the decrease in pay is worth it. I don’t feel I am a part of the cooperative. I am treated well. It’s tranquil. But I don’t feel integrated into the cooperative”

(Interview with Gregoria Zoriano, 11/08/2007)

Although its working conditions are better than those of traditional free trade zones, Comamnuvi is failing in the sense of what makes a cooperative. Comamnuvi has become a Maquiladora with fair working conditions, because the workers are considered “just workers” and are not necessarily inspired to become members. Many of the workers, within their initial weeks at the cooperative, exemplify a desire to become a member, but as time passes it seems that this desire fades. They witness the many internal conflicts of the cooperative and they change their minds. They do not feel welcome and are not encouraged to become members. The members of the cooperative seek to maintain the current structure of the cooperative by diverting further membership.

Conclusion

The members of the Comamnuvi cooperative are a miraculous group of women and men of who have struggled to be where they are they are today. Although they are facing a multitude of problems, their inspiration and fight will carry them forward. They accepted me into their homes and hearts as one of their own and for this I am very grateful. They are a unique group struggling to figure out what it means to be the " first worker-owned free trade zone in the world, " and with their recent independence from their founding NGO they have only begun their discovery. Although the 11 female socios and one male socio are inspiring, Comamnuvi is an endless whirlwind of power conflict. This conflict stems from the general power and structured experiences of members and workers. The members of the cooperative, despite internal conflict, share a common experience that has ultimately bonded them together. It is this common experience that separates them from the workers in the cooperative. They, in many ways, strive to minimize the opportunity of membership which has in turn led the cooperative to become a conventional business. Thus, in a cooperative sense, they are ultimately failing. The organization is run more like a maquiladora with better working conditions. Workers are encouraged to become members vocally, but they are not inspired through action to become members. Their perspectives, experiences, and futures vary widely due to the lack of ownership they feel within the cooperative.

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Appendix I.

Research Interview Questions

1. Organizational Structure of the Cooperative

- How does Nueva Vida function?
- How are they able to be a worker-owned factory? What is the process to gain such status? Why are they the first of this kind?
- Does the cooperative facilitate a democratically run organizational workplace? (Right to vote, leadership opportunities, right to information, right to expression)
- Is credit obtainable? How is access to credit facilitated?
- Is a comfortable working environment facilitated? Do members have opportunities for further training in relation to their job and other social skills?
- How are funds managed? Who manages funds? Do all members have access to records of financial management?
- How does Nueva Vida balance the principals of fair trade and collective organization with the need to make a profit? How do they provide quality products and still gain a profit if they are making a profit? Do they avoid cost-cutting practices?
- What do they see as their past and present challenges?

2. Power Dynamics

- Who is who in the cooperative? What roles do they play? Are there power differentials between workers and cutters? Are there power struggles between

workers and cutters? Are there power differentials between old and new members?

- How is gender difference played out? What positions do men hold? How do the majority of workers which are women view the fewer male workers and vice-versa?

- How do members and workers relate with one another? How do they feel about the organizational structure and power differentials within the cooperative?

3. Community Impact

-How many people from the community are employed at Nueva Vida?

- Has Nueva Vida given back to the community in other ways apart from employment? How do community members apart from Nueva Vida see the collective? How can community members become part of the cooperative?

-Which sector of the population benefits?